

HOBBS, DARWINISM, AND CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE

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Abstract

Despite providing the basic theoretical framework for Western biology and all related sciences, Darwinism continues to be a controversial perspective when it comes to understanding ourselves as distinctly "human." In this paper, I try to correct a common misinterpretation of Thomas Hobbes' conceptualization of human nature which I think sheds light on some of the significant misunderstandings and sources of objection to Darwinism. I begin by contrasting this common misreading of Hobbes' philosophy of human nature with an alternative reading that suggests a more subtle notion than is often allowed. I then summarize the basic ideas of Darwinism and explain why I think a Darwinian conceptualization of humanity, freed from misinterpretations of Hobbes, need not lead to an agonistic or reductive notion of human nature. Suggestions made by the philosophers Charles Taylor and Howard Gardner about how science and philosophy can help or hinder conceptualizations of personhood are considered insofar as they corroborate this idea.

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1. Introduction

Conceptualizations of human nature are important, especially for considerations of public policy and social change. How we think about what it means to be human influences and informs people's everyday ideas about all kinds of direct and specific personal and social issues. Whether and how we bear any kind of moral responsibilities or obligations toward other human beings, or toward other *types* of beings; whether and how features of lived personal and social experience are subject to control and revision by us; whether and how particular social arrangements may support or hinder human flourishing; these are a few examples of important issues that are closely connected to how we conceptualize humanity. This type of connection can be found on a more academic and scientific level throughout the humanities and in the human and social sciences, perhaps most obviously in fields like anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, political

science, and public policy studies.

While myriad questions in life and across the human sciences imply or at least are informed by our conceptualizations of human nature, nonetheless, there typically isn't the time, resources, or inclination in everyday life or in these fields to philosophize about human nature as an active, ongoing undertaking. Despite the importance of our ideas about human-ness, these ideas are typically held uncritically as unexamined and largely unrecognized assumptions by most of us most of the time. Hence, a deeper appreciation of what is at stake in many debates and controversies in life can be achieved by thinking through the assumptions about human nature that inform and sometimes recommend various alternative viewpoints. While openness to thinking critically and discussing these underlying assumptions doesn't guarantee ultimate agreement or consensus, it is a rational, philosophical way to continue discussions that are important to us, and to avoid more destructive kinds of outcomes. So the second reason to talk about this topic today is to draw attention to one way I think that philosophy is important.

Despite providing the basic theoretical framework for Western biology and all related sciences, Darwinism continues to be a controversial perspective when it comes to our understanding of ourselves as somehow distinctly "human." In this paper, I try to correct a common misinterpretation of Thomas Hobbes' conceptualization of human nature which I think sheds light on some of the significant misunderstandings and sources of objection to Darwinism, and conclude that philosophies of human nature can take biology

seriously without being needlessly reductive concerning human experience.

It is some time since Victorian public opinion presented Charles Darwin as forcing upon humanity a precipitous choice between, in Benjamin Disraeli's words, the side of the apes and "the side of the angels." (Smith: 453) Today, people in the sciences, and in academic and intellectual circles in general understand Darwinism and its significance much better than the Victorians could have. And yet, almost a century and a half since the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*, confusion and controversy about what Darwin's theory says, about what Darwinists believe, and about what all of this means for our conceptualizations of humanity continue both within and outside biology and closely-related sciences. Lately, the *Chronicle for Higher Education* reports that, "a recent Gallup poll found that 45 percent of Americans believe that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years, and 39 percent believe that Darwin's theory of evolution is not supported by the evidence." (McMurtrie: A8) Concerned biologists quoted in the article bemoan such reports as at least in part the result of failures in basic science education.

Darwinian natural selection is today the sole theoretical framework for biology, and I think this is so because it, or something very much like it, would be the inevitable result of any attempt to comprehend the vast range of empirical phenomena available in our experience of the natural world within the scope of a coherent scientific theory. Darwinian theory's basic principles are not counterintuitive, nor does understanding how they work require exotic reasonings or highly specialized technical jargon. It seems curious and ironic then

that many in a nation that is in some ways overly enamored with science and technology, nonetheless find it hard to understand or accept empirically supported and conclusively reasoned scientific claims that should influence how we think about human nature and our place in the universe. A good deal of this difficulty, however, involves the fact that a host of interesting philosophical and scientific questions remain open concerning how far Darwinian principles can be relied upon to illuminate specific aspects of human behavior, thought, feeling, and experience, and whether and how they may result in oversimplifications and incomplete or unacceptably reductive results.

Several various factors undoubtedly contribute to the suspicion and antipathy in which Darwinism is often held today, only some of which refer to failures of understanding what the theory says. Other factors certainly involve considerations about what the consequences might be for taking its central claims seriously and holding them consistently. Biologists, sociologists, ethicists, science teachers, educational theorists, psychologists, philosophers of religion and many others could surely provide greater insight into other salient parts of the problem of identifying the constraints that bear upon our attempts to conceptualize human nature in a way that is adequate to our scientific commitments and also to our other beliefs about human existence and experience.

On the most general level, I am concerned below with how certain background ideas and assumptions have generated confusion concerning what is at stake in Darwinism, hindering our ability to appreciate how it

might be saying things we haven't heard of or thought about before. I think an influential misreading of Thomas Hobbes' philosophy of human nature has specifically played an important role in generating confusion about what Darwinism means and doesn't mean. I think the way Hobbes is usually understood reflects as much about the background ideas, predispositions and anxieties of several generations of his readers than it does about his actual arguments. Precisely the same claim can be made regarding Darwin, and I make it here: Many ideas about what Darwinian theory means reflect more of the prior expectations about human nature through which we have tended to read Darwin than what the theory actually means or requires us to believe. One common way of misreading Darwin has arisen directly from a historical tendency to misread Hobbes, which is the main reason I discuss Hobbes here.

2. From Darwin to Hobbes

In a recent book on the evolution of egalitarian social structures, Christopher Boehm, Director of the Jane Goodall Research Center at the University of California, notes how social attitudes and traditional ideas about human nature have affected research, and situates his own work in relation to them:

One tradition [concerning human nature] is hawkish and the other dovelike, and they lead many scholars to view humans as essentially nice or essentially nasty.... As an admirer of both Hobbes and Rousseau, I hope [Boehm writes] that my approach has been in accordance with the facts rather than overwhelmed by ideology... I have tried to straddle the polarized debate." (Boehm, quoted in Midgley: 54)

I too suspect that the truth about human nature lies somehow between the extremes of Hobbesian "hawkishness" and a Rousseauvian "dovishness." Any general survey of how humans live and have lived that did not recognize among them behaviors and traditions of great violence and brutality as well as of deep nurturance and care would be seriously remiss. But at the same time, the question of human nature, as Boehm implies, is not so much about what human beings can in fact be observed doing, as about what it is that might *account for* the expectations we hold about what it is "natural" and "reasonable" for humans, in general, to do. That is to say, the question of human nature essentially concerns the possibility that there is some or other deeper underlying set of universal features or characteristics that all humans share, which can be understood as leading to the range of phenomena associated with the species.

Boehm's comments are thus relevant to my discussion of Darwin, Hobbes and human nature in two ways: First, they illustrate the general phenomenon I am most concerned with here, of how socially entrenched philosophical conceptualizations influence the way research on human nature is framed. This reminds us that, while it may not be possible to completely escape the background social conceptions and ideas we bring to research in the sciences, nevertheless, the more we succeed at being free from *particular* predispositions and polemical debates, the better our understanding of the complexity of things will be.

Second, Boehm identifies in particular the lasting influence of the 17th Century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes to current discussions in evolutionary biology concerning human nature. Boehm is right to observe

that the "debate" between Hobbes and Rousseau has influenced thinking about human nature in important ways. But, in fact, the very strong tendency among biologists and scientists working directly within the assumptions of evolutionary theory has been to associate the Hobbesian picture with Darwinism as opposed to either a Rousseauvian perspective, or some "straddling" perspective such as Boehm seeks to develop in his book.

The dominant tendency in Darwinism from its beginnings has been to understand natural selection in Hobbesian terms. However, I believe the interpretation of Hobbes Darwinists have taken for granted is neither well-founded nor worth believing. As I hope to show, discussions of Darwinism and human nature have been overburdened and somewhat obscured by an image of Hobbes that makes him sound "Darwinian," and by an image of Darwin that makes him sound "Hobbesian." I think both of these mutually-supporting interpretations are false and pernicious. I think they are kept alive, however, because they reflect particular social attitudes and background cultural predispositions concerning concepts like "person," "self," and "subjectivity" that should be questioned. As Boehm suggests, such ideas can be perpetuated in the way ongoing research is framed.

The philosopher Stephen Lukes helps identify some of these ideas and assumptions quite specifically. Lukes contrasts two ways of thinking about personhood or subjectivity. (Lukes, 1991) The dominant Western notion defines "person" or "self" as "autonomous, independent, and calculating." This "self" is regarded as

essentially an individual in competition with others, who, in the first instance, is defined as distinct from any roles, obligations, or duties in regard to others.¹

[T]here is an individualist mode of thought, distinctive of modern Western cultures.... Central to this mode of thought is a distinctive picture of the individual in relation to his roles and to his aims or purposes. To [his roles] he exhibits ... *distance*.... Over [his aims and purposes] he exercises *choice*.... This [individualist] picture contrasts with that in which the individual is largely identified with and by his roles and who relates to his ends or purposes less by choice than through knowledge and discovery. This second picture is one in which self-discovery, mutual understanding, authority, tradition, and the virtues are central. (Lukes: 298-300)

An "individualist" picture of the self, emphasizing independence from social roles, bonds, and responsibilities has tended to inform our discussions about human nature. This way of thinking has been identified with Western tendencies to value competitiveness, ambition, and masculinity, and to downplay the contributions and experiences of women, and the importance of familial roles, and community relations in the formation of the "self." (Lukes: 300) By contrast, Lukes sketches a conception of the subject which he identifies with anthropological and philosophical critiques of the dominant conception. This alternative perspective would give equal attention to those features of experience that are typically left out of the *individualistic* account, perhaps even giving them prominence in identifying essential features of human existence and experience.

I see three related questions as arising from Lukes' contrast between these perspectives on what it means to be a person or subject. Philosophically, we should ask whether the image of the "Hobbesian subject" as it has been understood actually corresponds to a proper reading of Hobbes. I don't think it does, and if I'm

right, this would thin the ranks of its defenders substantially by removing Hobbes himself from the role of authority.

Since the "Darwinian subject" is often regarded as "Hobbesian" in this sense, weakening its basis in this way would make it easier to ask a second question: whether the Darwinian subject may actually correspond better to the alternative view of the subject than to the traditional idea of the "individualistic" subject. If this were true, it would mean considering the *Darwinian subject* as socially embedded and as defined in part by its own locally relevant roles and connections with others, and its obligations of affect and responsibility toward them. I think the Darwinian subject, which I try to sketch below, does actually correspond better with this way of thinking about the self than the old "Hobbesian" fiction ever did. This leads naturally to the third question Lukes recommends, which is why it has been so hard to see this possibility in Darwin before. Here, I think we must consider the effect of the social and cultural assumptions associated with the individualist perspective as powerful enough to have narrowed our readings of Hobbes *and* Darwin so as to make their theories sound like they exclusively support the individualistic idea of personhood.

The history of association between Darwinism and a basically spurious reading of Hobbes goes back to Darwin's earliest champions. Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin's most persistent and influential proponents, seems to have supported the view that an agonistic, aggressive, competitive view of human nature he attributed to Hobbes was an appropriate model for Darwinism. (Kropotkin: 74-80) Almost a century later,

Ashley Montagu famously criticized the ethologists and popular writers on evolution of the 1960's and 70's, Konrad Lorenz, Nikko Tinbergen, Robert Ardrey and Desmond Morris, for interpreting Darwin according to this picture in a number of writings, calling Lorenz a "direct descendent of the 'nature red in tooth and claw' thinkers of the nineteenth century." (Montagu, 1976) To this effect, however, Montagu uncritically quotes Edmund Leach's rather absurd comment that the "Hobbesian notion" reduces human behavior to "the idea that if there were no policemen each of us would immediately set about murdering everyone else in sight." (Montagu: 259) Montagu seems to recognize the inappropriateness of this agonistic, "aggressionistic" picture as a model for Darwinism, especially in relation to human nature. But, he seems unaware of the extent to which the roots of this misunderstanding of Darwin lie in a misunderstanding of Hobbes that he helps to continue.

More recently, David Barash perpetuates confusion about Darwinism by perpetuating the same old distortion of Hobbes. A professor of psychology and zoology who writes frequently on evolution and Darwinism, Barash favorably identifies Hobbes in a recent book as anticipating the findings of a group of contemporary social psychologists working on the evolutionary dimensions of human behavior: "The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes ...pointed out that human beings tend naturally to a 'warre of each against each,' unless restrained by the power of the state, the Leviathan." (Barash: 136) I hope to show in the next section that this idea of Hobbes helps an all-too common oversimplification and distortion of his ideas to persist, which in turn tends to support a host of misunderstandings about Darwinian evolutionary theory.

When even spurious and unsupported theories 'sound right,' because they go along with our background assumptions and ideas, this can be enough for them to pass unnoticed and escape scrutiny and criticism for a long time.

3. Hobbes' Fiction

Having established the Darwin-Hobbes link, it is now time to look at Hobbes. First, let me make it clear that I am not calling for a wholesale rejection of the idea that Hobbes looks upon human nature, as his biographer the philosopher A. P. Martinich has said, "with a jaundiced eye," and that he is correctly identified by social conservatives as a fellow traveler and by social liberals as a baleful figure for the comfort his ideas have provided to the notion of a powerful central state and the values of the status quo.² I am not concerned here to challenge this overall characterization which I regard as essentially correct. I do think that what has become known as Hobbes' philosophy of human nature is a caricature that reflects a considerable misunderstanding of what his arguments actually say, and that this caricature has exerted a significant negative effect on our ability to understand Darwinism, especially in relation to human nature.³

Hobbes' *Leviathan* is often seen as mainly concerned with the question of whether and to what extent it is rational for human beings to subject themselves to the obligations and responsibilities of organized political life. In this sense, *Leviathan* presents Hobbes' account of the general aspects of our condition and constitution which rationally account for the observed tensions between individual freedom and social-

political order. Perhaps more influential than any of the book's actual arguments, however, has been Hobbes' vivid imagery of human psychology or the "natural passions" which forms a crucial premise for the famous argument of chapters 13-16.

Hobbes' argument begins by laying out a vision of the "natural condition of mankind," the logic of which is to lead us to "quarrel," in such condition as humans can be imagined to suffer "Out of civil states." (Hobbes: 100) Thus, "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war." What follows is one of the most famous and controversial passages in Western thought, in which this Hobbesian "natural condition" or "state of nature" is characterized:

Whatsoever is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time when men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; ... [agriculture]; ... arts; ... society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes: 100)

The dominant interpretation of Hobbes' argument sees this "state of nature" as depicting a location of real, competitive, violence from a human past that in some way persists in the human present. It regards Hobbes as saying that humans are fated by their egoistic, aggressive psychology to continue in self-destructive violence until forced to refrain from doing so against their inclination and their will. This requires the imposition of social and political order as an external authority whose sole but powerful rationale is its ability

to maintain social peace in spite of our essentially disruptive human nature. According to this *agonistic* reading, Hobbes regards social existence only as a foreign external exigency imposed upon humanity, not as a contingency that stems from somewhere within our basic human nature.⁴ Thus, social convention is all that contains or restricts our natural underlying barbarous psychology, owing to which a real and passionate human thirst for mayhem remains reliable and constant.⁵

As the historian of philosophy W. T. Jones, for example, puts it, “Hobbes maintained [that] competition, diffidence, and glory are the basic human drives, ... [b]ut the fact is that men do, and must, live communally. Hence the central problem Hobbes sought to solve in his theory--how to create conditions in which men can live together peacefully in societies, when temperamentally they are *wholly unfit* to do so.” (Jones: 120; 142) For Jones, Hobbes' imagery of the state of nature is intended to present a real part of our nature that renders us "wholly unfit" to do what it is nonetheless patently obvious we accomplish under normal conditions. The main problem of the *Leviathan*, then, as Jones sees it, is to set out conditions according to which organized society can overcome this violent, competitive human nature that is inimical to and disruptive of it.

An alternative to the *agonistic* reading of Hobbes would suggest that the state of nature is not meant literally, but that the argument is mainly counterfactual, working by arguing through a hypothetical case. What if humans could live without moral principles and social and legal rules? What if we did live freely as

individuals without a political state? These questions frame the issue, which is why Hobbes considers "the nature of man...Out of civil states," hypothetically, rather than as part of a misbegotten historical or psychological inquiry. (Hobbes: 99-100) In other words, Hobbes' account of the state of nature purports to show that hypothetical humans being would do whatever was necessary to get themselves *out* of such a state. Anytime we imagine human life independent of society, we are forced to recognize the unreasonableness of egoism. It is easy to miss the implication that if civic cooperation did not exist, humanity would have had to invent it.

Looking at the argument this way makes it clear that Hobbes' hypothetical human must emerge from the state of nature because he or she does not really belong to it. Human nature does involve a basic egoism that will tend to bring conflict under specific conditions like the breakdown of social order. But Hobbes identifies human nature with the desire for comfort and peace, the use of reason, the application of eternal moral principles, and the establishment of order to ensure peace that all together ultimately account for our being *out* of the "natural condition." The traditional reading of Hobbes wrongly recommends that this means our *social* condition is *unnatural*. But since what we naturally desire as egoists, according to Hobbes, requires social peace and a degree of trust and cooperation, it *is* thus our nature to seek to establish these whenever possible. As Hobbes no doubt recognizes, it has been the history of our kind to do just this. The idea of human nature that emerges from a careful reading of Hobbes is thus an idea of beings who live in a tension marked by both selfish and social orientations, which matches well what Hobbes actually says

about the natural condition: the "ill condition, which man by *mere* nature is actually placed in; though with a *possibility* to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason." (Hobbes: 101-2)

4. The Darwinian Subject

I have been arguing that the traditional idea of the "Hobbesian subject" is in some sense a figment of our collective imagination, rooted more in an ideology of competitive individualism than in Hobbes' actual argument in *Leviathan*. In point of fact, Hobbes assumes the human subject to be always invariably more than what he or she would appear to be in a hypothetical "state of nature." But if the agonistic interpretation of Hobbes is ill-founded, where does this leave Darwinism, which, as I have noted, has relied heavily throughout its history on the competitive, violent imagery of the agonistic Hobbesian subject? I approach this issue here by briefly identifying the essential features of Darwinian theory. I then interpret the central Darwinian notion of "struggle" in terms of the choice between the traditional agonistic idea of the Hobbesian subject and an alternative idea that I think has roots in something closer to Darwin's actual meaning.

Darwin's own summary of the central argument of *On the Origin of Species* focuses on the changes in frequencies of specific variations in a population resulting from the so-called "struggle for existence" over time:

As a result of the struggle for existence, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring,

also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for of the many individuals of a species which are periodically born but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each small variation if useful is preserved by the term of Natural Selection. (Darwin: 61)

Important elements of Darwin's argument that merit emphasis here are the role played by scarcity and the specific sense Darwin gives to "variation." Local scarcity plays a central role as an assumption of the basic condition of organisms in nature. This is why even slight changes in an organism relevant to its ability to survive and reproduce in relation to its locale can reasonably be expected to result in different frequencies later on. Second, variation between individual organisms has to be understood as variation in biologically fixed features which can in fact make a behavioral difference that could have some effect upon an individual's likelihood of living and reproducing relative to others.

The philosopher Philip Kitcher presents a standard summary of Darwin's argument in terms of the following reasoning, which helps to highlight the roles these principles play in Darwin's idea of "natural selection," and its key mechanism, "the struggle for existence":⁶

- 1) At any stage in the history of a species, there will be variation among the members of the species. (*Variation*)
- 2) At any stage in the history of a species, more organisms are born than will survive to reproduce. (*Competition or Struggle for Existence*)
- 3) At any stage in the history of a species, some of the variation among members of the species

is variation with respect to properties that affect the ability to survive and reproduce under specific local conditions. (*Fitness*)

4) At least the properties of an organism referred to in (3) are biologically heritable. (*Inheritance*)

5) Typically, the history of a species will show that properties which dispose their bearers to survive and reproduce, under specific local conditions, are likely to become more prevalent in successive generations of the species. (*Natural Selection*)

From this summary it is clear that Natural Selection (5) is a conclusion drawn from reasoning based on the claims made in steps (1)-(4), and is not a separate claim or an independent process from what is implied in the earlier claims. This means that Darwinian evolution is an inference drawn in light of what are taken to be the reasonable consequences of "variation," "fitness," and "inheritance," in the context of the principle of "competition," or "the struggle for existence," which assumes local scarcity.

Evolution, as Darwin describes it, results from a kind of competition within and between species in the midst of a complex web of biological interdependencies. As outlined above, Darwinian evolution suggests the survival of the fit, where this means that species that are well-adapted to enduring local conditions will tend to endure. Thinking about this "competition" or "struggle" correctly requires us to carefully consider what it refers to in the context of the theory overall. First of all, if we think of these concepts in terms familiar from human violence and conflict we will be badly led astray, since the model of agonistic human violence

misrepresents what is occurring in the lives of organisms that Darwinian "struggle" refers to. Violence actually has little to do directly with evolution. This is not to deny that there is much violence in nature and many head-to-head struggles between all sorts of organisms every day everywhere, but, rather, to insist upon a conceptual distinction between the spectacular contingencies thrown up in the course of the Darwinian "struggle for existence," and the fundamental idea and mechanism of that struggle itself.

The typical images of animal violence we usually think of when imagining what Darwinian competition refers to are usually images of predation. But predation isn't the struggle for existence. Differential living off the fruits of predation is the struggle for existence, and differential living off the fruits of predation involves far more on a day to day, week to week, year to year basis than the act of predation itself. As the mechanisms driving evolution involve the fundamental tendency of organisms to survive and raise offspring successfully, the Darwinian struggle refers to a far wider range of behaviors and activities than however many instances of predation could reflect. As Lieberman observes,

The Darwinian struggle for existence is not Tennyson's vision of 'Nature, red in tooth and claw,' ... The struggle for existence is essentially the recognition of the fact that life is precarious... In Darwin's words, 'I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny.' (Lieberman: 4)

The participants in *this* Darwinian struggle usually do not encounter one another at all. There is very little

about their behavior that fits into the agonistic, violent picture that is often nonetheless associated with Darwinism. If nature, according to the Darwinian view, *is* "red in tooth and claw," then this should be interpreted as reflecting the fact that the preoccupation of animals involves eating food, and that many of them eat meat, *not*, as is often supposed, that animal existence involves a naturally selected universal propensity to "struggle" in the sense of inflicting violence in battle.

The operative sense of "struggle," then, in Darwinism refers to what is really a kind of "war of attrition" under the conditions of scarcity and a constant impulse to survive and reproduce in the context of biologically fixed variation. The constant that binds the processes involved in natural selection together is thus *the persistence of life*. Because variation happens, and because it has results in terms of "fitness" that can be passed along biologically, in the context of local scarcity Darwin saw that the huge range of biological contingencies and behavioral strategies observable in nature could have resulted from the slow accumulation of very small changes over great periods of time.

Getting the central notion of "struggle" right takes us a long way toward seeing that Darwinism is a theory of survival and life, not of killing and death. Against an older narrow Darwinism for which life in nature may have seemed to correspond only to the activities of adult males in battle over females, resources, and territory, this view draws attention to the wider context of life-sustaining activities that occur for a particular species in a definite local environment. These include the host of everyday processes that would be

important in a complete picture of the lives of organisms but which are far less spectacular than violent agonistic struggles. In the next and final section, I briefly sketch what I think this interpretation of Darwinism suggests about human nature and how it may help us conceive of the "Darwinian" as opposed to "Hobbesian" subject.

5. Conclusions: Darwin and Human Nature

Einstein is reported to have once quipped that, "The purpose of chemistry is not to re-create the taste of the soup."(Gardner: B10) This distinction between scientific-objective explanation and subjective experience is a helpful place to begin the final and most speculative part of my paper. In sketching out the prospects for a conceptualization of human nature that might be developed in light of the foregoing critique, it will be necessary to situate Darwinism in relation to what it has to offer to our understanding both of human existence and of human experience.

Providing a Darwinist account of the existence of humans would amount to offering an explanation in terms of the principle of natural selection of how it is possible that a distinctly human form of life once arose. In light of what I have argued above, developing such a notion might begin with the recognition that the Darwinian "struggle for existence" is neither fundamentally driven by, nor tends to give rise to ever more complex forms of agonistic, violent, competitive behavioral strategies.

From a Darwinian perspective our conceptual and linguistic skills would have emerged as contingencies

rooted in capacities that were capable of evolving biologically. These skills would have developed under the selective pressures of the broadest possible notion of survival-related activities and behaviors. The broader conception of Darwinian struggle we developed in the previous section makes it easier to imagine how this could be a plausible story. For example, an ability to divine and respond to a sense of what another person's feelings are may not confer much of an adaptive value from the standpoint that regards us as agonistic social atoms. It makes far more sense, however, from the broader standpoint of something like an extended network of relations of dependence with complex roles, responsibilities, and norms.

There is currently a good deal of controversy about how the step-by-step scenario of our particular evolutionary trajectory may have worked. Natural selection offers a story about how "higher" beings arose. By using the term "higher" we admit to a certain sloppiness with regard to Darwinist principles that should be noted. There is no sense in which, from the standpoint of biology, the evolution of humans marks an "improvement" in the world, or "progress" in nature. From the standpoint of natural selection, it is important to observe again that "fitness" is always relative to local conditions, which are of course themselves always changing. The sense we give to "higher" in the phrase "higher" animals is today much the same as it was for Darwin, however, when he wrote these words for the final paragraph of the first edition of the *On the Origin of Species*:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Darwin: 459)

Darwin in this paragraph assumes the instructive stance of a situated historical human being speaking from within the assumptions of a linguistic community on the topic of his own "exalted" species' origins. Darwin, whose chief accomplishment was perhaps to draw our attention to the minute and seemingly insignificant details of life processes, speaks of their "grandeur" on the planetary and even the cosmic scale. Inadvertently, he thus draws our attention to this other aspect of our evolution as a species for which language is so central: our personhood and subjectivity depend in some measure upon our inhabiting a world formed by language, conceptuality, and experience.

Many reconstructions of the trajectory of human evolution have been offered which give greater or lesser importance to the emergence of language in the process of the rise of our species. What I focus on here is the part of the story that has to do with how this looks from the inside. That is to say, the idea of a Darwinian subject needs to make sense both from the perspective of a scientific account of human objectivity and also with an eye toward those aspects of our distinct form of life that seem to make the experience of human subjects unique.

In one of his most influential articles, the philosopher Charles Taylor carries out the consequences of the idea that human identity is irreducibly constituted by the meaningfulness of our behavior. Behavior is not merely performed by a disengaged or detachable "being," but, rather, is part of the "being" of the person who enacts it. (Taylor, 1971) In its performance, the performer is in part enacting or performing himself or herself, and this is what we mean by "identity." For Taylor, this means the study of human behavior and experience should be regarded as a hermeneutical endeavor, that is to say, as oriented toward understanding and interpretation rather than explanation and prediction. Taylor suggests that a kind of truce or division of labor exist between the natural sciences oriented toward objectivity and explanation and the human sciences and humanities oriented toward subjectivity and the interpretation of human experience.

In the discussion of human nature, Howard Gardner regards the best approaches to be those which recognize their incompleteness in something like this way. Gardner suggests that disciplines of study relevant to illuminating aspects of human nature should be understood as existing on a continuum, from the more expressive philosophical, literary, and humanistic writing involved with human subjectivity to the more explanatory scientific and theoretical writing concerning our objectivity or human being in general. The perspectives of approaches at either end of this continuum are limited to the extent they are considered apart from the other. But this is because different aspects of our being need to be treated differently from either the scientific or the literary-philosophical ends of the continuum:

At each point on the continuum, a somewhat different blend of disciplines and intellectual tools must be drawn upon. Cultural and historical factors are needed to explain how genes are expressed in different contexts; genetic analysis is needed to reveal historical and cultural potentialities; philosophy—both Anglo-American and humanistic varieties—is needed ... to define and identify those different perspectives. That is, after all, why we have, and will continue to have, universities: to provide a place where different disciplines can flourish and—in the happiest of circumstances—speak to, rather than past, one another. (Gardner: B10)

Disciplinary differences are not the result of some terrific distortion by disciplines at either end of the spectrum. Rather, Gardner believes the disciplinary differences are important because human existence and experience really have the kind of texture which requires different methods, orientations, and attitudes of approach if we are to make sense of them. These disciplinary differences should then be overcome through an open cross-disciplinary kind of discourse, which he sees as the model of the university, oriented toward human nature in a general way.

Gardner's model can be very helpful in thinking about human nature in the context of our foregoing discussion of Darwinism. We are finally a kind of being whose objective historical emergence and existence can be accounted for within a plausible reconstructive account in the context of our scientific assumptions. We are also a kind of being for which the subjective dimensions of our personal experience as such constitute our identities. In order to make sense of human nature, I would agree with Taylor and Gardner that one must be comfortable and familiar with the artifacts and products of human life in the world and experience all along the continuum. I think this is a perspective that Darwin himself, were he alive and

conversant with such thinking, would also endorse. Precisely *in* and *as a function of* our humanity, we are each also uniquely cultural, linguistic, and irreducibly individual beings:

[S]cientific analysis ... is likely to fail in attempts to account for the individuality of the person, [and], the individuality of each person's experience of a work [of art]. Nor, despite phenomenology and hermeneutics, do I think that such individuality can be adequately illuminated by philosophical tools—in fact, the idiosyncrasies of experience are more likely to be authentically captured in a powerful work of literature than explained by philosophical analysis. I do not deplore this state of affairs—I rejoice in it. (Gardner: B10)

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Notes

¹ Taylor, (1991 and 1989), refers to this notion of the self as fundamentally "detached."

² Hobbes is often regarded as a patron saint of political cynicism and *Realpolitik* for having established something like the following argument. Humans are always just a few figurative pen strokes from the war of each against all. Since we are and remain nasty and brutish despite the paper-thin veil of the social contract, a powerful coercive force is always needed to keep humans from returning to a barbarous state of nature. Hobbes' sovereign is thus taken to stand for a powerful institution that is above the law, whose sole purpose is to police an unwieldy and unreliable truce in the persistent violence that would otherwise characterize life. I think this view of human society and politics is wrong, but also that it reflects, at the very least, a serious oversimplification of Hobbes' position.

³ A. P. Martinich warns, "[T]he spectrum of opinion about 'what Hobbes really meant' is astonishingly wide. to some he is an atheist; to a few he is a sincere, if idiosyncratic Christian, to some he is a democrat; to most he is an absolutist. To some he is an empiricist; to others he is a rationalist. Although these dichotomies may seem to be incompatible, whether they are in actuality depends upon how the terms are defined and what criteria are applied." (Martinich, 1997: 1)

⁴ Martinich, (1997: 25; 31-2), reliably presents the basic ideas of various readings of Hobbes, including the basic orientation of the "alternative" or counterfactual reading I present here.

⁵ Hobbes, 1962: 129. Hobbes' point then seems to be that social indoctrination and political control are justified to the extent they provide essential guidance and policing mechanisms. My reading also makes sense of the fact that Hobbes moves from the natural laws according to which we renounce or transfer our rights to a broader discussion of contract, covenant, justice and the virtues.

⁶ Kitcher, 1995:19. I paraphrase for brevity and clarity.

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