

EVOLUTIONARY INDIVIDUALISM

Presidential Address

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I have for you this evening some generalizations reflecting my recent thought on the historical development of human nature theories in our culture. More specifically, I want to talk about the evolution of the individualist vision of human nature from Hobbes to Kant, and then describe a contemporary version of the theory in sociobiology.

It is my general thesis that the meanings of human actions cannot be fully explained by appeal to their causes. As Socrates argued with such intuitive conviction in *Phaedo* (98-9), his presence in prison could not be accounted for merely in terms of physiology. A causal account is surely a necessary condition for an explanation of a human action, but it is not sufficient. In short, I take it to be intuitively obvious that the "meaning" of an action cannot be explained in causal terms, with appropriate apologies to those who sincerely believe me to be begging the question against them.

I further believe that often an important element in the meaning of an action is its moral significance. Whether from sympathy or principle, people frequently act in ways that they and others would explain most naturally in moral terms. Such explanations are, I would argue, different in kind than all arguments from necessity, causal or otherwise. Moral explanations are premised upon the assumption of free choice. And the most obvious instance of free choice is that which, while causally explicable, is nevertheless intentionally inconsistent with the perceived self-interest of the actor. Such free choices, I would maintain, often stand behind moral action in contexts of inequality among actors. Where there is natural or other inequality, moral action on the part of the more enabled on behalf of those less so stands as a clear counterexample to those who would interpret all action as self-interested.

The early individualist theorists dodged these sorts of issues by positing a premise of empirical equality among humans. Later thinkers, however, dropped that notion in favor of a premise of moral equality. It is on that development that I will focus in my discussion of the evolution of individualist

thinking from Hobbes to Kant. And I will conclude with the suggestion that contemporary sociobiology represents a return to the earlier, empirical claims.

In my paper, "Two Models of Human Nature in the Modern Period,"¹ I argued that the Individualist theories of human nature which underlie so much Anglo-American thought are not able to explain some important areas of human behavior—especially social behavior. I categorized these theories as "substructural" explanations of human nature, by virtue of their attempts to explain human actions by appeal to causal substructures of one sort or another. (Hobbes' mechanistic physiology stands as a perfect example.) I concluded, then, that such substructural theories were insufficient to the explanation of what we might term the "meanings" of actions.

In the years since that paper I've had the opportunity to become more familiar with the literature of sociobiology, including a number of authors who seem to be arguing that neo-Darwinian biology, clearly a substructural theory, can indeed explain some of the areas of human social behavior that I had raised the earlier questions about. Indeed, they appear so sure of this that they are only too eager to suggest ethical conclusions from their theories, a sure sign that they intend to account for a major part of what I have called the "meanings" of human actions.

The narrower purpose of my remarks, then, will be to examine the claims of one such neo-Darwinian argument, in Roger D. Masters' recent book, *The Nature of Politics*.² But first I should like to set up the background for that by considering the evolution of individualist theories during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Let me begin at the beginning, with Hobbes and Locke. In their work we see the first full blown individualist theories of human nature in English. Virtually every area of their thought, from metaphysics to political economy, is individualistic in some sense. Each posits, for example, the existence of free and equal individuals at the origins of civil society in the state of nature. And it is the properties of those individuals that entail the Hobbesian and Lockean theories of the state, the importance of which to our own history and culture could hardly be overstated.

So what are these properties? What are the natural characteristics of humans that ground those influential theories? In addition to their freedom and equality, both Hobbes and Locke take natural individuals to be self-interested possessors of themselves and other property, driven by passions, yet capable of rational calculation. They possess no innate ideas, rather garnering their knowledge through sensory experience, explained via a mechanical, corpuscular theory of perception. They are, for all that matters, purely material beings interacting with a purely material world. Their natural social relations are few, with the paradigms being contractual and commercial. They do make moral judgments, but those are based on individual desires and aversions. And the basis for their entry into civil arrangements is a rationally calculated, self-interested decision flowing out of their mutual needs and fears.

That this model has found its way into the contemporary Western view of human nature in a variety of ways is obvious. It takes, for example, virtually no argumentative skill to sell this view of humans to any given freshman philosophy class. They already believe it. The hard part is convincing them that there may be more to be said. But obviously I do think there is more to be said, and a good bit more. On this point sociobiologists and I would surely agree. My differences with them concern how much more can be said as well as the way that we say it.

To begin the analysis let us consider that crucial moment of social interaction in which the Hobbesian-Lockean individual "signs," so to speak, the social contract. As I just suggested, this is construed as a rational, self-interested gesture on the part of the natural individual. Hobbes' account is the more direct. His rendition of the individual's rationale is approximately as follows. I perceive that I am but one individual among many, all, or nearly all, of whom are about as strong and as clever as I. So, given that our individual passions will inevitably lead us into conflict, and that our equality entails the same possibility of injury, loss, and death for each of us, it would be most prudent for me (and the rest) to surrender some of our natural liberty to act on passion's whim.³

For how many generations have students of Western political theory posited that premise? Among other functions in

subsequent thought it is, for example, the prototype of the Enlightenment idea of "counterpoise," the explanation of how private selfishness leads to the public good.⁴ And as such it was foundational for Smith's famous "invisible hand" account of capitalist efficiency, as well as Madison's account of "factionalism" as a source of political stability in democracy.⁵

But in spite of its revered place in our intellectual history, or maybe because of it, a serious flaw in Hobbes' argument was for a long time ignored. Humans neither are, nor do they frequently perceive themselves to be, empirically equal. Hobbes' claim that on balance we are similar in strength and intelligence has in practice been rejected by so many people for so many reasons that we cannot evoke the excuse that, like so many "simplifying assumptions" in theories of all sorts, it is at least "close" to being true. Consider one obvious counterexample, the relation between the sexes. While there is a variety of explanations for the clear pattern of male domination that exists in so many cultures, there is one central fact which all must recognize, namely, that men are generally bigger and stronger than women. So when the women "signed" the social contract it is no surprise that they typically got less in return, since as all parties to the contract knew, the women were not equal "when push came to shove."

Equality of intelligence, on the other hand, because of the inherent difficulties of measurement and comparison, has been subject to even more cumulative doubt than that of strength. We might simply ask if there has ever been a national, religious, or other ideological border established over which subsequent claims of stupidity were not hurled? Perceived inequalities have been perhaps even more important than real ones, as the history of race relations in our own and other countries so clearly shows. Even though American school children have been chanting the phrase "all men are created equal" for two centuries there has yet to be a generation in which significant numbers of us have not believed it false.

What happens then if we simply drop the equality premise from the Hobbesian-Lockean account? On the face of it, the terms of the social contract would have to change in ways that lead us toward a more Darwinian, and even Social Darwinian view of it. And indeed there are nineteenth-century

versions of Individualism that do come to reflect that change. But before we look at the "evolutionary turn" in Individualism, let us consider the consequences for the Enlightenment views when we drop the premise of empirical equality.

The most obvious of those consequences is the recognition of the need for another sort of equality premise. For if we recognize up front the legitimacy of claims by some individuals that they can outsmart or out-fight the others, then it seems we have imported the "war of each against all" into our civil arrangements. And that was the very thing Hobbes and Locke did not want to do. And surely it is inimical to the very definition of a valid contract that any of the parties consents under duress.

Yet the English-speaking philosophers of the Enlightenment, by and large, failed to see the problem. We find in Hume, for example, almost exactly the same argument as Hobbes' for the premise of empirical equality in a social contract account of the origins of society.⁶ And the reason for this lack of progress I think has to do with the limitations of individualistic moral theory. Given the premises of self-interestedness and moral relativism, there was little room to posit either a natural altruism or some transcendent moral principle to explain social cohesiveness among unequals. Natural altruism is ruled out virtually by definition for the Empirical Individualists, and transcendent moral principle, they argued, could not cause human actions.

Continental philosophers, on the other hand, since they did not share completely the Individualist model of the Empiricists, did not share in all their problems. Let me cut right to Kant. The first premise of Kantian ethics represents a rejection of the empirical equality of individuals. The gifts of nature and fortune are haphazardly distributed, and thus cannot be the bases of moral judgment. Only in the universality of reason can such a basis be located. The shopkeeper's fair treatment of his naive young customers cannot ultimately be explained by appeal to either self-interest or sentimental inclination. Rather it is the categorical demand of objective reason that is involved in the moral justification of his action. What it means to be moral is exactly to transcend sentiment and self-interest to recognize that even though the other guy may appear to be my physical or intellectual inferior,

he is nevertheless my moral equal, and must therefore be treated always as an end, never as a means.⁷

In this argument we see a paradigm example of what I described in "Two Models" as a "superstructural" account. I take Kant to be talking about the meaning of fairness, as opposed to the causes of behaviors that are often called 'fair.' In this respect it seems to me that he is echoing one of the oldest and most famous arguments in the history of Western philosophy about the difference between what is and what ought to be, that between Socrates and Thrasymachus in Book I of *The Republic*. Socrates, however, is not defending the moral equality of individuals. Kant is. And in so doing he describes an Enlightenment alternative to the Individualism of the Empiricist thinkers—an alternative containing an irreducible reference to the moral meanings of an individual's actions. As such it is an alternative that contains at least an implicit solution to the problem of the sociality of unequals. And it does so by abandoning the premises of universal self-interest and moral relativism.

Surely it is clear why these premises must be abandoned. The moral ideal that Kant is appealing to, like the ideal of judicial fairness, requires an objectivism which is inconsistent with both premises. The recognition of the moral equality of people demands that we transcend self-interest, going beyond principles that are justified only relative to individuals. Obviously such objectivity will not easily be explained by a substructural, causal theory of individual motivation. Of course it is true that individuals act frequently from their perceptions of their own interests and highly subjective moral judgments. And we can agree with the Empiricists' causal account of such behavior. But when we try to explain instances of the fair treatment of unequals then, as I have tried to show, such an account would appear inadequate. We are instead driven to a superstructural account, that is, one that explains individual actions in terms of some larger reality that gives them meaning.

A significant element of the "meaning" of an action, as I have been using that expression, consists in relations between the action and various "larger realities." Of course different superstructural theories posit different larger realities. And not all of those—religious accounts of God's commands,

for example—are obviously describable in social terms. But the theories I have in mind, from the Enlightenment forward, are all amenable to such description. Each posits some sort of collective reality to give meaning to individuals' actions. For Kant, as we have noted, this collective reality is the community of rational beings. Other theories posit smaller collectives based on imperatives of nationality, social class, or even labor union membership, for instance.

Consider an example of the latter sort. In the good old (pre-Reagan) days of unionism, workers not infrequently engaged in strikes which they knew individually from the beginning would leave them individually worse off. They knew that the amount of wages they were likely to lose during the strike would never be entirely made up even by gaining all that they were demanding of management. Their justification of this self-defeating behavior was typically couched in terms of either its contribution to the strength of the labor movement as a whole or its positive results for the next generations of laborers. Clearly they saw their actions as having a larger social meaning connected to the principles of fairness which they took the union movement to stand for. And so to interpret those actions as self-interested clearly misses the point with regard to their significance in the minds of the actors.

Let me take a moment to summarize. I am arguing that there has been a necessary evolution of Individualist thought since the Seventeenth Century. This evolution is most obvious in moral theory, but reveals itself in other aspects of Individualism as well. There is, I believe, a logic to this evolution—a logic which is inexplicable in the substructural terms of the original Individualists, but which can be made sense of superstructurally. Consider the following string of generalizations. Individualism entails consciousness of a self as separate from others. This self is aware of its own interests and inclinations and perceives others as similarly aware. An equality of individuals is thus posited which in turn creates the logical possibility of true generalizations across collections of the similar individuals. And such generalizations, as abstractions, provide the grounding for "objective judgments" about the collection and its parts—that is, judgments reflecting no particular individual's interests or inclinations. One such objective judgment is that these similar individuals ought to

get similar treatment in civil society. But the original premises of empirical equality and universal self-interest are insufficient to guarantee this, since in fact people are not empirically equal and they sometimes act in the interests of others. Thus a moral (or other superstructural) equality is substituted to explain what is the same about the individuals across which our abstractions generalize. Hence the move toward the Kantian philosophy, and other "enlightened" forms of Individualism.

In the nineteenth century the Kantian individual evolves into the Hegelian, the Marxian and others, while the Empiricist individual is developed further by Mill, Darwin and a host of other philosophers and social scientists. In "Two Models" I talked at some length about the effects of that bifurcation of models on subsequent Western ideas and institutions. But here I would like to focus on the Darwinian and neo-Darwinian development of the Empiricist model.

In many ways Darwin's account of the human individual is a direct extension of the ideas of the earlier Empiricists. It contains a materialist, causal account of human action. It posits an instinctive passionate bias for a relativist theory of moral judgment and an epistemology of habit similar to Hume's. But of course Darwin's account is novel among Empiricists in several respects. Most prominently, it describes a mechanism of development for the species' present shared characteristics. The evolutionary hypothesis of natural selection grounds Darwin's individual in a naturalism largely absent from the earlier thinkers of his tradition. One prominent aspect of that new naturalism concerns his account of social relations. The interpersonal connections in Darwin's state of nature are markedly different from those in the accounts of Hobbes, Locke and Hume. They are relations of kinship rather than contract. And in one important sense the premise of empirical equality is abandoned, along with that of universal self-interest.

As part of his theory of natural selection in human evolution Darwin argues for the survival value of the social and moral qualities.⁹ Those kin groups in the state of nature are, other things being equal, more fit whose members are better endowed with feelings of sympathy, courage and loyalty. In this sense, then, it is clear that it is by virtue of

special empirical differences rather than samenesses that groups succeed and fail in the evolutionary competition. And furthermore he wishes to argue that this is so even in the face of the fact that more sympathetic, courageous and loyal individuals may often have a higher mortality rate than their less social brethren. In short, the value of altruism in terms of reproductive success for the kin group as a whole may more than compensate for the loss of a few brave altruists. At least some, if not most, individuals thus have instincts that naturally motivate acts not consistent with personal self-interest. Evolution works through individuals, but not always consistently with their personal interests.

It is tempting to construe the process of natural selection as part of a superstructural theory, in that it provides an explanation of human behavior in terms of a larger, evolutionary reality. But we have several motives to hesitate, I think, at the point of deriving moral principles from the theory. The unfortunate moral conclusions of the Social Darwinists surely make us generally cautious about anything that might be called "evolutionary ethics." And there are as well the deeper suspicions about deriving "oughts" from an empirical "is." Darwin, to my knowledge, however, does not draw normative moral conclusions from his theory. As with Empiricists before him, his interest is in giving a causal account of that behavior generally considered moral. He does not go on to argue that because we are naturally inclined to certain behaviors we therefore ought to behave in those ways.

Neo-Darwinists, writing from socio-biological perspectives, have not, on the other hand, always demonstrated a similar restraint. A number of them, including Roger Masters in *The Nature of Politics*, have wanted to suggest ethical implications from the theory of inclusive fitness.

To be sure, the theory of inclusive fitness represents a fascinating development in individualist theory. The human individual—the phenotype—is no longer the center of focus. Rather it is the individual's genes that occupy the center of attention. It is genes that are "selfish." It is genes whose destiny have moral implications.¹⁰ Altruism is easily explained. The self-sacrificing altruist is merely facilitating the further success of his genetic package through his surviving

kin. Success and thus ethical goodness, it would seem, are measured in terms of reproductive success at the genetic level.

But can we define goodness in terms of reproductive success? There are obvious counterexamples. Surely there are few who would take such a measure seriously at the individual human level. We generally do not judge the ethical goodness of individual lives in terms of reproductive success. Nor are we inclined to make such judgments on the basis of kin group success. Members of large families are usually accorded no special moral credit. Clearly our ordinary moral intuitions do not easily support such a view.

This may explain why Masters refuses to make explicit what is obviously the implicit metaethical center of his book. His theoretical ambition is made clear throughout the work. At one point, for example, he makes the following claim:

Western civilization since the eighteenth century has been confronted with a pervasive opposition between nihilists or historicists (for whom all values are subjective or relative) and doctrinaires (for whom theological or ideological principles can be imposed on others by force if need be). A way out of this profound dilemma can now be found by using evolutionary biology as the basis for ethical judgment.¹¹

But Masters never quite makes clear how that connection is, even generally speaking, going to be made.

Here and there he says things that seem clearly to imply the ethical schema. For example, in defending the goodness of the philosophic and scientific questioning of accepted opinions he says,

Open discussion and scientific inquiry have redounded to the benefit of those who contest the legitimacy of science and philosophy in the most literal way. The explosion of population since these practices were institutionalized in the West represents an increase in reproductive success of most individuals in the recent history of our civilization.¹²

But in the end Masters refuses to make a clear metaethical claim. Rather he skirts the issue, saying such things as,

Unlike historical determinists, biologists do not imply that the process of change is one of improvement or that we can necessarily predict the future. A new naturalism, like contemporary physics, leads to moral reasoning that is based on "relative objectivity": truths that depend on time and context are nonetheless truths.¹³

Of course the explication of "relative objectivity" is just as ambiguous as the term itself. And after 200-odd pages on the premises for a new naturalist ethics, Masters decides against drawing the conclusion.

But how can he, after all, once he has made the sort of relativist claim I just quoted? He has not broken out of the tradition of empiricist ethics. And when we add to that his claims that the new naturalism can neither predict the future nor assume it in any way progressive, we begin to wonder exactly what it is the theory does. The answer, I believe, is simply that it gives us a substructural, causal account of the mechanism of long-term species changes. It entails, for example, an explanation of how "reciprocal altruism" could characterize human behavior in the face of apparent individual self-interest. But the ethical issue concerns why altruism is a good thing. And for the theory of inclusive fitness there can only be one answer: altruism leads to reproductive success at the genetic level.

So once again we must ask, can ethical goodness be defined in terms of reproductive success? To which, after all of the above, I would like to respond with a highly qualified yes. I think there is an intuitively defensible metaethical principle to be derived from inclusive fitness theory. Unfortunately, however, it would appear to have no interesting normative implications for individuals.

The principle should be something like the following: that is good which enhances the long-term genetic success of the species. Such a principle is of course ambiguous. Let me try to clarify. By "long-term genetic success" I mean the largest possible number of fully formed phenotypes—that is, persons.

And by "fully formed" I mean capable of experiencing the general sorts of physical, emotional and intellectual states we take to be characteristic of the adults of the species.

For an explanation of why this is good I would turn to Leibniz. The best of all possible worlds is that which contains the greatest possible range of spiritual reality. Of course Leibniz did not invent this idea. As Lovejoy¹⁴ so beautifully demonstrated, the idea of the Great Chain of Being weaves its way through virtually all of Western history. But in the *Monadology*, Leibniz might be said to have invented the purely spiritual version of the idea. That world is best in which there is the greatest possible number of monads, each variously reflecting the totality which they compose. Not all monads are human souls, but surely the principle entails maximizing the number of individual reflections, including those that are souls. Into the mind of the divine architect/clockmaker Leibniz posited the principle that what might exist ought to exist. In short, let's try everything. So from the perspective of souls the greatest number and variety is best.

What I am suggesting is that a superstructural principle such as Leibniz gives us in his account of the Great Chain of Being could be employed to give a larger meaning to the natural process of genetic reproduction. Human beings, like all other life forms, owe their existence to the process described by evolutionary theory. But unlike the other life forms the process in humans resulted in beings who invented or discovered the idea of moral goodness. And surely if anything is morally good for the species as a whole it is that it should flourish over the long run.

What I do not see is how we ought to proceed in drawing normative conclusions from such a principle. In short, what would count as acting in a way to promote the long-term genetic success of the species? We could no doubt derive a rule against destroying the planet. But beyond that not much seems to follow given the epistemological difficulty involved in predicting the long run genetic consequences of our actions.

Masters suggests a few very general normative implications. He wishes to endorse democracy, for example, as more consistent with inclusive fitness theory than totalitarianism. This claim he grounds in the empirical equality

of genes. Given the remarkable homogeneity of the human gene pool, he argues, no one has the right to claim that his genes ought to be favored over any others for transmission to the future.¹⁵

In this argument we see the most recent attempt to defend a notion of empirical equality among individuals. And once again, I would respond, the argument is doomed. Genes are, in lots of respects, just as individualized as the phenotypes that carry them. Some of them, for example, are seriously diseased, causing severe impairments for the phenotypes they generate. And while our intuitions might firmly support the right of such phenotypes to pass on their genes, there would also be intuitional support for labelling as morally good the decision by such an individual to voluntarily refrain from reproduction. And we can surely imagine a variety of science fiction scenarios in which the last surviving band of humans find themselves making lifeboat-style decisions about which of them should reproduce. Minor genetic differences might there be very important to the further success of the species. In short, all genes are not created equal, and the differences among them could well be significant for the long term future of the species.

I must conclude that Masters's is just another substructural account of human behavior. As such, it does not tell us anything interesting about the meanings of human actions, including their moral significance. If we add to the sociobiological model a value premise like that derived from Leibniz, we can generate an intuitively supported notion of moral goodness, but only at high levels of abstraction. Intuitively sound normative implications for individuals do not seem to follow. My behavior does, by definition, have a meaning in the long term genetic history of the human race. But to know what that meaning might be would require me to take a God's-eye view of that history, a requirement which cannot even be approached. In reality, inclusive fitness theory has no advice to give us about the meanings of our actions.

I will continue to study the sociobiologists with interest, for theirs is surely among the most interesting contemporary scientific models of human behavior. And I will go back to Masters, especially for his treatment of the synthesis of

inclusive fitness and game theory. But at the same time I suspect I will remain convinced that substructural accounts, no matter how grand their scale, will never be much help in figuring out what it all means—at least until biology produces a Kant.

NOTES

¹"Two Models of Human Nature in the Modern Period," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 9, no. 3 (1986): 116–37.

²Roger D. Masters, *The Nature of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

³Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 13.

⁴For the definitive discussion see A. O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1961).

⁵Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Bk. 4, Ch. 2; and James Madison, *The Federalist* #10.

⁶David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," *Political Essays*, ed. C. W. Hendel (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 44–45.

⁷For a fuller account of the differences between Rationalist and Empiricist models see "Two Models."

⁸Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ch. 1.

⁹Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Pt. 1, Ch. 5.

¹⁰Masters, 6.

¹¹Masters, 238–39.

¹²Masters, 261n.

¹³Masters, 244.

¹⁴A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

¹⁵Masters, 228–30.