

The Darwinian Left

A Rhetoric of Realism or Reaction?¹

Steve Fuller

Poroi, 1, 1, January, 2001



- 1 Before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, socialists could claim they had done a better job of uniting theory and practice than capitalists. Socialists had generally succeeded in raising the welfare of the bottom end of their societies, typically at the cost of lowering it at the top end. And that is exactly as the socialists would have wanted it. For, even if not all socialists held the rich personally responsible for the plight of the poor, all were in agreement that the rich constituted a structural obstacle in the struggle to overcome mass poverty. In contrast, capitalists have found it more difficult to square their own theory and practice. In theory, everyone should flourish with the liberalization of markets. Yet, in practice, even when the poor increased their income, it was never enough to catch up with the increases in wealth made by the rich. The result was an intensification of existing class divisions, or “relative deprivation,” which capitalist theorists could only attempt to explain away by invoking such ad hoc factors as the lack of a work ethic among the poor or the unpredictability of markets.

- 2 Back then capitalists found themselves on the defensive precisely because they agreed with the socialists on the fundamental equality of all human beings. Nothing in capitalism implies contempt for the poor in the way socialism implies contempt for the rich. Both capitalists and socialists concurred that given the right political economy, everyone should be able to function as full-fledged members of society. Thus the increasing political and economic disparities in advanced capitalist societies – especially the United States – suggested that their grounding theory was fatally wrong. I certainly remember my parents and teachers claiming as late as my senior year in college (1979) that Marx was correct at least in his general claim that once capitalist societies turned socialist, they would never look back. The welfare state was then seen as facilitating socialist reforms in countries with atavistically strong capitalist traditions, not (as today) providing a temporary safeguard in nations that have yet to master the laws of the market. As it turned out, a mere quarter-century’s worth of political experience (roughly 1945-70) was pumped up into proof

that Marx had discovered the basic law of social progress. Not surprisingly, then, it took even less time to demonstrate, with equal conclusiveness, that Marx had been wrong all along.

- 3 Enter Peter Singer, the latest philosopher to try to convert the recent past into political destiny via the alchemy of a scientifically inspired metaphysics (Singer, 1999a). Singer's philosopher's stone turns out to be Darwinism, which he believes can revive the fortunes of the Left in today's post-Marxist world. Quoting Richard Dawkins, Singer portrays Darwin, not Marx, as Hegel's true heir:

Although "We are built as gene machines," [Dawkins] tells us, "we have the power to turn against our creators." There is an important truth here. We are the first generation to understand not only that we have evolved, but also the mechanisms by which we have evolved and how this evolutionary heritage influences our behavior. In his philosophical epic, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel portrayed the culmination of history as a state of Absolute Knowledge, in which Mind knows itself for what it is, and hence achieves its own freedom. We don't have to buy Hegel's metaphysics to see something similar really has happened in the last fifty years. For the first time since life emerged from the primeval soup, there are beings who understand how they have come to be what they are (Singer 1999a, p. 63).

An important assumption that Singer makes – which I happen to share – is that the Left requires a 'scientific' foundation, at least insofar as progressive politics needs to legitimize any substantial deviation from past policies. After all, the people who would have to endure any proposed policy changes are precisely the ones who have endured the policies that would now be changed. In the modern world, science seems to provide the only consistently persuasive basis for believing that systematic change will be better than stasis. Nevertheless Singer's vision of a "Darwinian Left" does little to exploit science's role as an alternative source of authority to tradition. If anything, his use of Darwin reinforces traditional views and limits the scope for social change. Simply consider the ease with which Singer quotes Dawkins (in the sentence before the one quoted above) who asserts that altruism "has no place in nature, [is] something that has never existed in

the whole history of the world.”

- 4 This essay is an exercise in social epistemology, one of the most effective critical strategies available to the rhetoric of science. In the first instance, I read Singer's turn from Marx to Darwin as a sign of our times. However, the sharp chord that Singer strikes in other contemporary leftists obscures as much as it reveals. In particular, it hides the conservative roots of Darwinism that, in its first 150 years, has made it such an unreliable fellow-traveler of those concerned with the liberation of traditionally disenfranchised groups in society. These roots are worth revisiting, since they are not exactly as they might first appear, nor their effects exactly as devotees of neat ideological distinctions might wish. Yet, even after the scientific and political rhetorics surrounding the “selfish gene” hypothesis are disentangled, it is clear that a significant part of the human – and even animal – condition is underplayed by Singer's appropriation of Darwinism. This missing aspect is epitomized by Hegel's phrase, “the quest for recognition,” the most eloquent recent expression of which has been by Francis Fukuyama (1992). Without completely endorsing Fukuyama's rather sanguine democratic liberalism, I argue that he has tapped into a deep current in Western thought that remains unrepresented in modern biological science. To be sure, here is not the place to propose a heroic synthesis of the Darwinian and Hegelian strands in evolution. Nevertheless I discuss how greater attention to the Hegelian strand would overturn an intuition Singer shares with many interpreters of the human condition, namely, that greater familiarity should breed charity - rather than contempt – of those interpreted.

Hume's Hidden Right Hand and the Origins of the Darwinian Left

- 5 Singer blames Marxism for failing to realize that humans are biologically constituted to resist the sort of comprehensive societal transformation promised by a Marxist revolutionary order. But he does not mean to endorse libertarianism here. The problem is not that Marxism constrained people's “natural liberty.” Singer holds that Marxism did not take seriously the evolutionary adaptiveness of persistent social arrangements, especially ones that contradict the revolutionary's most cherished ideal, egalitarianism. In developing this argument, it soon becomes clear that Singer is targeting a particular form of socially engineered equality – namely, between the sexes. Here Darwinism's causal focus on

sexual reproduction as the key to species survival in humans is alleged to contain some valuable political lessons for the Left: “While Darwinian thought has no impact on the priority we give to equality as a moral or political ideal, it gives us grounds for believing that since men and women play different roles in reproduction, they may also differ in their inclinations and temperaments, in ways that best promote the reproductive prospects of each sex” (Singer 1999a, pp. 17-18).

- 6 To those familiar with Singer’s long-standing interest in extending rights to animals, which is also based on Darwin-inspired reasoning, the apparent ease with which he can excuse gender discrimination may seem odd. However, it is characteristic of the English philosophical tradition, on which both Darwin and Singer draw, to argue on “naturalistic” grounds both for breaking down any hard ontological distinction between humans and other animal species and reinforcing persistent social distinctions within humans. What has varied across thinkers and centuries in this tradition is exactly how one proceeds to bridge the gap between humans and non-humans and which persistent human social distinctions are legitimized.
- 7 Armed with the Neo-Darwinian synthesis, Singer can point to the vast majority of overlapping genes between animal species to warrant the extension of rights to animals. Sigmund Freud, a pre-Mendelian Darwinian who appreciated the English tradition, could treat human beings as distinctive physiological channels for generalized animal energies, while recoiling from John Stuart Mill’s call for gender equality – even as he was translating *The Subjection of Women* into German! (Appignanesi and Forrester 2000, pp. 421-423). Darwin himself, by no means an activist for the rights of either women or animals, originally learned to blur the human-animal distinction from David Hume’s account of reason as an instinct common to all animals but expressed in varying degrees in different species and even different races, given Hume’s views on the multiple origins of humans from apes (Richards 1987, pp. 106-109; Harris 1968, pp. 87-88). Since Hume both exemplifies the mentality that informs Singer’s discussion and continues to enjoy totemic status in contemporary anglophone philosophy, a brief digression may be in order.
- 8 Historians of modern philosophy have observed, usually in perplexity, why Hume, now seen as the most reasonable and well reasoned of the British empiricists (Mill included), was consigned to minority status for the 100 years following his death – that is,

until the rise of Darwinism in British intellectual culture. While Hume's staunch anti-clericalism is usually cited as the reason, that is only part of the story: he was an anti-clerical Scot who upheld the English monarchy because of its proven ability to keep the nation united in peace and prosperity. Before the widespread acceptance of naturalistic arguments for the maintenance of tradition – often under the rubrics of “adaptationism” and “functionalism” – there was no obvious ideological niche for a secular Tory thinker like Hume. Secularists tended to be republicans, monarchists theists.

- 9 This point is often lost because of Hume's much vaunted “scepticism” and his association with such Enlightenment icons as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, Hume was sceptical only about a priori, not a posteriori, means of grounding authority. The intended targets included not only the divine right of kings and innatist forms of rationalism, but also attempts to overturn authority by appeals to “the rights of man” and the sort of a priori normative principles that would motivate the French Revolution. Hume liked Rousseau for his views about the oppressive effects of corrupt institutions, not his more utopian urges to return humanity to some pristine, pre-institutionalized state. Even more to Hume's liking was Montesquieu's refashioning of Aristotle's “Man is born into society and there he remains.”
- 10 In short, Hume was “radical” in much the same sense Wittgenstein was, namely, someone who wanted to revise how we justify common practices without necessarily revising the practices themselves. While this strategy does little to change what happens on an everyday basis, it significantly alters what counts as legitimate grounds for change – diminishing both the presumption of the incumbent and the motivation of the pretender: neither *lex tyranni* nor *vox populi* is treated as absolute and universal. The plausibility of such a modulated view of things assumes that the greatest evil is to violate the “if it ain't broke don't fix it” principle. It implies that one should oppose those who would exchange a stable social order for an untested ideal, while resisting the urge to redress persistent local injustices that can be ultimately explained as part of a global adaptive strategy. For the generation after Hume, and posterity more generally, this view would receive its most eloquent expression by that Whig, Edmund Burke.²
- 11 Historically this view has suited a landed gentry suspicious of tyrants who advanced their fortunes by speaking for society's lower orders in ways the poor themselves had not previously spoken.

Perhaps the most robust descendants of this line of thought in the 20th century, the anglophile “Austrian” school of economists championed by Friedrich von Hayek, earned their liberal credentials with an early and vigorous opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, but then remained conspicuously silent on the long-standing forms of class, race, and gender discrimination that affirmative action legislation has been designed to counteract. It is just this combination of a high sensitivity to power emanating from a concentrated source (e. g., a tyrant, the Politburo) and a low sensitivity to its emanation from a diffuse source (e. g., locally enforced class-, race-, gender-based prejudice) that marks Singer’s Darwinian Left as heir to this ultimately conservative tradition.

- 12 For these heirs of Hume, diffuse forms of power are recognized as natural, not coercive, especially when there are beneficiaries who deem their situation a “stable environment.” Consequently they have difficulty seeing how a countervailing form of concentrated power would improve matters. In times of domestic tranquility and no foreign threats, a policy of benign neglect would seem to be licensed. The result is the following attitude toward women:

In many nations, the female sex are reduced to like slavery, and rendered incapable of all property, in opposition to their lordly masters. But though the males, when united, have in all countries bodily force sufficient to maintain this severe tyranny, yet such are the insinuation, address, and charms of their fair companions, that women are commonly able to break the confederacy, and share with the other sex in all the rights and privileges of society (Hume 1751, sec. III, part 1).

Here Hume defends the *de facto* oppression of women by men on the grounds that women manage to find ways of mitigating their disadvantage to lead fulfilling lives and influence society. In the sentences prior to these, Hume had denied the natural equality of all humans on the evidence of their vastly different levels of civility, while at the same time regretting that European colonists have slaughtered native Americans and impressed Blacks into slavery. Hume’s concern here was with the actual misery caused, not any transcendental concerns about the violation of human dignity. Hume’s policy message seemed to be that lesser peoples should be either subject to paternalistic governance or left alone in their sub-civilized state. The proven “success” of male-female

relations testified to the former strategy, whereas the pre-colonial existence of Blacks and native Americans testified to the latter.

- 13 Because ideological allegiances have shifted so much over the past two centuries, it is easy to forget that Hume's "balanced" counsel was seen in his own day as strategic complacency. The reformists back then were Scottish clerics like James Beattie, who argued for universalism on the basis of the species essentialism that the Bible granted to humans, allied to the then-popular idea of an innate "commonsense" faculty through which God communicated with us. In terms of cosmology, Beattie *et al.* were unable to see how Hume could so vigorously oppose the idea of divine creation on a priori grounds, while remaining confident in the "uniformity of nature" on a posteriori grounds. For Beattie, as for Darwin's theistic opponents, laws of nature were *ipso facto* evidence for God's existence. Yet, for his part, Hume's opposition to divine creation mainly concerned the idea that God could intervene in the physical world as he pleased (i. e., breaking the laws of nature through miracles), which is analogous to how a tyrant would impose his will on the social world. Although Hume was not as explicit as, say, Voltaire on this point, his view was compatible with God as *deus absconditus*: someone powerful enough to create the best possible world and hence capable of remaining indifferent to its subsequent development. This attitude is comparable to the political conditions under which constitutional monarchies have been maintained.
- 14 Nevertheless the view from the Scottish clergy was that Hume's defense of the English monarchy was designed to arrest any further extension of rights beyond what already had benefitted the anglophile property-owning class and its aspirants. In that respect, Beattie's appeal to universalism was not unlike today's Scottish Nationalist Party's support for the European Union as a countervailing force to the Crown. To be sure, with the hindsight of two centuries, Beattie's reform-minded universalism reads as condescending calls to uplift the "natives." However, I would urge that his sentiment be seen as anticipating affirmative action legislation. Without the welfare state formally redistributing income from rich to poor through taxation, the only available strategy for equalizing human differences was to deploy the resources of the leading NGOs, the independent churches, which funded their missionary work through the devout's subscriptions.³
- 15 Peter Singer wishes to return us to Hume, now armed with Darwin, with the slight twist that incentive schemes are used to

encourage the rich to transfer income to the poor by appealing to the likely consequences of their failure to do so, namely, that they might lose (through damage or theft) what they already possess – be it by achievement or inheritance (a distinction to which Singer is remarkably indifferent). This strategy seems to be targeted to societies where there are zones of wealth in ambient poverty, and both rich and poor are sufficiently knowledgeable of the contribution that each makes to the other's situation: i. e., large urban centers. Such incentive schemes are unlikely to move either those who are secure in their wealth or despondent in their poverty. In short, whatever else the “Darwinian Left” may be, it is an ideology with diminished political ambitions.

In Quest of Recognition Hegel's Heroic Hand in the Wake of Marxism's Demise

- 16 To appreciate how Singer managed to throw out the radical promise of scientific politics with Marxism's failure to redeem that promise, I shall start by contrasting Singer's coroner's report on the demise of Marxism with Francis Fukuyama's (1992), which anticipates many of the themes to be raised here.
- 17 Both Singer and Fukuyama agree that, on a global level, Marxist socialism has been decisively defeated by liberal capitalism. Yet Singer shows no regret about what might have been lost in the process, whereas Fukuyama keeps the normative question open – of course, not so much that he would have preferred a Marxist future to a liberal one. He clearly agrees with Singer that Marxism is a bankrupt political tradition, taken on its own terms. However, Fukuyama also sees Marxism as the main vehicle by which a certain ennobling image of humanity was projected on the world stage, one to which Singer is completely oblivious.
- 18 In contrast to Singer's perspective, Fukuyama's position (at least in its 1992 formulation) is striking in that its species-wide “struggle for survival” derives no intellectual sustenance from contemporary biological accounts of human behavior. Rather it is steeped in classical Greek sources. Fukuyama's proximate philosophical debt is Hegel's attempt to define humanity in terms of its endless quest for recognition, even at risk to one's own life. To be sure, this quest has undergone considerable metamorphosis in the history of Western culture. It first entered Plato's thinking as an aristocratic warrior ethic; and at the peak of Marxism's popularity, it had

become a rallying cry for uniting the dispossessed peoples of the world.

- 19 But regardless of how it is manifested, the quest for recognition has not fitted comfortably with the selfish image of *Homo Sapiens* – and animal life more generally – common to Darwinism and its English roots. Specifically it does not reflect a first-order desire for goods that are enjoyed privately, or “excludably,” as economists would put it; rather, it is a second-order “desire to be desired” that cannot be achieved without the participation of others. Indeed, the personal goods that normally mark the achievement of recognition – such as titles and honours – are in themselves fairly trivial. What matters is the swirl of public activity licensed by these symbols.
- 20 Ultimately the quest for recognition cannot be reduced to selfish behavior because those engaged in the quest are not afraid to risk their lives – or at least a substantial portion of their material well-being – to do things that typically benefit others much more than themselves. Not surprisingly, rational choice theory finds recognition-seekers *prima facie* irrational. To square the quest for recognition with the utilitarian calculus, it is sometimes said that they are sacrificing themselves for the greater good of some favored group, but this end is more often assumed than proven. Moreover one can never be recognized too much, whereas the law of diminishing marginal utility teaches that desires can be satisfied so as to render any further pursuit of them pointless. Fukuyama observes that the selfish human that has anchored the English political imagination from Hobbes to Darwin presupposes a world of scarce material resources, in which staying alive is the order of the day (1992, pp. 143-161). This leads to an identification of rationality with risk-averse strategies. Thus one always obtains food for oneself and for others only if the level of personal risk is low or the likely benefit outweighs the risk.
- 21 To be sure, Fukuyama’s preferred alternative – the political tradition that runs from Plato through Hegel – is equally aware that in the long run we are all dead. Nevertheless, in that tradition’s state of nature, a hospitable physical environment makes the voluntary maintenance of life unproblematic. Scarcity here is perceived as primarily a function of cognitive limitations – that is, the finitude of consciousness and memory, which over time threatens to erode any achievements in recognition. Nevertheless the posous memory of ancestors and the survival of their artifacts show that some have managed to acquire this scarce resource,

which amounts to having their spirit borne by later bodies. Consequently rationality comes to be aligned with continuous risk-seeking, or what Fukuyama calls the “thymic” political imagination, after Plato's word for courage. Resting on one's laurels is not an option in a world governed by distraction and forgetfulness, especially where the material resources are available to do more than one already has.

- 22 Marx is aligned with the thymic tradition because his faith in the success of the proletarian revolution presupposed that capitalism's productivity is sufficiently high to absorb any short-term costs that might be incurred by the workers' violent overthrow of the existing relations of production in their quest for recognition. Thus, while the world of *Capital* is much better endowed than that of *Leviathan*, the struggle for survival features prominently in both. To be sure, as a diligent student of both classical philosophy and classical political economy, Marx integrates the struggles represented by Singer and Fukuyama. The “quest for recognition” pursued by Marx's proletariat combined a desire for both material security and political status: that is, epistemologically speaking, to be sheltered from the mistakes others make and to be permitted to make their own mistakes.
- 23 However, alloys of Hegel and Hobbes need not always have such salutary results. A good case in point is the perpetually acquisitive nature of capitalism, even once the system has produced considerable wealth. Marx saw this as capitalism's tragic flaw, which would be played out in the falling rate of profit as capitalists try to outdo each other by producing the most goods by the cheapest means. Max Weber traced it to the inscrutability of divine justice behind the Protestant Ethic, while Thorstein Veblen and later Fred Hirsch (1976) pointed to the competitive consumption practices in contemporary capitalism. It would seem that Hegel gets his revenge on Hobbes, since capitalists always crave new “states of nature” in which they can prove their superiority. Fukuyama himself sees this development in more hopeful terms, since it spurs entrepreneurs to seek out new markets, which (he claims) ultimately spreads the wealth around the world. Yet even Fukuyama sometimes bemoans consumerism as a degraded version of the quest for recognition, coming close to endorsing Nietzsche's suggestion that a “good war” (even a “cold” one) would revive the old quest in all its heroic glory.
- 24 If capitalism's compulsive acquisitiveness exemplifies Hegelized Hobbesianism, an instance of Hobbesified Hegelianism would be

postmodern identity politics. On the surface, the call to “respect” traditionally disadvantaged social groups appears to continue the quest for recognition. However, postmodern practitioners of identity politics do not generally mean to risk transforming or losing their identity in the hope of representing the interests of humanity. That would be to envisage women or minority ethnic groups as Marx did the proletariat, namely, as the vanguard of a worldwide revolutionary movement. To be sure, liberal and socialist feminists have entertained just such a vision, but they are not typical of contemporary feminism. Rather identity politics tends to pursue the narrower goal of securing social space for its group within an existing power structure whose defining features are seen as uncontrollable, if not exactly unchangeable.

- 25 An important benchmark here is the recent turn in identity politics toward “performativity,” as popularized by Judith Butler, but ultimately derived from Michel Foucault’s unfinished work on the history of sexuality (Butler 1990). I would argue that the politics of performativity should be seen as the latest moment in the trajectory that includes Hume and Wittgenstein, whereby an epistemological radicalism belies political quiescence by “naturalizing” (or “empiricizing”) the scope of normatively appropriate action. In Butler’s championing of the ethic of “drag,” a renovated concept of identity provides a posteriori grounding for what had been previously seen as only a priori groundable. The two genders remain as the normatively appropriate forms of self-presentation, but which biologically sexed persons occupy which gender depend on the social consequences of one’s particular self-presentation, a.k.a. “passing” as male or female. Thus, in providing an epistemological basis for “being queer,” Butler has opened up social space by altering what counts as legitimate practice but not the practice that is thereby legitimated.
- 26 As with Hume and Wittgenstein, here too significant change is said to occur mainly as the unintended consequence of reproducing institutionalized practices at a local level, not some global strategy that lays claim to meta-level knowledge of a wide range of locales. As a concrete political strategy, this means that women’s impersonations of men and vice versa are the most likely vehicles for redressing gender-based discrimination in a world profoundly structured by gender differentiation but at the same time providing resources for both men and women to work the system to their advantage. From one standpoint, Butler’s gender performativity appears to be the final frontier of egalitarian politics. From another, it looks like a sectarian strategy for those

who already enjoy considerable social, economic, and political freedom - such as middle class gays and bisexuals who live in the San Francisco Bay area.

- 27 To put the politics of performativity in perspective, recall some alternative strategies for redressing gender discrimination. The more familiar ones have been largely state-mandated, such as affirmative action and equal pay legislation. They presume that most women have neither the opportunity nor the inclination to impersonate men to improve their standard of living. A more distant political possibility is the complete diffusion of gender identity, as organic reproduction is institutionally and technologically separated from sexual intercourse. It is one thing to advocate free sexual passage between the two genders, but quite another to call for a multiplication of gender identities that ends up emptying the concept of gender of all meaning.
- 28 Gender performativists start to worry at this point, and some have hinted at a backlash comparable to those who celebrate the free passage of individuals between racial or cultural identities but then balk at the prospect that inter-marriage, hybridization, and sheer globalization might serve to render race and culture meaningless social categories. Yet, even here, Hegel may have the last laugh on Hobbes. As Marxists are still fond of observing, members of the bourgeoisie who demonized the unearned wealth of the nobility and clergy in the French and Russian Revolutions simply had a version of that argument turned against them – in the name of “capitalist exploitation” – by the working class, thereby removing any temporary advantage the bourgeoisie had gained by it.

The Quest for Recognition as Transcending the Horizons of the Darwinian Left

- 29 There are many ways to think of the relationship between “selfishness” and “altruism” in roughly Darwinian terms. If we stick to Richard Dawkins’ original formulation of the “selfish gene,” then everyday instances of altruism are reduced to epiphenomena, namely, macro-behavioral consequences of one organism enabling another of its kin to reproduce their common genes (1976). (This is called “Hamilton’s Rule,” after Dawkins’ Oxford mentor, William Hamilton.) Since a gene’s very purpose is self-reproduction, it needs to produce individual organisms as vehicles. On this view, the organisms themselves are neither

selfish nor altruistic. They are simply used by the gene for its own purposes.

- 30 Sometimes Dawkins is criticized for overextending the metaphor of selfishness. But it would be more correct to say that the so-called metaphor is an anthropomorphically fueled equivocation. On the one hand, Dawkins means that genes subject everything else to their own ends; on the other, he wants to suggest that altruism exists only as a gene-driven illusion. However, what remains obscured in this equivocation is that everyday instances of selfishness are just as illusory as those of altruism, since any increase in an individual organism's advantage is always a macro-effect of the advantage gained by the genes that the organism carries. An organism's selfish or altruistic interests may or may not coincide with the conditions that enable the organism's genes to reproduce themselves. In this respect, Dawkins has seriously misled Singer into thinking that Darwinism "proves" that organisms are more "naturally" selfish than altruistic. *If there is no other reason for attending to levels of causation in policy-relevant arguments, this is it.*
- 31 This deconstruction of the selfish gene metaphor enables us to witness the ease with which attributions of selfishness are transferred between the individual organism and its genetic constituents. In contrast, consider the rhetorical viability of the "selfish society," understood not as a society of selfish individuals but a society that consumes its individual members just as a gene consumes its organic carriers. Here one might invoke the names of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, or Niklas Luhmann – all of whom regarded human beings as vehicles for reproducing the larger social system to which they belong. Yet, interestingly, the selfishness metaphor is rarely extended sociologically. On the contrary, the sociologists in question are normally seen as advancing a theory of the social system in which individuals are "sacrificed" or "subordinated" to a larger presence that exerts power over them. It would seem, then, that Dawkins had tapped into an implicit convention governing metaphorical extensions of "selfish," namely, that selfishness is a bottom-up-oriented relation, whereas power is a top-down-oriented relation. Hence, we are inclined to say that society, not selfishness, exerts power over the individual, whereas "naturally" selfish individuals constitute society.
- 32 However, matters are complicated once genes figure in the equation because genes can be understood either as specific parts

of a whole organism or as vehicles for the expression of properties common to many organisms. Most logical paradoxes rest on confusing part-whole and one-many relations, and gene-talk continues this venerable tradition with a vengeance, as epitomized in the question: Will greater knowledge of genetics enable us to design people as we please or force us to confront the terms of our natural enslavement? Singer, a follower of Dawkins, wants to answer yes to both questions. Moreover it is possible to have it both ways, once we understand the interaction effects of different genes in an organism that expresses its unique genetic constitution under the distinct environmental regime that constitutes its history. But unfortunately, our imperfect knowledge of these effects encourages an expedient switching between rhetorics.

- 33 On the one hand, a part-whole rhetoric is used to capture the libertarian impulse that is animated by the recent discovery of a “gene for X,” where “X” is a socially salient trait. Here genetics is about physically localizable things in specific individuals. On the other hand, the more deterministic one-many rhetoric is used for a widespread trait that appears intractable to policy interventions. Here genetics is about elusive tendencies that are unpredictably manifested in a general population. Thus Singer licenses the pre-natal manipulation or abortion of genetically disabled human fetuses, while (as we saw earlier) virtually excusing the long-standing discrimination against the advancement of women in the workplace. Of course, when it comes to legitimating a socially controversial trait like homosexuality, its antagonists will appeal to genetic rhetoric to nip it in the bud, whereas its supporters will use the very same genetic rhetoric to underscore its inevitability (and hence normality) in the existing population. In both examples, the current state of our genetic knowledge provides the pretext for letting, respectively, the ease and the difficulty of strategic intervention carry more metaphysical weight than it might otherwise.
- 34 Yet there is an important difference between the relative ease with which a prima facie undesirable situation can be altered and the utility that would be ultimately served by altering it. Temporal perspective typically makes the difference. For example, even if we can now easily prevent certain physical disabilities, those disabilities may have historically served to expand our collective capacity to experience reality. From the standpoint of philosophy, psychology, and linguistics, deafness and blindness are the obvious cases in point (Ree 1999). Our quick assent to Singer’s call for eliminating “genetic defects” involves discounting the collective

gain that have been derived from nurturing them in the past and having forced “abled” people to extend their imagination and ingenuity to accommodate them (Lewontin 1993). This is not to say that disabilities should be indefinitely perpetuated; rather it is to argue, on Singer’s own utilitarian grounds, for cultivating naturally occurring disabilities, at least until their distinct perspectives are absorbed into our common cultural inheritance. To be sure, this strategy needs to be tempered by the findings of genetic science, since certain fetal abnormalities may result in individuals whose suffering cannot be alleviated by any ambient social adjustments.⁴

- 35 To his credit, Singer realizes that little more than a metaphor connects Dawkins’ appeal to selfishness and the phenomena with which selfishness is normally associated (Singer 1999a, chap. 4). Nevertheless he allows Dawkins’ “gene’s eye-view” to anchor his discussion of the policy prospects for altruism. The result is that Singer accords undue weight to selfishness at the level of human behavior and, more importantly, presumes that there is usually a tradeoff between self- and other-oriented action. Thus, while Singer grants that some selfish behavior can be made to benefit others with the right incentives, his prescriptions tend toward veiled threats and explicit penalties, as in “pay higher taxes now or else expect more crime in the future.” This suggests that he believes that promoting the cause of altruism is an uphill struggle against our selfish inclinations.
- 36 Instead, however, of simply importing a gene-based conception of the selfishness/altruism distinction to explain behavior, we might observe the implications of the distinction at the behavioral level itself. A provocative frame of reference for this discussion is the “handicap principle,” which purports to explain altruism as a limited form of self-sacrifice that animals undergo to mark their status to members of their own species and sometimes of others (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). Without such altruism, it would be difficult for animals to orient themselves around their world, in both sociological and epistemological terms. The handicap principle is meant to be quite general, covering mate selection, the mutual identification of predator and prey, not to mention basic representational practices.
- 37 The last sort of case is especially revealing, since the use of signs is normally explained in terms of economy of effort, as if the salient relation were between the word and the thing to which it refers. The point, then, would be that saying the word is usually more

economical than providing the thing. However, according to the handicap principle, the evolutionarily salient relation transpires between the word and its utterer: Why would someone feel compelled to say anything in the first place? The answer to this question is not obviously economy of effort, since saying nothing at all would take less effort and the utterance often benefits the addressee more than the addresser. Similarly one might ask: Why do potential mates – or predator and prey, for that matter – announce their status (e. g., by engaging in song or displaying plumage) before enacting it.

38 To focus on the difference that the handicap principle makes, consider a representational practice as basic as my telling you something you did not know. I am “handicapped” by spending time talking to you that I could have spent doing something of more direct benefit to me. Moreover, by telling you what I know, I have eliminated any advantage I might have had over you by knowing it. Yet these costs are offset by your recognition that I am a reliable source of information and hence someone to whom you should defer in the future. In short, you come to depend on me because I took the initial risk of reaching out to you and it turned out to have mutually beneficial consequences, even if not in the same sense. For, ultimately, altruists aim to display their superiority (“magnanimity”) to those who benefit from their actions. This interpretation of altruism goes to the heart of the concept, as it was originally popularized in mid-19th century arguments for philanthropy. It presupposes a world that is sufficiently rich in resources that individuals will be inclined toward risk-seeking behavior that aims to extend one's claims over others. Here we begin to see a possible evolutionary basis for the quest for recognition. Yet it is in marked contrast to the more Hobbesian world presumed in modern evolutionary accounts of behavior. In that case, individuals are struggling to maintain what they already have, and hence are averse to taking risks unless a clear benefit can be foreseen. Under the circumstances, selfishness is understandable.

39 It might be useful here to sketch the contrasting genealogies of the selfishness- and altruism-based accounts of evolution by arguing that after Hobbes' secularization of Adam's fall, Darwin and his followers have sought non-theistic redemption in some chance combination of genetic dispositions and environmental expression. In contrast, like Fukuyama's account of the quest for recognition, the handicap principle begins from a position more akin to the Greco-Roman than the Judeo-Christian tradition,

namely, individuals regard themselves as gods in the making who demonstrate their admirability by their success at self-extension. Once the *Illiad* replaces *Genesis* as the creation myth, it becomes easy to see how the handicap principle may instill a spirit of “competitive altruism” as you and I try to outdo each other in displays of superiority. The net effect is that we sacrifice more of ourselves, and in the process leave more traces of our accomplishments and failures, from which our successors may benefit.

- 40 The flamboyant gift-giving practices of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia that so fascinated Franz Boas and Marcel Mauss in the early 20th century – in which the natives would often risk their own welfare in the name of tribal recognition – obviously fall into this category (Boas 1921; Mauss 1954). But so too would the development of elaborate information and communicative exchanges, be they conducted in the polis, on the playing field, in the pages of a scientific journal, or over the internet. It would be difficult to reduce these instances of competitive altruism to latent self-interest because often the recipients benefit more in the long term than the benefactors. In the larger biosphere, this holds especially across species, as potential predators and prey demonstrate their respective status to each other. Yet the true prevalence of competitive altruism may be obscured by a stigmatic label like “obsessive-compulsive” behavior, which presumes that one should do more for one’s kith and kin than for a set of anonymous others whom one regularly encounters in rather specialized settings.
- 41 Moreover competitive altruism cannot be assimilated to the “reciprocal altruism” introduced by Robert Trivers, which tries to turn altruism into a form of extended self-interest whereby one gives to another expecting to receive something of comparable value in return (Trivers 1971). In game-theoretic circles, this is known as the “tit-for-tat” strategy. Peter Singer himself has probably done the most to turn this strategy into an ethical principle, but it remains a very limited basis on which to ground altruism, since it is anchored in the interest one has in others of one’s own kind (Singer 1981). Singer then argues for extending the relevant sense of “kind,” mainly on the basis of biological and more broadly ecological considerations that cast doubt on the idea that human welfare can be addressed independently of animal welfare.

Charity or Contempt? A Unresolved Problem for Cross-Species Interpreters

- 42 As Robert Solomon has noted, Singer's defense of altruism relies heavily – I would say much too heavily – on a Scottish Enlightenment conception of concern for others modeled on Newton's inverse square law of gravitational attraction, so that by analogy concern diminishes as social distance from oneself increases (Solomon 1999; Singer 1999b). This conception fails to acknowledge that once we start to acquire a scientifically nuanced understanding of our fellows, we might start to question their moral worth, which might in turn reverse the salience of the social distance principle.
- 43 Singer's basic strategy for expanding what he calls "the circle of ethics" – his surrogate for altruism – is to show that certain physiological and genetic similarities between humans and non-human animals compel us to include these non-humans in our calculations of welfare. But for Singer, that then entails a re-evaluation of human life, since the greater good of this expanded circle (and even its constituent individuals) may be served by, say, allowing a healthy pig to live, while consigning a disabled human infant to death. (The need for such tradeoffs clearly presupposes a policy regime with irremediably scarce resources, a point rarely made as explicit as it should be.)
- 44 Solomon criticizes Singer's strategy for sacrificing compassion at the altar of reason. He argues that, according to Singer's logic, not only would the disabled infant be left to die, but so too the homeless person who refuses to find work. If one knows with moral certainty that a given human will be of more cost than benefit to the expanded circle, then that person should be removed from the circle. An apt analogy here may be to recall that Kepler had originally proposed the inverse square law to capture illumination as a function of distance from a light source. Perhaps then, by increasing the power of the light source to enable the illumination of more distant objects (cf. healthy pigs), one may unintentionally consume less distant ones (cf. homeless humans) in flames.
- 45 I agree with Solomon that all this seems to follow from Singer's argument. But I disagree that it points to Singer's uncompassionate hyper-rationalism. Solomon would suggest that

the problem lies in the broadly utilitarian framework within which Singer operates. On the contrary, I believe that Singer is not a hyper-rationalist but a hyper-empiricist, someone who lets his greater empirical knowledge of the differences in the behavioral patterns and motivational structures of human beings vis-a-vis those of non-human beings prejudice the value weightings he assigns in his utilitarian calculus. In other words, one can know (or think one knows) too much about individuals to make an appropriate moral appraisal. The benefit of the doubt is then accorded to those we know less about. On that basis, I would say that Singer is biased against humans.

- 46 The legal system regularly counteracts the perils of hyper-empiricism in the circumscribed procedure of courtroom trials: who can be a juror in a case, what counts as permissible testimony, etc. John Rawls (1971) famously conferred philosophical respectability on this practice by arguing that decisions concerning the most fundamental principles of justice require a “veil of ignorance” in which the decision-maker knows only the most general features of her society but not her particular status therein.
- 47 Nowadays political theorists tend to regard Rawls’ veil of ignorance as little more than an intriguing artifice propping up a theory of justice that merits our endorsement on other grounds. However, I believe that the veil reflects the deep need for a stopgap against any undue influence that the varying degrees of knowledge we have of our fellow humans and non-humans may have on our normative judgments. Although Rawls himself justified the veil of ignorance on transcendental grounds, I would do so on what I have called “reflexive naturalist” grounds (Fuller 1993; cf. Fuller 1985, where I first explored the epistemological import of the veil of ignorance). In other words, among the empirical components of our normative judgments should be the “meta-fact” that the historical development of human knowledge has been uneven, both in terms of what is known and who knows it. Contrary to Rawls’ own construal of the veil of ignorance, failure to recognize this point is not limited to letting greater knowledge of our own situation disadvantage others socially distant from us. At a more general level, it provides ironic vindication of La Rochefoucauld’s maxim, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Specifically our greater familiarity with humans vis-a-vis animals breeds contemptuous interpretations of our fellow humans. (On the rationality of this and related psychological mechanisms, see Elster 1999.)

- 48 That familiarity might breed contempt goes unnoticed because the sociobiological literature on which Singer relies often presumes that our knowledge of non-humans is in some normatively relevant way better than that of humans, since humans are presumed to engage in more complex behaviors than other animals, given the supposedly more complicated ways in which our genetic potential interacts with the environment. Of course, read rhetorically, sociobiological accounts of non-humans are full of covert, unconscious, and otherwise unacknowledged borrowings from Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Freud. The problem is getting sociobiologists to see Marx *et al.* as relevant to the human beings for which their theories were originally designed! A charitable understanding of this topsy-turvy situation is that social scientific theories like those of Marx typically identify only a few variables as salient for explaining human behavior. Sociobiologists find this too simple, unless these variables can be located in morally “simpler” organisms that then provide evolutionary precedents for human behavior. Ants thus replace Althusser as the bearers of epistemic authority.
- 49 However, once we lay to rest the chimera that we know more about non-humans than humans, is there any way of justifying the La Rochefoucauldian interpretive principle? I would say yes, but it requires that we transcend the perspectives of both humans and animals, and instead adopt the standpoint of God – but in the specific Enlightenment sense that made *deus absconditus* such an attractive image for Voltaire and his fellow deists. For them, “the best of all possible worlds” implied that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God, including the freedom allowed to God. However, it was a deliberately imperfect reproduction designed to challenge humans to use their freedom to earn their salvation. In contrast, animals were created in a perfectly amoral state. Whereas animals are always all they can be, humans can always be more than they are. On this basis, familiarity with humanity’s potential may breed contempt for what particular individuals make of it.
- 50 The model for this attitude is traceable to La Rochefoucauld’s own origins as a mid-17th century French aristocrat who was more than adequately familiar with how members of his own class squandered their privilege, ultimately ceding it to the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV. Thus he looked more charitably upon those who improved upon, rather than degraded, their inheritance. What distinguishes Singer’s interpretive stance from La Rochefoucauld’s is the former’s failure to take seriously what

can be added through will and effort to one's genetic endowment. In this sense, Singer remains deaf to the quest for recognition, at least in the human species and probably others as well.

© Steve Fuller, 2001.

Notes

- 1** This essay has been greatly improved by David Depew's deft editorial hand. I would also like to thank Greg Ransom of Mariposa College, California, for allowing my recent book, *The Governance of Science* (Milton Keynes, UK, Open University Press, 2000), to be debated in the Hayek electronic listserv in late July and early August 2000, during which many of the views expressed here were consolidated.
- 2** My thanks to David Depew for reminding me of this point.
- 3** I am indebted to Stephen Toulmin's most recent work for this insight.
- 4** My thanks to David Depew for raising this very valid point.

References

- Appignanesi, Lisa, and John Forrester. 2000. *Freud's Women*, 2nd edn. Harmondsworth UK: Penguin.
- Boas, Franz. 1921. *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*. Report 35. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of Ethnology.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elster, Jon Elster. 1999. *Alchemies of the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Fuller, Steve. 1985. *Bounded Rationality in Law and Science*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of History and Philosophy

of Science: University of Pittsburgh.

Fuller, Steve Fuller. 1993. *Philosophy of Science and Its Discontents*, 2nd edn. New York: Guilford Press.

Fuller, Steve. 2000a. "Governing Science before It Governs Us." *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 25, 2, pp. 95-100.

Fuller, Steve. 2000b. "The Coming Biological Challenge to Social Theory and Practice." In J. Eldridge *et al.*, eds., *For Sociology*. York: Sociologypress, pp. 174-190.

Harris, Marvin. 1968. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. New York: Thomas Crowell.

Hirsch, Fred. 1976. *Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hume, David. 1751. *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

Lewontin, Richard. 1993. *Biology as Ideology*. New York: Harpercollins.

Mauss, Marcel. 1954. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Cohen and West.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ree, Jonathan. 1999. *I See a Voice*. London: Flamingo.

Richards, Robert. 1987. *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Singer, Peter. 1981. *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Singer, Peter. 1999a. *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Singer, Peter. 1999b. "A Response." In D. Jamieson, ed., *Singer and his Critics*. Oxford: Blackwel, pp. 269-335.

Solomon, Robert. 1999. "Peter Singer's Expanding Circle: Compassion and the Liberation of Ethics." In D. Jamieson,

ed., *Singer and his Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 64-85.

Trivers, Robert. 1971. "The Evolution of Reciprocal Itruism."
Quarterly Review of Biology, 46, pp. 35-57.

Zahavi, Amotz, and Avishag Zahavi. 1997. *The Handicap
Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin's Puzzle*. Oxford:
Oxford University Press.