

Book Reviews:

Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature by Larry Arnhart. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

Does Darwinian biology have anything important to contribute to political philosophy? A simple argument suggests that the answer is 'yes'. The results of modern Darwinian biology, if true, reveal important information about human nature. Any adequate political philosophy must be based on a correct understanding of human nature. Therefore, Darwinian biology has the potential to make important contributions to political philosophy.

But this quick and simple answer does not tell us *how* a better understanding of human nature is relevant to political philosophy. And, on this matter, at least two possibilities need to be distinguished. First, the study of human nature may be important to political philosophy because it reveals or helps us understand the limits of politics. For example, if we come to believe that a strong disposition to aggression is sown in the nature of human beings, we may come to doubt that any political program that seeks to eliminate all violence among human beings is realistically achievable. Second, the study of human nature may be important to political philosophy because it reveals or helps us understand what human beings ought to value, or what the good for human beings is?

These two possibilities need to be distinguished, for it may be the case that the first possibility will bear fruit while the second will not. Thus a rejection of the second possibility does not imply that Darwinian biology has no contribution to make to political philosophy. Clearly, however, the second possibility is the more ambitious one. It holds out the hope that ethics in general, and political morality in particular, can become a natural science. The scientific study of the evolutionary history of mankind can disclose what is good for us and how we ought to treat one another. This was Darwin's hope, and it is a hope shared by Larry Arnhart in his provocative new book *Darwinian Natural Right*.

Darwin did not develop a philosophically satisfying account of how human nature, as he understood it, could inform judgments about what is good for human beings. But Arnhart self-consciously attempts to provide such an account, enlisting Aristotle and Hume on his behalf. As befits a review, my critical remarks will apply to Arnhart's arguments only. They will not establish that no such account could succeed.

The linchpin of Arnhart's account is the idea that the good is the desirable. More precisely, the idea is that the good for human beings lies in the fullest satisfaction of their natural desires, where natural desires refer to desires that "are so deeply rooted in human nature that they will manifest themselves in some manner across history in every human

society.” (29) Arnhart presents a non-exhaustive list of twenty categories of such desires. The list includes, among others, desires associated with parental care, sexual mating, war, social dominance, friendship, justice, aesthetic pleasure, wealth and religious understanding. As is evident, many of these desires presuppose social interaction. Solitary individuals cannot have friends, fight wars or pursue justice. For this reason, Arnhart sides with Aristotle and against Hobbes in holding that human beings are by nature social and political animals.

According to Arnhart, the satisfaction of these natural desires constitutes the good for human beings. He also claims that the satisfaction of these desires provides a normative standard for judging social practices and institutions — for “we can judge societies as better or worse depending on how well they satisfy those natural desires.” (17) Not surprisingly, Arnhart believes that Darwinian biology explains why natural desires are natural. He claims that these desires are based in the physiological mechanisms of the brain and that they have evolved by natural selection over millions of years of human history. Of course, as Arnhart himself acknowledges, these desires will be expressed in different ways by different people in different circumstances. And, as he also points out, natural desires refer to general proclivities. Not every human being will have every natural desire, but all human societies will contain people who have them.

To his credit, Arnhart is aware of the obvious objection to his account and spends some time attempting to respond to it. The obvious objection holds that even if Darwinian biology can identify a set of natural desires, this would not show that the satisfaction of these desires is good for human beings. Nor would it show that the satisfaction of these natural desires could provide a normative standard for judging social practices and institutions. At most, reference to these desires could help us explain or predict human behavior. It could not enable us to judge human behavior as good or bad, right or wrong. We can refer to this as Hume’s objection, since it is derived from Hume’s famous remarks about the gap that exists between factual and evaluative claims.

Interestingly, in attempting to respond to Hume’s objection, Arnhart draws on Hume’s own discussion of the moral sentiments. On the view attributed to Hume by Arnhart, a correct moral judgment is a factually correct report of what human moral sentiment would be in a particular set of circumstances. (70) So, for example, if it is true that human beings would express approval when considering an act of kindness in a particular set of circumstances, then it would be correct to judge this kind act to be morally praiseworthy. In this way, Arnhart’s Hume bridges the gulf between facts and values. Moral judgments are factual claims about the shared moral sentiments of human beings. Moreover, according to Arnhart, Darwinian biology explains why we have the moral sentiments that we have.

Having dispensed with Hume’s objection (at least to his own satisfaction), Arnhart proceeds to consider and reject a number of other objections to Darwinian morality. These include the charge that

Darwinism denies human beings the freedom that morality presupposes and the charge that Darwinism cannot account for the transcendent religious ground that morality requires. Against the first of these objections, Arnhart contends that the freedom that morality presupposes requires only that human beings have the capacity to make deliberative choices and that Darwinism does not deny that human beings have this capacity. Against the second of these objections, Arnhart contends that Darwinism reveals morality to be a natural phenomenon; and, as such, it is not necessary for it to be grounded in a supernatural reality.

The remainder of *Darwinian Natural Right* consists of a series of illustrations that purport to show how Darwinian morality can distinguish natural social relationships from those contrary to nature. The illustrations concern the familial bonding of parents and children, the relations between the sexes and the institution of slavery. Arnhart's views on these matters are fairly traditional. He defends the private family over communistic arrangements for raising children on the grounds that parents have a natural desire to care for their young. He defends monogamous marriage on the grounds it satisfies natural desires for mating and a sexual division of labor. And he rejects female circumcision and slavery because these practices frustrate important natural desires.

The major problem with Arnhart's argument is that he provides almost no defense of his linchpin idea that the good consists of the satisfaction of natural desires. The closest he comes to offering support for this idea is the claim that "If we find that we are naturally inclined to something or adapted for something, then we believe this helps us to know what is good for us." (23) This claim is clearly false. Quite frequently, we believe that the satisfaction of a strong desire, even a strong natural desire, will set back rather than advance our good. For example, a man may realize that his desire for multiple sexual partners, if acted upon, will make his life go less well as it will prevent him from having deep personal relations with the one woman he really cares about.

Sensing this difficulty, Arnhart claims at one point that "what is 'desirable' for human beings is whatever promotes their human flourishing." (82) But this is unhelpful, for he defines human flourishing in terms of the fullest satisfaction of our desires. Thus, for Arnhart, we may have reason to resist a natural desire such as the desire to be sexually promiscuous if we correctly judge that acting on that desire will frustrate our desire to lead a life that achieves the fullest satisfaction of our desires. Quite clearly, this response will not do. It still leaves us with no explanation for why the mere satisfaction of a desire, natural or not, contributes to our good.

The natural move to make at this point would be to claim that it is only the satisfaction of rational desires that contribute to the good of human beings, where rational desires are related to intelligible human goods. But this move is unavailable to Arnhart. It would require an independent account of intelligible human goods, one that was not simply derived from the natural desires that human beings happen to have. This may account for why Arnhart offers no defense for the claim that the

human good consists in the satisfaction of natural desires. He may sense that no such defense can be offered within his Darwinian framework. Thus, Arnhart rests content with an implausible, undefended conception of the human good.

For similar reasons, the normative standard that Arnhart appeals to — the standard that holds that social relationships that satisfy our natural desires are morally sound whereas those that frustrate our natural desires are morally suspect — is implausible. This is well illustrated by his discussion of slavery. Arnhart writes that “the practice of slavery has always displayed the fundamental contradiction of treating some human beings as if they were not human.” (162) This is true, but beside the point. For all we know social practices that display fundamental contradictions might satisfy important natural desires. After canvassing the thoughts on the subject of a number of historical writers from Aristotle to Lincoln, Arnhart finally presents an argument that purports to show that slavery is wrong that looks like it might follow from Darwinian morality. The argument is that unlike the relations between parents and children and the relations between men and women, “the coercion of slaves cannot be based on a natural complementarity of desires. The master’s desire to exploit the slave clashes with the slave’s desire to be free from exploitation. Consequently, slavery is contrary to human nature and thus contrary to natural right.” (210)

This argument does not work. By parallel reasoning, one could establish that societies that have a social practice of not permitting slavery are also contrary to natural right. One could claim that in free societies the desire of people to be free from exploitation clashes with the desire of people to exploit others. Since Arnhart believes that the desire to exploit others is a natural desire, he cannot believe that in free societies there is a “natural complementarity of desires.” This suggests that to establish that a social practice like slavery is wrong one needs to do more than simply point out that the practice frustrates the natural desires of some people. But to do this would require Arnhart, once again, to go beyond his assumptions. He would need to appeal to a normative standard other than the one that he thinks follows from Darwinism.

These problems with Arnhart’s argument likely stem from a deeper confusion. Throughout *Darwinian Natural Right* he offers naturalistic explanations for a wide range of human behaviors, often comparing them with similar or related behaviors of non-human animals. These explanations may explain how human beings have developed the capacity to do various things. For example, there may be a satisfying Darwinian explanation for how human beings have developed the capacity for moral reflection. But it is a mistake to think such an explanation can tell us how this capacity ought to be exercised. Like logical or mathematical reasoning, moral reflection is subject to its own standards — standards that are not grasped by attending to the processes that explain how beings emerged with the capacity to be governed by them.

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