

Feature Article

DARWINISM AND THE RIGHTTHE  ORIGIN  OF  
CONSERVATISM

*Evolutionary theories suggest  
that conservative politics are necessary to  
govern a fallen man.*

---

JOHN O. MCGINNIS

---

*Mr. McGinnis is a professor at Cardozo Law School, Yeshiva University, in New York City.*

TODAY a revolution is remaking the social sciences. For the last two decades, theorists in psychology, economics, anthropology, and linguistics have begun to discard the traditional social-science model in which man creates the social world through his culture. They have instead turned to evolutionary biology to draw an ever more precise and powerful description of the human nature that generates all cultures. The results of their discoveries are now seeping into the popular consciousness as the media report through a biological prism such fundamental topics as the relations between the sexes. Because evolutionary biology provides an informative picture of man and because citizens are rapidly assimilating that image, any political movement that hopes to be successful must come to terms with the second rise of Darwinism.

Conservatism will certainly be easier than liberalism to integrate with evolutionary biology. The constraints of our biological nature explode the most persistent delusion of the Left: that man is so malleable that he can be reshaped or transformed through political actions. In contrast, the depiction of our species that is emerging from Darwinism -- as composed of individuals who are basically self-interested yet capable of altruism toward family and friends; who are unequal in their abilities yet remarkably similar in their aspirations -- comports with fundamental premises of conservative thought.

Thus the new biological learning holds the potential for providing stronger support for conservatism than any other new body of knowledge has done. Yet it may also raise questions about some intellectual traditions of the Right, such as pure libertarianism,

and its methodology may disturb religious conservatives. These tensions must be resolved if the conservative coalition is to thrive in the intellectual soil of the coming century.

There are seven concepts that are essential to understanding the Darwinian picture of man. The logic of each concept applied to human affairs turns out to bolster major tenets of mainstream conservatism.

1. *Self-Interest and Politics*. Like all other animals, our species has been shaped by millions of years of natural selection. Natural selection works through genetic inheritance and variation. Genes for many physical and behavioral traits are inheritable; such genes may also be variable within the population of animals of the same species. Because of recombination and mutation, animals within the same species differ in their genetic makeup. Some inherited traits will enable some individual animals to leave more offspring than others. Genes for such traits then increase in the population of the species.

Thus, as Robert Wright has nicely observed, it follows directly from natural selection that any individual animal will have behavioral adaptations designed to favor its own interests over those of others. The single exception is that they may favor other animals who can aid in disseminating their distinctive genes. Thus each human individual has strong innate behavioral tendencies to favor his own interests, those of the comparatively few relatives who share a large proportion of his genes, and the potential mates who are necessary to reproduce his genes. We are not closely and equally related to many other individuals of our species, like ants and some other social insects, who routinely sacrifice themselves for their colony.

One interest all human beings share is seeking resources and status. In all past societies surveyed, those who had more relative status and resources left more progeny than those who had less status and fewer resources. (It is possible that this finding would not be true of some present-day societies, but evolution in humans works so slowly that any such counter-trend would take thousands of years to be reflected in our genetic make-up). Thus human beings are emotionally and cognitively wired to be resource and status seekers. We also confirm from studies of other primates that we innately view exchange and hierarchy as alternative strategies for gaining resources. For instance, chimpanzees exchange food, but they also make coalitions among themselves to simply take food and sexual access.

The universal affinity for property and status has serious political implications. In any society large or heterogeneous enough for members to sense that they are unrelated, they will seek to turn resources held in common to their own personal advantage. To a biological anthropologist it was thus wholly predictable that individuals under Communism would spend less of their time in productive exchange and more of their time manipulating the state so as to become more equal than others. Similarly, in social democracies individuals will organize themselves into coalitions for the purpose of gaining access to the state treasury. Such political systems lead to a lack of productivity, social conflict, and instability because there is simply a mismatch between collectivism on any large and enduring scale and our evolved nature. As Edward O. Wilson, the world's foremost expert on ants, remarked about Marxism: "Wonderful theory. Wrong species."

2. *Kin Selection*. We have evolved an emotional life in which we have a tendency to take an abiding interest in the welfare of our kin, because they share a substantial

proportion of our genes. Because children represent a parent's genetic future, the parent - child bond has the potential to be particularly close. Thus, as conservatives have argued for centuries, the family is a natural unit of society, and family affections are not mere social constructs but are deeply rooted in our behavior and psyche. Policies that strengthen the family provide a reliable and lasting form of social insurance.

3. *Sexual Differences.* A government that is careful to preserve rather than dissolve family ties is important for other biological reasons. Evolutionary biology predicts that men and women will have different degrees of attachment to their family. Because women are limited in the potential number of their offspring, they are naturally more child-centered in their affections. Men by contrast can have a huge number of children, and thus their relations with any particular child tend to be inherently less secure. Men do provide more care for their progeny than males in most other mammalian species because human infants face a lengthy period of helplessness and fare much better with substantial paternal investment of time and effort in their upbringing. Yet fathers are more likely than mothers to resent and avoid obligations that may deprive them of other mating opportunities. Men are innately more aggressive and obsessed with status than women for similar reasons: because of their low-cost role in sexual reproduction they have far more scope for converting resources and status into the creation of children.

FAMILY obligations in some measure counteract the more roving nature of the male by enmeshing men in networks that both provide children with needed paternal affection and prevent socially destructive male aggression. Thus the greatest cost of modern welfare programs may not have been the tax dollars wasted but the paternal investment squandered, because, as Charles Murray has demonstrated, welfare discourages the social norms that anchored men to the women with whom they had children. This has led to generations of children who have had less male nurturing than they need -- and generations of men who are excessively aggressive because they have not been restrained by family obligations. The imposition of no-fault divorce has also made it easier for men to shirk parental care. Thus, the new biological learning provides direct support for conservative initiatives such as welfare reform and the introduction in Louisiana of "covenant marriage," which allows women to negotiate for greater permanence for their pair bond.

4. *Reciprocal Altruism and Civil Society.* Our species has also evolved a host of behaviors that facilitate "reciprocal altruism" -- a willingness to perform acts beneficial to another unrelated person in the expectation that the person on the receiving end will reciprocate. The bundles of qualities that make us reciprocal altruists are very useful in overcoming "prisoner's dilemmas" -- situations in which a cooperative act would lead to benefits for both parties, but only if reciprocity could be assured. In primitive societies, where centralized enforcement of legal obligations was quite imperfect, psychological mechanisms that resulted in cooperation would have been naturally selected. For instance, individuals who did not renege on deals and who repaid a good turn with another increased their wealth compared to those who did not. As reciprocating individuals gained resources and therefore left more children, genes for traits promoting reciprocal altruism spread through the population.

Altruistic behavior, however, tends to be limited by the need for reciprocity. Although individuals are disposed to cooperate, they tend to withdraw their cooperation if no long-term benefits are received. Genes encouraging behavior that did not ultimately

redound to the concrete benefit of an actor or his kin did not spread through the population. Much of the emotional life of our species -- gratitude, sympathy, moral outrage -- is therefore designed to regulate the relations of reciprocal altruism. Cognitively too, we keep a mental account of what other individuals have done for us and to us -- a fact nicely captured by Tom Wolfe's concept, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, of a "favor bank," in which lawyers and court personnel kept careful track of the favors they had performed.

Because of innate reciprocal altruism, exchange is thus as natural to man as song is to a songbird. The market is not a mere artifact created by the state but a force of nature. Indeed, reciprocal altruism generates not only trade but also civil society as a whole. Organizations spring forth that facilitate all kinds of social exchange, including the trading of information and of affection. Such spontaneous orders differ from one society to the next because of differences in knowledge and circumstances, but the social world everywhere is bound together by the vines of informal cooperation. These are so vibrant that the concrete which states try to lay down over this growth is in perpetual danger of cracking.

The same bonding mechanisms that facilitate this spontaneous order, however, also make political factions more intractable and divisive. As David Hume recognized, "when men are once enlisted on opposite sides they contract an affection to the persons with whom they are united and an animosity against their antagonists: And these passions they often transmit to their posterity." Modern psychological studies confirm that when individuals acquire a group identity, they will act with more solidarity as a group against other groups than individual calculation warrants. By bonding together in numbers, such factions can better control hierarchies, like the state, and thus no longer have to rely on exchange as the primary method to increase their resources.

**T**HEREFORE, while reciprocity has beneficial effects in the market and in civil society, the factions it facilitates make it more likely that the state will be used to distribute resources from one group to another. Liberal identity politics, whether of class, race, or sex, exacerbate this danger. Conservative political theorists like James Madison, in contrast, have focused on tempering and restraining factions. Factions can be tempered if the individual can be made to identify in some measure with a community that encompasses a wide range of interests. Factions can be restrained if the power of the government can be limited so that it cannot as easily be used for redistribution. One important conservative notion -- federalism, or subsidiarity -- has in the past simultaneously accomplished both of the political objectives required by our evolutionary nature. By making government local, it makes it easier for individuals to identify with a community; and by putting governments in competition with one another, it restrains the powers of factions.

5. *Deception and Self-Deception.* Deception is pandemic in nature. Camouflage and mimicry are just two of its typical forms. Paradoxically, our tendencies to reciprocal altruism increase the potential gains from deception in our species, because exploiting reciprocators may lead to gaining benefits without having to give any in return. In our species the opportunities for deception are improved by language, which simultaneously provides a valuable medium of exchange -- information -- and the ability to counterfeit that good.

Of course, it is in the interest of those potentially deceived to discover deception, and it

not surprising that human beings are natural, if imperfect, lie detectors. (That is the reason why we want jurors to hear testimony live rather than read a transcript.) This detection ability encourages selection for behavior that will avoid detection, setting up an arms race between deceptive behavior and mechanisms for detecting deception. Biologists have suggested that this arms race is, in turn, the origin of pervasive self-deception in man. By deceiving himself, an individual may suppress the cues that allow others to detect deception. Hence self-deception is most likely when there is an intense need to deceive others.

The fact that human beings have innate tendencies toward deception and self-deception buttresses the conservative defense of civil society and skepticism about state power. Civil society develops norms to combat deception in private life. In the market, individuals have strong incentives to maintain a reputation for honesty so that others will deal with them. Fraternal and religious organizations arise in part to vouch for the good behavior of their members.

In contrast, it is much harder to root deception out of large-scale politics. For instance, in a democracy citizens are rationally ignorant of most political issues; that is, they know perhaps subconsciously, that their individual votes are so unlikely to influence elections that it simply does not pay to follow the twists and turns of public debate. Politicians have a scope for deception proportionate to this ignorance. A commanding presence, a compassionate demeanor, and rhetorical virtuosity are evolutionarily designed mechanisms that fool the inattentive.

The ingrained susceptibility to self-deception also undermines the celebration of sincerity and authenticity that has been at the heart of the Left's project since Rousseau. Evolution suggests that individuals may project the most sincerity and feel the greatest measure of authenticity precisely when they are offering proposals that are deceptive -- ideas that benefit themselves and their group at the expense of others.

6. *Natural Inequality*. Darwinism confirms the view that individuals have inherently unequal abilities and that these inequalities are likely to be greatest in the personality traits, such as intelligence and ambition, that are related to acquiring property. In *On the Origin of Species* Darwin himself formulated this law about natural variation: "A part developed in any extraordinary degree or manner, in comparison with the same part in allied species, tends to be highly variable." When a species breaks into a part of the design space of the world previously unexploited, enormous selective pressure develops in the genes of that species to make ever more effective use of this virgin territory. For instance, the beaks of Darwin's species of finches are highly variable since these finches were able to exploit a large variety of previously inaccessible seeds on the Galapagos Islands. Likewise, since human beings have brains whose cognitive aspects are developed to an extraordinary degree compared to those of other animals, one would expect the human brain's inheritable capacity to be highly variable. This theory is confirmed by recent studies suggesting that measurable personality traits are to a large degree inherited rather than shaped by the environment -- and that intelligence is the trait most conserved through generations.

Natural inequality has implications for both the ideological and the structural content of politics. On the level of political philosophy, it undermines the basic premise of liberal egalitarianism: that it is possible to equalize outcomes by eliminating inequality in social circumstances. The engine of inequality is buried so deep in human nature that it is impossible to eradicate. Indeed, as Richard Herrnstein showed, equalizing social circumstances will mean that the inequality in outcomes will become dictated in

greater measure by genetic inheritance.

In contrast, conservatives are correct in understanding that, because of natural inequality, structures must be fashioned to prevent harmful schemes aimed at the delusive goal of eliminating it. Indeed, in *Federalist 10*, the most celebrated document of political philosophy in American history, James Madison observed that the greatest problem for any political structure is how to protect "the unequal faculties for acquiring property" from government interference. Over the long run, such protection assures greater prosperity for all by sustaining the incentives for the talented and productive to exercise their genius through invention and innovation. In the West over the past hundred years, this has allowed a vast array of individuals to enjoy a degree of good health and leisure that was previously available only to a select few.

Nevertheless, as Madison recognized, the very inequality that makes this prosperity possible also makes the protection of the different abilities to acquire property more difficult because it exacerbates the danger that the government will be used as a mechanism for redistribution from one faction to another. Inequality means that there will always be a large pool of individuals with less talent than others for acquiring property. Given the human capacity for self-deception, these citizens are less likely to make a dispassionate assessment of their own abilities than to believe that some prosperous group is holding them back. Skilled demagogues and dissemblers can always be found to provide justifications for redistributing property because individuals are primed to seek status -- and nowhere can greater status be acquired than from political leadership.

This natural dynamic of inequality in politics vindicates conservative attempts to establish constitutional structures that limit the power of demagogues and the potential for expropriation of wealth. The original American Constitution -- with a complex system of federalism, separation of powers, and national representative democracy -- is the most justly venerated of these attempts. While conservatives are right to object to the judicial usurpations that have vitiated this system over time, a Darwinian understanding of politics suggests that simple democracy is no substitute for constructing a system to guard against the passions and self-deceptions of individuals with disparate abilities.

*7. The Fragile and Divided Self* -- The final natural fact for politics is also the most personal. The self, like all essential aspects of man, is an adaptation to selective pressures over millions of years and thus is jury-rigged from different mechanisms from our evolutionary past. It is a mistake, for example, to think of the sexual self as completely continuous with the more obviously rational acquisitive self that evolved somewhat later to take advantage of resources and status opportunities. These selves evolved for different purposes and are not fully connected -- hence the frequently observed imprudence of sexual passion.

Evolution's understanding of the self is thus an implicit challenge to the modern liberal project of protecting the sphere of sexual autonomy from regulation while heavily regulating exchange of resources. An order that is rational and self-correcting in historical time is much more likely to spring from more calculating modules devoted to reciprocal altruism than the more impulsive modules of sexuality.

**A**FTER canvassing the social understanding provided by the new biological learning, we may fairly conclude that a Darwinian politics is a largely conservative politics. This

is not surprising, because conservatives have always prided themselves on dealing with man as he is, not as we might wish to imagine him. Despite the congruence of modern Darwinism and conservative thought, some might foresee substantial pitfalls for practical conservative politics. First is the simple fact that some religious conservatives do not believe in evolution and have made their antipathy to it a part of their political creed. But their hostility is not fatal to the future of the conservative coalition. The description of man that emerges from evolution resembles in many respects the fallen man posited by Christian theology -- a being self-interested and absorbed in status seeking. Members of political coalitions may have to agree broadly on human nature, but they do not have to agree on the methodology that brings them to that understanding. For instance, the Framers of the American Constitution comprised both deists whose religion was inspired by the Newtonian science of their day and Christians with far more traditional religious attachments.

A variation on this concern is the idea that acceptance of Darwinian thinking will undermine religious belief, which is itself a bulwark of social stability. This also seems implausible. There is no logical incompatibility between belief in evolution and faith in God; the Catholic Church has long understood that crediting natural selection as the proximate cause of man does not threaten God's standing as his ultimate Creator. Moreover, given the universality of religion across all cultures, religious feeling almost certainly has natural roots in our emotional psyche and will not be dissolved by scientific discovery.

Another unwarranted concern is that a focus on biology will lead inevitably to a discussion of racial differences and therefore to an increase in racial tensions. While Darwinism offers strong reason to assume that men and women differ on average in their emotional affects and aspirations because women have naturally been more bound up with their children, it offers no reason to assume the existence of substantial racial differences in the personality traits important to acquiring property. Of course, it does not deny the possibility of such differences either. But evolutionary biology and anthropology do stress the universal nature of man: we are all members of one species, and through kin selection and reciprocal altruism we tend to have common aspirations and similar affects for satisfying those aspirations. Thus a multiracial society can be sustained so long as it is centered on the family and the market -- the loci of our commonality.

ON the other hand, evolutionary biology may present a serious challenge to pure libertarianism. This may surprise some people who confuse the rise of Darwinism in the social sciences with the nineteenth-century tenets of Social Darwinism. There is no connection. Natural selection leads to the survival of the most reproductively fit; however, it is a classic example of the naturalistic fallacy to infer from this scientific fact the moral conclusion that the goal of society is to aid the most reproductively fit. Instead, by describing human nature more precisely, evolutionary biology offers an improved map for the political economy in our age. It shows what are the natural tendencies of man and what are the possible ways human political actions can both release and constrain these tendencies to increase human happiness.

Moreover, the fragile and divided self that evolution describes may not be entirely consonant with the more integrated self at the heart of libertarianism. For instance, the younger self is so weakly connected to the imagination of the older self (primarily because most individuals did not live to old age in hunter-gatherer societies) that most people cannot be expected to save sufficiently for old age. A large group of aging and

propertyless individuals would be a source of social instability. Therefore there may be justification for state intervention to force individuals to save for their own retirement. Similarly, the sexual self is so weakly linked to the long-term rational calculating self that simply requiring individuals to live with the consequences of their sexual acts may not be enough to restrain socially destructive activity. Society may need to create institutions to channel and restrain sexual activity.

Evolutionary biology also undermines what might be termed utopian conservatism: the notion that there is some social structure in which all the possible human goods -- family values, patriotism, entrepreneurship -- will be fully and equally realized. Evolution shines a somewhat tragic light on the desire for perfection in human affairs: the different adaptations around which emotions are structured are inevitably in conflict, particularly as the environment changes. For instance, as the rule of law in society perfects the axis of reciprocal altruism and makes it easy to gain resources through trade with unrelated individuals, the family becomes less necessary as a source of protection and as an axis of commerce for its members. Western civilization, in fact, has been marked by the continuous shrinking of the extended family, so that "family values" today are generally a reference to the nuclear family -- a shadow of the "clan values" that dominated hunter-gatherer societies. One can go to a society with a less rule-oriented regime than ours (like Italy) and get some sense of the encompassing warmth of family life that is lost with the progress of law. A Darwinian conservatism recognizes the fundamental trade-offs in social life and works to conserve what is possible rather than seeking to resurrect what is dead. Darwinian conservatism is thus the conservatism of those, like Edmund Burke, who offer political reforms to meet changing conditions.

Evolutionary biology necessarily underscores the impermanence of all human arrangements. Like any scientific understanding, it echoes the Heraclitean maxim: Everything not supernatural is in flux. When a biologist looks at the behavior of animals, he recognizes that this behavior is an interaction of genes and the environment. As the environment changes, so will the behavior. An evolutionary science of politics thus has nothing in common with genetic determinism.

Because our discoveries and inventions change the human environment faster than that of any other animal, there is always a temptation -- to which today's techno-conservatives, like Newt Gingrich, often fall prey -- to think that such changes may usher in an age of harmony and plenty that will solve the dilemmas of politics. Evolutionary biology shows that this is simply a pipe dream. Our nature assures that we will simultaneously be obsessed with our relative status in society and possess unequal abilities for acquiring higher status. Thus individuals will always seek to use the government as a means to rearrange their relative positions. No matter how much wealth free trade produces, no matter how much information the Internet transmits, the central problem of politics will remain: how to empower the government for safeguarding life and property, and yet simultaneously constrain it from eviscerating civil society and expropriating property.

**S**UCH changes in information transmission and technology require innovative structures to achieve this perennial goal of human politics. For instance, it may be that the federalism of the Framing is no longer an effective structure for containing centralized governmental power. The ease of transportation and the dominance of mass communication have loosened citizens' attachments to their states. We simply cannot share the feelings of Robert E. Lee, who in refusing the command of the Union



armies stated that he must fight for his "native state" rather than the United States. Some other political devices that are better rooted in current attachments may have to be found for restraining government in our time.

Accordingly, the most important lesson of Darwinism for conservatives today is to remind them that their task is to respond to the ingrained tendencies of human nature in a world in flux. Its unique contribution is to provide a powerful scientific framework to describe that nature more precisely than ever before. Thus it should inspire the Right to act in the tradition of the greatest conservatives of past generations, like Madison and Burke, who also used the best science of their day to create political structures that would enable men to flourish in the intersection of their particular circumstances and their enduring nature.



[Outrage du Jour](#) | [The Real Clinton](#) | [WFB's Word of the Day](#) | [Soapbox](#) | [Washington Bulletin](#)  
[College Scene](#) | [NR Extra](#) | [Letters](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Marketplace](#) | [Home](#)

National Review is a  Member Organization