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Contrasting Biological and Historical Approaches to The Evolution of Political Morality

Ever since the publication of Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* in 1975, the idea that all of human behaviour — including ethics and politics — might ultimately be reducible to genetics has been gaining adherents¹. Despite setbacks in the 1980's, when human sociobiology was roundly attacked as reactionary and simplistic, neo-Darwinian approaches to explaining human values and social practices have continued to multiply (most recently under labels such as 'evolutionary psychology' and 'biopolitics').

Evolutionary biology has even begun to extend its reach into areas formerly reserved for the humanities such as literary theory and aesthetics. While much of this research remains novel and controversial, some of its results are undeniably sophisticated and interesting, especially when supported by recent advances in genetics and genomics which have opened a new window onto human evolution.² Even where strong positive claims are not made for any kind of genetic determinism, proponents have begun to claim that neo-Darwinism now threatens to supersede and even invalidate dominant traditions within value theory, such as liberalism and Christian humanism.³

The reactions of moral and social philosophers have been mixed, some embracing the new trend towards the 'naturalization' of value, others categorically rejecting it as

reductionistic and ‘dehumanizing.’⁴ Counting in favour of the neo-Darwinian approach is the fact that an expanding range of clearly ethical human behaviours (e.g., incest avoidance, kin altruism) have been shown to closely parallel similar behaviours in non-human species; moreover, convincing accounts of a genetic basis for some of those behaviours have now been developed which ought to apply equally across the entire biological continuum. And if those few ‘ethical’ behaviours have a genetic basis, then why not all of them? On the other hand, neo-Darwinian accounts have fared quite poorly when it comes to explaining cultural phenomena, and the cultural evolution that is such an important part of understanding human history and diversity. In fact, a major obstacle to human sociobiology is to explain why there is any such thing as ‘history’ at all. Other species are not historical as humans are: they do not regularly transform the conditions of their own existence, heritably, on a time-scale far too brief to be explained by genetic variation. Instead of explaining history, some neo-Darwinians have begun to try to explain it away: if they are correct, then any kind of historical ‘development’ is largely illusory, a mere epiphenomenon on the surface of deeper genetic continuities that are (in combination with the environment) the only true motors of change in human life. And if history is illusory, then so too must be the so-called ‘progress’ that is its outcome and the so-called ‘reason’ that is its cause.⁵

What seems most desirable here for humanists — a theoretical middle-ground that can allow for and combine both cultural and genetic factors within moral and political philosophy — has few defenders because the two types of theory (humanistic and scientific) appear to exclude each other, methodologically if not logically. For instance,

the naturalistic fallacy would appear to preclude any attempt to derive robust normative conclusions from the results of natural selection. And while evolutionary psychologists are aware of this limitation and usually resist the temptation to make positive normative pronouncements, they are quite willing to declare that the evidence of a real and persistent biological human nature refutes the pie-in-the-sky hopes of utopian philosophers and social reformers alike. There seems, at first glance, little hope for combining such a creed with the humanistic scholarship that has been attempting for millennia now (with little reference to genetics) to describe history as humanity's long striving towards the self-conscious mastery of its own existence. Both sides tend to see the debate as all-or-nothing: dominant trends in human social behaviour are either determined by genetic dispositions or they are not. If the pessimistic (and increasingly nihilistic) ethical conclusions of the neo-Darwinians are to be challenged, and normative value theory defended, then some way of combining them must be sought.

In this brief paper I would like to use a single phenomenon — the opposition between political hierarchy and egalitarianism — to suggest the more general possibility of a theoretical middle-ground that can combine these rival approaches. I will propose that some well known themes within the tradition of humanistic scholarship on human nature can already accommodate a role for recent developments in human biology in a non-nihilistic fashion. From Plato's city-soul analogy through to Nietzsche's master and slave moralities, and beyond that to the present day, humanistic theory has always recognized that society is complex and conflicted, as is every human psyche.⁶ Ants and bees may very well be genetically programmed to work and even to sacrifice themselves

altruistically on behalf of their kin, but they show no signs of having any qualms about doing so. Humans, by contrast, have qualms about all sorts of moral imperatives. And yet if the ultimate cause is the same in both cases, and was equally determinant of both species' past survival, then why is it that humans are so conflicted? Why is it that we even recognize and set apart certain values and imperatives as 'ethical' at all, instead of simply acting them out unselfconsciously (as the ants appear to do)? This very conflict, I shall argue, can be taken as reflecting the competition between the factors of cultural and rational choice on the one hand, and genetic evolution on the other. The crux of my argument, however, comes from insights in comparative primatology and cultural anthropology. In short: the source of human complexity is prehistoric, but traditional humanistic theory has overlooked this because of its bias in favour of historical evidence as the guide to understanding human sociality. The implications for political theory may be quite significant and I will touch on them at the end.

Consider the opposition: history versus pre-history. The main distinction between the two is the presence of writing, with historians confining themselves largely to those inquiries about the past that can be guided by documentary evidence — words written down and left behind by the people being investigated. Because of the durable persistence of written documents, humans over the past few millennia have gained intimate access to a wide range of tiny selections from a human past that was often very different from their own lived present. To this historical consciousness has been added an ever-increasing awareness of simultaneous human diversity gained through travel first facilitated by trade. The 'first historian,' the ancient Greek Herodotus, famously combined the

functions of both a historical researcher and an anthropological observer in his seminal investigation of the causes of the wars between the Persians and the Greeks.⁷ Ever since then, historians have been speculating about the causes of historical change more generally and poring over every surviving scrap of written human experience to do so.

By contrast, prehistory has largely been a blank page until very recently and so has contributed very little to the dominant theoretical attempts to understand human nature. Its function has rather been to serve as a foil to the dynamic, creative concept of historical time: prehistory was defined negatively as the time before human beings did anything important. Since historians are themselves literate persons and have always lived within the political hierarchies and advanced economies of urban societies, prehistoric (non-literate) peoples have suffered by comparison and have universally been adjudged 'primitive' — i.e., to be remnants of a now-surpassed, and inferior, past age.⁸ Western historians have perhaps been peculiar in their tendency to tie this bias to an emancipatory view of reason, whereby societies that embody reason move more steadily towards prosperity, security, justice and human fulfilment. In all likelihood this Western concept of reason is inherently historical and hence dynamic and utopian, and a simple diagram can serve to capture much of the spirit of Western historical rationalism (see Diagram One). Conceptually, 'history' has understood itself to be a transitional period with a specific beginning and, in some cases, an anticipated end-state of human social improvement or perfection. Central to this notion is that literate societies participate in a kind of continuous change and conscious evolution which non-literate societies do not, because literate societies possess the historical self-awareness (made possible by writing)

by which to comprehend intentional social change as manifest in governmental institutions. Written law concretizes a people's will to overcome its past and create a better social future. The most complete expression of this Western historical rationalism is found in Hegel, for whom writing, history, and the state all implicate each other mutually. As a political theorist, Hegel has virtually no use for prehistory.⁹

Politically speaking, this familiar, progressive view of history tells the story of the shift from universal despotism towards universal freedom. Although it forms part of the dominant discourse of the European Enlightenment, it is not strictly a modern view. It has appeared wherever any kind of political individualism has achieved ascendancy over authoritarianism, as was the case in the ancient Greek context of the first Western historians. For instance, we can read this progressivist historical rationalism in the famous fragment by the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes (~550 bce) which stands to this day as a motto for Western humanism: "By no means did the gods reveal all things to mortals in the beginning; but in time, by seeking, we discover the better." Xenophanes and the other pre-Socratic 'philosophers' formed an ambitious counter-cultural movement in ancient Greece that was extremely self-conscious about its own historical role: no less than to carry humanity across the threshold from passive prehistory into active, investigative reason — and thereby to begin the long, difficult march of history towards a better future. In this fragment, Xenophanes expresses his faith that human beings can, through their own intergenerational efforts, discover new insights by which to improve their condition. Not long ago — in a continuing line of direct descent from Xenophanes — Francis Fukuyama published his *The End of History And The Last Man*, a triumphalist

reading of the collapse of Soviet communism as a demonstration that history had indeed achieved its culmination in Western liberal democracy.¹⁰ This brings us to our case in point: contrasting theoretical accounts of the evolution of political morality from despotism to democracy.

At best, the empirical historical case that has been made for the popular Western belief in the inevitability of democracy and egalitarian values is not overly persuasive (formal democracies ancient and modern have collectively governed the lives of only a tiny fraction of the people who have lived during historical times); and world events since 1989 have already prompted many, including Fukuyama himself, to draw back from his overly optimistic conclusions. Technological progress is clear, but progress towards universal freedom has been spotty and has yet even once to reach a majority of the global population; moreover, the modern technology that is the most visible sign of historical progress has itself repeatedly threatened to wipe out the whole human race through ethnic and ideological conflict, or environmental destruction. Into this crack of self-doubt have sprung the neo-Darwinists, eager to point out the limitations of a mostly-speculative humanism that has ignored human biology and based itself on the ridiculously small sample of evidence of progress that is provided by 'history.' Proponents of 'biopolitics' point instead to the deep prehistory of humanity which stretches almost 200,000 years into the past and blends continuously into the genetic evolution of other species including the other primates and now-extinct hominids.¹¹ What was human life like during that long prehistory? There are no written records to tell us and only scant archaeological evidence to go by, insufficient to reconstruct social structure or behaviour in any detail. But as the

neo-Darwinists claim, a great deal of evidence does still exist: not only genetics, but comparative primatology and the record of physical anthropology. This evidence points to a very different account of human nature than what we typically find in humanistic theorists like Hegel.

Apes are hierarchical animals whose social behaviour is governed by relations of dominance and submission, though to a degree that varies by species. They are territorial animals who compete violently with other groups of their own species for resources. Those most closely related to humans, the Chimpanzees, are the most despotic of all: every adult male enjoys a status higher than all females, and both males and females compete violently with others of the same sex for positions within a linear hierarchy. Those at the top of the hierarchy enjoy considerable advantages in access to food and mates; their genes are disproportionately reproduced in all subsequent generations, and to a degree that corresponds to their rank; they continuously dominate, control, hector, intimidate, ostracize and sometimes even kill those who challenge them for status and those who submit to them alike. A wide range of bodily characteristics (e.g., size and shape of teeth, thickness of skull, sexual dimorphism) are identifiable as the physical correlates of these social relations, and these features may be read in the fossil remains of early humans and others just as they are in the kinetics of living apes. Without a doubt, primate nature has been honed through millions of years of intense natural selection for success in intra-specific dominance, aggression, and intimidation.¹²

To judge by our physical traits alone, humans ought to fit neatly into this pattern of despotic social organization, likely somewhere in the mid-range of existing primates (see Diagram Two, vertical axis). And while human social organization in deep prehistory eludes us, there is certainly no shortage of evidence for despotic violence from recent human history, let alone the daily news. Most of that evidence appears to confirm these neo-Darwinian insights. To many of the proponents of neo-Darwinian social theory, this reveals the true reality of our nature and our inheritance: deep down we are violent, aggressive and largely selfish apes who desire above all to dominate others but who also submit to domination by others who intimidate us.

How then are democracy and egalitarianism even possible? According to Somit and Peterson, these more 'peaceful' sentiments are products of what they call 'indoctrinability,' a human tendency which derives from evolved religious behaviours whereby communities collectively cultivate strange, mythological belief systems as a means of maintaining group cohesion and identity.¹³ The argument is that religious belief systems are like artistic representations of an invisible world which cannot be challenged or refuted by experience. While the value of religious behaviour overall has been adaptive, it has as a byproduct beliefs that can culturally evolve in opposition to other of our genetic dispositions. The cultivation of non-natural value-beliefs such as egalitarianism is therefore an evolutionary 'mistake' because those beliefs will constantly be contradicted by actual human behaviour; but the fact that human minds have evolved to be 'indoctrinable' means that we go on brainwashing ourselves culturally to believe in them anyway. The upshot is that while we might deceive ourselves about our motives and

our intentions, our evolved disposition to behave in more normal primate fashion will still usually trump our dogmas. Political and moral philosophy are reduced to varieties of self-deceptive mind games — and the belief in human progress a pure fantasy.

Let me turn now to my proposal for bringing these competing accounts together. As I already said, humanistic political philosophers have always recognized fairly profound divisions within the human person, so much so that a person's mind can often even be said to be 'at war with itself.' In Plato, as for most of the Western tradition, this is viewed as a struggle between reason and passion, or soul and body. In Nietzsche, this becomes a struggle between noble and slavish values; while Nietzsche downplays the role of reason, still his conflict is between a 'higher' (i.e., spiritual) purpose and 'lower' (i.e., bodily) comforts and conveniences. Both of these classic authors, and many others besides, project these psychic conflicts out onto society as a whole, such that they become social oppositions (with opposing classes of people dominated by opposing values). Moreover, Nietzsche speaks of the origin of ethics proper as the culmination of a violent moulding of a people by a ruling elite, such that in order to survive people must first learn to suppress their 'natural' (i.e. prehistoric) instincts beneath those required by imposed (i.e., historical) law. Only by means of such self-mastery does nature succeed in "breeding an animal with the right to make promises."¹⁴

The key to seeing how these classical treatments (and others like them) have anticipated recent discoveries in human biology is provided by evidence from cultural anthropology. Just as neo-Darwinian biologists look to genetic and behavioural parallels between

species in order to construct theories of human political behaviour during prehistory, anthropologists look to the behaviours of surviving prehistoric peoples, and extrapolate backwards through time. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of observed prehistoric cultures is the elaborate effort that almost all of them put into maintaining an egalitarian ethos — in direct contradiction to what their biology alone would supposedly predict. Christopher Boehm notes how this ethos is virtually universal in existing prehistoric communities and in all likelihood was universal throughout human prehistory, at least since the advent of complex language. He indicates how even chimpanzees exhibit tendencies towards solitary events of egalitarian action where groups of submissive apes collectively stand up to dominant individuals, effectively turning the hierarchy upside down, momentarily. Chimpanzees however, do not possess the means to extend these events beyond the moment.

Early humans, by contrast, possessed several features that pre-adapted them to the establishment of what Boehm calls ‘reverse dominance hierarchies,’ in which low-status individuals collectively assume political control over high-status individuals — most notably the invention of lethal weapons that can kill from a distance (allowing low-status individuals to easily dispose of dominant males). Both humans and chimpanzees demonstrate not only the desire to dominate others, and the willingness to submit, but an additional emotional response: resentment of submission. This resentment means that their submission is never total and dependable, and that leaders must always expect coups from below. The final element that humans needed to develop and maintain reverse dominance hierarchies, however, was language. Language both empowered low-status

individuals to build coalitions against their more intimidating dominators, and allowed them to record through narrative the dominance-seeking actions of high-status individuals. The upshot of Boehm's case is that humans are indeed genetically predisposed to selfish, violent, dominant and intimidating behaviour, but that low status individuals have found ways to act upon their resentment of submission through coordinated collective action. Through the medium of complex language, humans overcome their submissive emotion of fear by standing and working together with their low-status peers to resist oppression by intimidating individuals. This was a major cultural elaboration of a pre-existing minor genetic tendency.

The implications of these insights for political and moral theory are quite striking. Following Boehm's argument, I have proposed a chronological trajectory of human political evolution in Diagram Two. It begins, at the left, with humans fitting like chimpanzees into the normal range of primate social despotism. Then, as language appears on the scene about 50,000 years ago (y.a.), low-status individuals seize the opportunity this provides to organize against their intimidating leaders, largely through the cultural maintenance of a 'reverse dominance hierarchy' by means of an egalitarian ethos. Finally, about the time that humans begin to settle down and take up agriculture (~10,000 y.a.), the dominance hierarchies are reversed once again, with alpha males seizing power and instituting social classes leading to the first cities (~6,000 y.a.).

This theory affirms Nietzsche's suggestion that the complexity of human agency is the product of a culturally-maintained opposition to each person's own inherited, instinctive,

genetic dispositions. This is not, however, what Somit & Peterson call an erroneous translation of religious ‘doctrine’ into politics, but rather has been a rational, creative, and highly successful strategy to overcome our own biological nature through coordinated action. The coordination is provided by a culturally maintained egalitarian ethos. For at least 50,000 years humans lived in small-scale, territorial societies that maintained egalitarian political structures in the face of continual attempts by powerful individuals to dominate the group from within. Perhaps the most striking feature of this proposal, however, is the implication that this successful strategy was undermined completely with the appearance of settled agricultural communities at the end of the last ice-age (10,000 y.a.). Somehow, likely by means of the private accumulation of capital made possible by settlement, dominant individuals learned how to beat the reverse dominance hierarchy system and return human society to the more standard, linear dominance hierarchies that have been almost universal throughout the brief, recent period of human experience known as ‘history.’ Ironically, this most recent reversal of fortune has been so complete that humans in the historical period have become by far the most despotic of all of the apes: the collapse of the social effectiveness of the culturally-maintained prehistoric egalitarian ethos has restored genetically-based dominance hierarchies with a vengeance.

Which, then, may we deem to be the more ‘natural’ option for humans: hierarchy or equality? Political philosophers have been misled somewhat by their concentration on historical evidence, because history does not reflect the fact that despotism was a relatively new thing in the first cities, and that the persistence of social dominance by elite groups throughout history to this day has been maintained by much deeper and

genetic primate means: the leaders' ability to achieve mass submission through public demonstrations of violence and intimidation. Philosophers who understand the evolution of political morality to be the inevitable march of reason from prehistoric despotism to ultra-civilized freedom would appear to have their story backwards.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Diagram One: Western Historical Rationalism

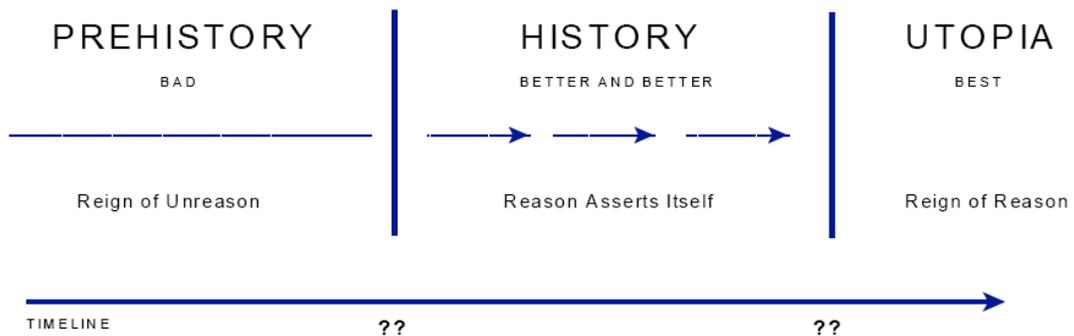
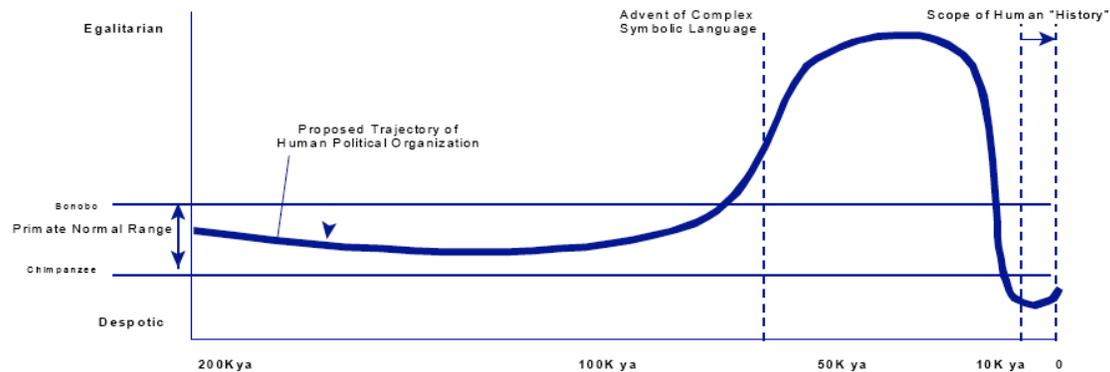


Diagram Two: Long-Term Human Political Evolution (after C. Boehm, 1999)



1. Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1975).
2. For an overview of recent uses of genetics to reconstruct human prehistory see Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of our Ancestors* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
3. For example: John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2007). Likewise, Neo-Darwinian attacks on religion per se are now legion.
4. Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (eds.), *Biology and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1999).
5. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).
6. Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1992) is an important and underappreciated contribution to the debate over the role of evolution in ethical theory.
7. Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).
8. Chris Gosden, *Prehistory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 15-16.
9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History* (New York, Prentice Hall, 1995), §§40-49.
10. Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History And The Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
11. Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson. *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy: The Biological Bases of Authoritarianism* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

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12. Christopher Boehm, *Heirarchy in the Forest* (Cambridge, mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 125-148.
 13. Somit & Peterson, *Darwinism*, 77-84.
 14. F. Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 57-96.