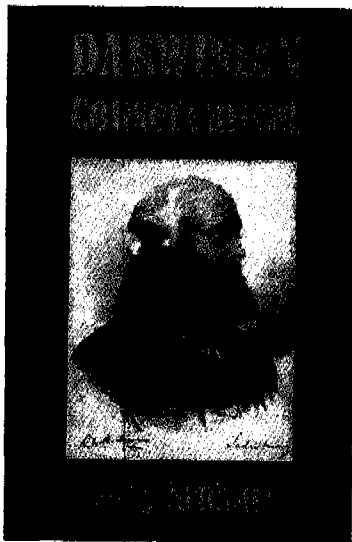


BOOKREVIEWS



DARWINIAN CONSERVATISM

by Larry Arnhart
Exeter (UK): Imprint Academic,
2005. 162 pages

Reviewed by Timothy
Sandefur

Larry Arnhart's message, stated in the first line of his book, is that "conservatives need Charles Darwin." But *Darwinian Conservatism*, like his earlier book *Darwinian Natural Right* (1998), shows that they need Larry Arnhart just as badly. His new book is an important reform tract: a plea to fellow conservatives not only to see the danger of hitching their wagon to the falling star of "intelligent design", but also to realize that the left has no legitimate claim to the laurels of scientific rationality.

First things first: Arnhart deserves praise for rejecting the notion that science is somehow neutral toward politics or morality. If politics is to solve human problems, then it must be based on an understanding of what humans are,

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and what they need to survive and to flourish. Unfortunately, many scientists are so eager to keep science strictly separated from messy partisan conflicts that they claim biology has nothing to say about ethics or politics. This is silly. Evolution is the most robust explanation of human nature ever devised, and any political philosophy that hopes to be more than dream talk must ultimately be based on that account. Evolutionary science holds out the possibility of founding politics not on arbitrary value assumptions or cultural relativism, but on humanity's objectively ascertainable qualities and needs. Take property rights, for example. Previous generations thought of property as part of the divine order of the universe. That answer is no longer attractive after Darwin, but neither is the equally contrived answer, common on the left, that property is just a conventional institution that can be altered or revised by wise bureaucrats in the service of noble goals. Like Richard Pipes (1999), Arnhart argues that property rights are a natural need of human beings, rooted in our biological nature, and that they have evolved alongside our physical nature (pages 31, 59-67). He makes the same argument about nineteen other "natural desires" which originate in "a universal human nature," and "motivate [our] moral judgment" (page 26). These desires, he continues, are conservatism's chief concerns, and they are not of supernatural origin, but are the product of evolution. In short, "Natural law is not a 'myth.' It is a rationally observable and scientifically verifiable fact" (Arnhart and others 2000).

It is unfortunate for conservatism that this argument is so unusual. All Arnhart seems to be saying is that conservative values can be grounded in nature, not just myth. Yet conservatism has labored long under the assumption that we need a special magic spark to give

us moral significance. Science, according to such conservative mainstays as Russell Kirk (1985: 419), Robert Nisbet (1990), or Richard Weaver (Young 1995: 108-10), leads to a "mechanistic" universe populated by "mere atomistic individuals" who live a graceless life of cost-benefit analysis. But Arnhart argues that there is no need for magic to make us moral creatures. Morality is a function of (evolved) human nature: "Because normal human beings have the human nature that they do, which includes propensities to moral emotions, they predictably react to certain facts with strong feelings of approval or disapproval, and the generalizations of these feelings across a society constitute their moral judgments" (page 44).

But while human nature, and its moral aspects, are not handed down from On High, neither are they arbitrary matters of convention. Throughout the twentieth century, political thinkers on the left have regarded human nature as a function of culture, meaning that it can be changed to serve society's needs. John Dewey, for example, argued that an individual's personality is "something achieved ... with the aid and support of conditions, cultural and physical," and that modern liberalism sought the "positive construction of favorable institutions, legal, political and economic" by which individual personality could be formulated, not just liberated (Dewey 1935). In some ways, this Progressive attitude was a consequence of "Darwin's overthrow of essentialism" (Dennett 1995: 39), since it seemed to prove that there was no unique *thing* to differentiate humans from the rest of the universe, and therefore, that there was no such thing as unchanging categories in politics or morality. Right and wrong, justice and injustice, private and public, could be whatever people decided. As Louis Menand puts it, Progressives rejected the idea that "there exists some order, invisible to us, whose logic we transgress at our peril" (Menand 2000: 439), and adopted anything-goes nominalism instead.

But there is an important way in which evolution does *not* overthrow essentialism (Matson 1984:



24-6). Humans do indeed have a nature, even if biological evolution has molded them from less sophisticated predecessors. The primary error of conservatives like Kirk or Harvey Mansfield, writes Arnhart, is their assumption "that human nature is not a solid ground of moral norms unless it is eternally unchanging" (page 54). Although he does not spend much time in this book on such complicated epistemological arguments, Arnhart has explained in *Darwinian Natural Right* why a much stronger explanation of human nature — and a much stronger foundation for naturalistic ethics and politics — is provided by an "evolutionary account of species [that] is neither strictly essentialist nor strictly nominalist" (Arnhart 1998: 233).

In fact, nominalism should *also* be seen as a rejection of Darwin (see, for example, Menand 2000: 371-2). And yet somehow the idea that natural human conditions like property, inequality, acquisitiveness, or sex roles, have no biological anchor, but can be altered by energetic social planning, has somehow come to be seen as "scientific" by a great many intellectuals (Johnson 1990). This notion really puts leftists in a bind: "On the one hand, Darwinian leftists must accept the Darwinian account of human nature. On the other hand they must assume that human beings are free from the constraints of human nature because they create human history as a cultural artifact" (page 123; see also Johnson 1990: 338-40).

Conservatism overreacted to leftist relativism by searching for eternal, magical solutions; what Daniel Dennett calls "skyhooks" (1995: 74). In fact, some conservatives do not even care whether such solutions really exist, and have argued instead for a "noble lie" whereby "it is the moral and political utility of religious belief that is decisive" (page 91; see also Bailey 1996). But how strong can a political theory be, which *consciously grounds itself* on a lie? The "deepest question," Arnhart writes, is "whether morality necessarily depends on religious belief...or whether a scientific naturalism can support a natural moral sense (as

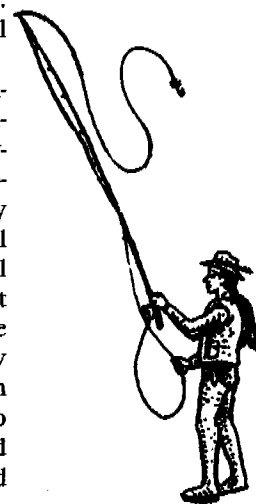
Darwin argued) that does not necessarily require religious belief" (pages 115-6). His defense of the latter is a significant contribution to conservative thought.

In short, Arnhart rejects both the leftist appeal to cultural or moral relativism and the traditional conservative appeal to magic, by grounding politics on "a universal human nature of natural instincts and desires," which allows us to "judge some societies ... as satisfying those natural desires more fully than other societies." Understanding this means seeing that "cultural traditions are not the only source of morality, because the natural instincts of human beings provide a natural ground for the moral sense, just as Darwin argued" (page 23). This is correct, but there are two other important issues to be confronted when discussing the relationship of evolution to politics: the concept of spontaneous order, and the conflict of faith against reason.

The Nobel-prize-winning economist Friedrich Hayek coined the term "spontaneous order" while debunking the leftist assumption that social institutions are, or can be, the products of human design. This assumption, alas, remains common among modern liberals; Laurence Tribe, for example, has argued that there is really no such thing as a free market because "'freedom' of contract and property" are really just "expressions of positive governmental intervention," so that there is "no 'natural' economic order to upset or restore" through government regulation (Tribe 1988: 578-9). But as Hayek explained, the market is *not* the product of centralized design, but the outcome of countless unorganized interactions between people, gradually producing stable, useful institutions like property or contract law (see, for example, Hayek 1978-1981). In Arnhart's words, a spontaneous order is "a complex order that arises not as the intended outcome of the intelligent design of any mind or group of minds, but as the unintended outcome of many individual actions to satisfy short-term needs" (page 16). Evolution is the most obvious example of this ordering process, but the free market, and, to a lesser extent, common

law legal systems, are also spontaneous orders (see also Nozick 1974: 18-21). Hayek made it clear that not only are government planners unnecessary for solving economic problems, they are often downright harmful, since they ignorantly interfere with better, decentralized problem-solving. For example, when bureaucrats demolish a neighborhood to make way for a new subsidized shopping center, they destroy the spontaneous process of neighborhood-building that gives a town character and a sense of place (Curtis 2006). When they implement technical regulations on a trade, they stifle innovation which might not fit official, preconceived notions of how the market "ought" to work (Postrel 1998: 83-111). Hayek argues that it is usually best to leave markets alone to devise solutions, rather than to impose a single, one-size-fits-all solution invented by politically-influenced bureaucrats in faraway capitol buildings. This argument fits very comfortably with evolution. If design does not require a designer, then there is no need for the state to "design" economic institutions. Multiple decentralized choices will tend toward efficiency.

Ironically, this argument actually *conflicts* with conservative values. While they tend to reject government control over the economy, conservatives are generally eager for government to control *other* relationships, such as sexual relations or marriage. They distrust the free market precisely because its underlying principles allow individuals to make their own choices in these areas of life also (Schumpeter 1962). Richard Weaver, for example, complained that capitalism leads to a "soulless, desiccated middle class which ... destroy[s] the concept of non-material value" (Young 1995: 161), and Russell Kirk saw capitalism as expressing a "modern temper" which "ignore[s] the longings of humanity" such as "the comforting assurance that continuity is more probable than change" (1985: 492). Spontaneous order works through vast number of individual choices, but conservatives oppose individual choice in many personal matters because it disrupts tradition (Sandefur 2001). It is libertarian-



ism, not conservatism, that embraces the dynamic character of free markets (Postrel 1998; D'Souza 2000).

Arnhart glosses over this problem by absurdly suggesting that libertarianism is a variety of conservatism, which it emphatically is not (Barnett 2004: 72). In fact, he seems to suffer throughout from a deep confusion as to the difference between conservatism and libertarianism, and he clings to an interpretation of conservatism that many would reject: namely, the notion that liberty is one of its primary values. In fact, liberty has rarely been a conservative value; it was only the chance arrival of Goldwater and Reagan on the Republican Party scene in the 1960s that drew many libertarians into describing themselves as conservative. These people propounded a theory of "fusion" between libertarians and conservatives (Meyer 1996). But recent events have eroded that fusion significantly, and the future of its union seems bleak.

Another troubling omission is Arnhart's failure strongly to confront the philosophical elephant in the room, and that is the interaction of reason and faith in the post-Darwin world. Evolution is not controversial because of its factual conclusions about the origins of species; it is controversial because it shows that our world can be understood in terms of reason alone, without faith. And since so much authoritarian political philosophy — conservatism in particular — has been based on faith, that account has tremendous social consequences. Arnhart's argument that scientific reason can also support conservative principles may reassure those whose primary concern is for practical policy matters, but in the end it will make little progress against those whose focus is more fundamental. Without taking a position on the conflict of faith and reason — by, in fact, seeming to appease religion — Arnhart cannot advance far on the battlefield where evolution and conservatism contend.

These two problems actually intertwine. Arnhart's reason-based approach is welcome indeed, and it is true that conservatives need it.

But I doubt that that approach can be fairly classified as conservatism itself. In fact, for all his talk of Edmund Burke and family values, Arnhart has much more in common with the secular libertarianism of Ayn Rand or Jacob Bronowski than with such basically theocratic thinkers as Kirk (Rand 1968; Bronowski 1965). It would be nice if conservatives would adopt secular libertarianism, but while a society based on an unceasing demand for evidence and rational demonstration would, indeed, be a society of liberty — it would hardly be conservative.

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THE FIRST HUMAN: THE RACE TO DISCOVER OUR EARLIEST ANCESTORS

by Ann Gibbons
New York: Doubleday, 2006.
306 pages

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Ann Gibbons's fifteen years of writing news stories for *Science* magazine on the subject of human origins shows in this book, and shows well. She has crafted a lively, evocative narrative about the various scientific teams searching

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