

## Locke, Darwin, and America's Future

*Peter Augustine Lawler*

America's two guiding lights today are John Locke and Charles Darwin. Locke provided the principles for classical liberalism and the Declaration of Independence; he is the source of our sense that we possess autonomy and rights, and our sense that the story of our progress is one toward greater and greater freedom, with the liberation of the individual from various forms of natural, political, and religious bondage. From Darwin, who provided the scientific basis for evolutionary naturalism, we get our sense that nature, including human nature, is constantly changing, and that we and everything about us are the products of an accidental, impersonal process.

While these two dominant impulses have both had prominent roles in the history of our republic, and so have coexisted for some time, they are deeply in tension with one another. The Lockean idea of *natural* rights is tied to ideas about the eternity of nature and the eternity of God from the premodern Western tradition—suggesting a kind of stability in our country's philosophical foundations. It often seems that this stability has been undermined by the Darwinian notion of the constant evolution that underlies all life and that seems both inevitable and, in creating and improving us, good. But Locke and Darwin actually share a view of nature indifferent to the existence of particular human beings or free persons. Lockeanism is even more unstable than Darwinism in its claim that human beings are free enough to transform natural reality into something better—a process which is also constant and ceaseless, one which moves us from the impersonal stability of natural laws to the increasing power of individualism. In fact, it was the very instability of Lockeanism that opened Americans to many of the implications of Darwinian theory.

How, if at all, are we to reconcile the naturalistic and the libertarian impulses we have inherited from Darwin and Locke? It turns out that modern enlightened Americans are stuck with somehow believing that we are radically free to reject all that we've been and reinvent ourselves as we please, while at the same time we are wholly subject to the evolutionary

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and material process that is the complete source of our beings. A true conservative or true defender of human love, liberty, and greatness would see something true in the Darwinian criticism of Locke, just as he would see something true in the Lockean criticism of Darwin.

### American Darwinism

Darwin's theory, formulated nearly two centuries after the work of Locke, helped make clear the numerous instabilities already inherent in the Lockean position. At the most benign level, American Progressives—such as Woodrow Wilson in his 1908 book *Constitutional Government in the United States*—chafed at the restraints on political reform found in our Constitution, whose origins were Lockean. A “living” Constitution should imitate the dynamic, evolutionary forces found in all living organisms. And Lockean limits on leadership—based on undue distrust of the potential tyranny of both leadership and the people—will keep government from responding to the evolving realities of modern life. Instead, the Progressives thought, government can give the necessary political or consciously human direction to the inevitable forces of change. In a way, the idea of evolution actually suggests that bigger government can be safer government. It can make us more free from the tyranny of nature. This liberating thought is also supported by the idea that, as Darwin himself suggested, the moral instincts of people also evolve or change for the better over time. As we evolve, our ambitious and selfish impulses abate, posing progressively less of a threat to the rights of others.

A less benign interpretation of the Darwinian criticism of Locke concerns the status of rights. According to Locke, each human being has a certain dignity that derives from having the singular potential for breaking free from the nature that is indifferent to his existence—and, moreover, from his singular awareness of being more than a mere member of some species. Each of us is alive to the truth about his precarious existence, and each of us is determined to preserve ourselves in freedom—to work against the indignity of nonbeing—for as long as possible. Our very beings rest increasingly in our own hands as we wrest our freedom from nature. This natural freedom and dignity is the source of our rights, and because human beings all possess the potential for freedom equally, we all have equal rights.

But for Darwin, the dignity I accord to my particular being is an illusion. I exist for the species (or the family or tribe), and my particular being makes but an insignificant contribution to the replicative success

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of the species (or the family or the tribe). Everything I do is done as a being meant to be species fodder, and so I live, above all, to generate better replacements. But I have no purpose that makes my own destiny irreplaceable or uniquely significant; nature is indifferent to *me*. Not only can and will nature readily dispense with me, but my experiences of individuality are illusions that distract me from what I am really meant to do.

The species depends on the typical, anonymous behavior of a large number of beings basically just like me. In that sense there is, as some say, such a thing as Darwinian conservatism (though this idea is undermined by the evolutionary need for what is *typical* to be both variable and susceptible to change). But there are not any Darwinian natural rights, and there is no natural basis for the idea that the person is a rational animal open to the truth about all things, or that the person secures his or her dignity by submitting to some universal moral law. Lockean individualistic politics seemed to be discredited by a new science that subordinated the illusory individual to the reality of various social collectivities. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century political innovations were often about rejecting what were seen as the scientific deceptions that had produced the individual and his unnatural alienation.

How Darwinians conceived each of us to be a mere part of some impersonal whole differed from case to case. Most notably, the Social Darwinists held that the free competition of individuals was really the struggle for existence that allowed our species to develop the fitness to survive and flourish. The unfit—those with inferior natural equipment—have, like the rest of us, no intrinsic natural value and do not deserve to survive. The attempt to unnaturally prop up the particular existences of the unfit is done at the expense of the flourishing of the species as a whole. As mere parts, their existence should be surrendered for the benefit of the whole. And even the flourishing of the fittest members of the species cannot be justified by their value as individuals. They only deserve to exist because what is best for them is best for us all—*us* considered as a whole.

For Social Darwinists, social or political programs that impede the superiority of the fittest, such as by expending state resources to ensure the survival of the weak, are futile attempts to resist the evolutionary intention of nature, and so threaten the very future of our species in a competitive natural environment. Those programs are based on what the Social Darwinists consider the Christian and Lockean error of believing in the unique and irreplaceable worth of every particular individual, which leads to a species-destructive effort to impose on nature a standard alien to it. Strangely enough, privileging the good of the fittest members of our

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species is based on a theory that denies their existence in any meaningful way as individuals.

Still, Social Darwinism was too Lockean to be genuinely Darwinian. It retains the Lockean obsession with avoiding nonbeing (although that obsession has shifted from the individual to the species), as well as the obsession with employing technology to master our environment and secure our future. A more consistent Darwinian would argue, against both the Lockean and the Social Darwinist, that nature does not really intend for each of us to care if our species has a future. Both confuse the war of competitive selection that is all of nature with an illusory belief that our species alone is obliged consciously to defy nature.

It should come as no surprise that members of a particular species obsessing over the species' future would perversely culminate in the various eugenics schemes of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The Lockean view is that free individuals work to free themselves from nature. The corresponding Darwinian view is that we, as conscious perpetuators of the species, work to improve upon nature according to nature's own intentions. We are the species that has improved other species with our own needs in mind. And it is reasonable, perhaps vital, the Darwinian would say, that we employ such methods on our own species. Our inclination *not* to do that has been based on the deception that human persons cannot be used that way—that it is an offense against their freedom and dignity. But the truth is that nature uses each of us exactly the way it uses the particular members of other species.

Darwin himself argued, in *The Descent of Man*, that men who were civilized, or excessively humane and charitable, undermined natural selection by attending to the sick and poor, and that “no one who has attended the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man.” Once it is clear that each of us is merely a part serving a whole, then it is not only possible but our *duty* to improve upon what we have been given by nature for the betterment of the species. We can mate the fit with the fit, consciously improving the quality of our species, making it more competitive in the process of natural selection. We can keep the unfit—those with inferior natural endowments—from mating or even surviving. We can certainly keep reproduction from being seemingly random and whimsical or detached from what are obviously species-specific needs. There is no reason why we cannot discern the intentions that govern the evolutionary process, using our brains to contribute to the development of our species. Strikingly, however, Darwin himself could not help but add that some of these conclusions were contradicted by our

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evolved moral quality of sympathy, and that “if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with a certain and great present evil.”

The rise of eugenics was doubtless of Darwinian inspiration, but it was only ambiguously in accord with Darwinian principles. As Socrates explains in the *Republic*, any plausible eugenics scheme has to detach reproduction from the idea of our natural inclination toward personal choice in a mate. Although even Darwin himself encouraged “the weaker and inferior members of society not marrying so freely as the sound,” the idea that the improvement of our species is in our conscious, human hands—not just individually but as a matter of directed planning of the whole—comes at the expense of the desires we have been given by nature as mating and familial beings. Perhaps Darwin should have instead concluded, and implored his followers to agree, that it is in general unnatural to labor over the future of the species at the expense of the bonding and caring characteristic of social animals. We rebel against having our erotic longing subordinated to the requirements of breeding, and we rebel against having our erotic relationships reduced to doing our sexual duty to the species or tribe. We surely—and by nature—want the best for our children, but we do not want our children simply regarded as contributions to or anonymous parts of some collectivity, natural or engineered.

So the improvement of our species favored by the “Darwinian” eugenics of the Progressives cannot be described as according to nature. Its view of evolution is, of course, less natural than based on the Hegelian historicist notion that we are the species capable of changing our natures. The Progressives borrowed the metaphor of evolution from Darwin and used it to discredit the Christian idea that there was anything permanent or unique or valuable about our species or particular members of it. But the Progressives did not really believe that they were doing what comes naturally. Their view of who we are, in fact, was more Lockean than Darwinian.

### Locke and History

The move in political thought from Locke to Darwinian Progressivism, or from classical liberalism to what is called “living constitutionalism,” is usually understood in terms of a move from a stable view of human nature to the idea that who we are changes over time, as does nature itself. At first glance, Locke seems to have a Newtonian or Cartesian view of nature as a mechanism with unalterable laws, so that nature—including human

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nature—does not change. Yet he also emphasizes that technological progress is for the good of each of us, and encourages technological evolution away from nature. And a sophisticated, high-tech world in which human beings acted consistently as free individuals would be one where various social inventions—such as money, property, and government—would be more indispensable than ever. Technological progress threatens political stability; it follows that forms of government have to adapt to the changing imperatives of technological control.

Although Darwin himself had a naïve faith in the almost inevitable natural evolution of the “moral sense” of members of our species, this faith in human progress was usually described by Darwin’s followers as historical rather than natural. That understanding was itself based on an analysis of Locke’s view of human nature offered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Second Discourse* (1754).

For Locke, we are by nature free individuals who invent and consent to various social institutions, such as family and government, to satisfy our needs as emotionally free or asocial individuals. This idea of consent is based on a certain ambiguity about our natures: Locke, following Hobbes, presents us as naturally isolated and needy, but he typically presupposes—and occasionally explicitly says—that we have social instincts. His effort to make human life consistently individualistic, to reconstruct our understanding of every human relationship in terms of contract and consent, cannot simply be based on the belief that we are solitary by nature. Instead, Rousseau suggests, it is in part a polemic against the social instincts that turn free individuals into suckers. Locke’s struggle is not just against patriarchal, aristocratic, and theological conventions, but also against the social dimension of who we are as natural animals.

On Rousseau’s reading, Locke holds that we are by nature the gregarious animals that Aristotle and Darwin describe, but that this natural understanding does not do justice to our unnatural freedom. We, in our freedom, transform ourselves over time into individuals—into what we were not by nature—so that each particular human being becomes more free and less natural over time. On this reading, Locke’s individualism is not really the injunction to do what comes naturally or instinctually, but instead to turn over all of our lives to labored calculation. Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, called this latter imperative the American “doctrine of self-interest rightly understood.” Our natural instinct to love and serve those close to us, described by Darwin, must be transformed into conscious cooperation in the service of mutual interests. In effect, this American moral doctrine commands us that if we are to

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maximize our potential for turning human progress away from nature, we must turn friendship into networking.

Rousseau attempts to correct Locke's anti-natural intention by making his understanding of human nature more consistent. Rousseau's anti-Lockean observation is that the emotionally self-sufficient natural individual, being all alone, is too apathetic and too stupid to think about bettering himself. There is, from his view, nothing that needs to be bettered. And so if we are by nature solitary, self-sufficient individuals, then we would, in fact, have no distinctively human content: we would be without the longings that flow from love and from consciousness of mortality; we would have no community, no language, no need or capacity to be emotionally tied to others or to think beyond the end of the day. A true individual's needs would be simple enough to be satisfied readily and on his own, and there would be no need to laboriously invent one's way out of natural misery. We would have neither the freedom nor the impetus to move away from nature, nor would we need "natural rights." Genuinely radical individualism causes the free individual to disappear, because only the purely self-sufficient individual, with no needs for which to exercise his freedom, remains.

In some ways, Rousseau and Darwin agree that who we are as human beings is an accident. But Rousseau agrees with Locke that our freedom really does exist, and that no natural science can fully account for all the inventive (including, of course, self-inventive) accomplishment that characterizes members of our species alone—neither why they arose, nor even that they exist. Because Rousseau holds that there is no accounting through natural science for our freedom, to be free is to be not natural but Historical. More consistently than Locke, Rousseau rejects what became known as Darwinian gregarious naturalism by claiming that our so-called social instincts are—indeed, all human sociality is—unnatural. But Rousseau, Locke, and Darwin all hold that the distinctively human forms of love are unnatural, as is being moved deeply by consciousness of death. For Darwin, being unnatural, they do not, strictly speaking, exist at all; Rousseau and Locke, on the other hand, are left with the equally strange thought that who we are in our freedom is a mysterious leftover from what we know through natural science.

For Rousseau, we historical beings accidentally make ourselves more free and more miserable over time. A perhaps less consistent version of that thought is already present in Locke: The most distinctively human natural characteristic is the *pursuit* of happiness, not happiness itself. Each of us is impelled to exercise his freedom through an uneasiness or restlessness

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that points in no particular direction beyond momentary satisfaction. And Locke and Rousseau do agree, after all, that the consequence of satisfying one human need is to create another one more difficult to satisfy—and so people necessarily become increasingly rational and industrious or sweaty in their pursuits of happiness. The accomplishments of human freedom are in many ways unprecedented, and there are no natural limits that we know of with certainty to what we can accomplish with our freedom.

The dynamic reality of human freedom, Locke realizes, cannot be accounted for in terms of mechanistic science. From a Lockean view, nature itself changes for the better when we mix our labor with it. In fact, nature provides us almost worthless materials; virtually everything of value to us is of our own creation. Locke encourages human beings to mix their labor with everything in the service of securing who they are as free beings. He makes clear that through our labor we appropriate worthless or indifferent nature for our purposes, making it a part of *our* created world. The distinction between impersonal nature and human freedom effectively disappears.

It is in accord with the spirit of Locke to think in terms of the evolution of everything we can put our hands on, including our own bodily existence. Locke speaks of the invention of government well after the invention of money: relatively “natural men”—such as the indigenous people of America—had no need of more than amorphous tribal authority, but now we have changed enough that we cannot do without the discipline and direction of strong government. Locke also makes clear that we should try to invent our way out of every natural limitation, and that there is no definite limit to the progress we can make in freeing ourselves, and so in changing who we are. The guidance provided by the laws of nature is almost exclusively negative: we should replace natural misery with comfort, necessity with freedom, and death with indefinite longevity. It almost certainly would not surprise Locke that we have entered an era of biotechnology in which everything about who we are by nature seems open to change. For Locke as much as for Rousseau or Hegel, human evolution becomes less natural and more conscious and volitional through historical progress. The ambiguity in Locke which Rousseau resolves is the idea that human beings are by nature free to free themselves from nature.

### **History’s Liberation from Nature**

For Rousseau, the modern individual is miserably alienated, and he works, against his intention, to make himself still more miserably restless. The

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bad news is that History screwed up beings who were content by nature. The good news might be that we are conscious enough to bring History under our control and alienation to an end. That insight is the main reason why Lockean or ambiguously natural thinking was displaced by consciously historicist thinking in the nineteenth century. The Darwinian metaphor of evolution was used to express a faith in a historical future: either (according to Marx) the coming end of History, or (according to John Stuart Mill and Walt Whitman, among others) a more indefinite perfectibility in which our alienating technological progress would finally be ennobled by a corresponding moral progress, which would become the source of the elusive human happiness promised by modern liberation.

Implicit in the idea of History is the reasonable supposition that particular human beings cannot invent themselves out of nothing. Who they are, then, is dependent in large part on when they live in History—or, put another way, how far they live away from nature. History is both the record of what free individuals or persons do and a process as impersonal as nature. Human perfection does not occur in individuals, but it will occur at some Historical point in the future, and so human beings can be sacrificed today for the achievement of that future. Just as much as Darwinian naturalism, Historical thinking regarded persons not as unique and irreplaceable beings but as part of a whole greater than themselves.

Darwin turns individuals into species fodder, and Historical theory turns them into History fodder. Either way, the evolutionary view sacrifices the particular beings that exist today to a process that does not even claim to do any of them any particular good. That is not to say that a Darwinian believes that History is real. The Darwinian contribution to History is in eroding the belief that there is a permanent human nature that describes what each of us is. But Darwinism's more fundamental contribution is its denial of the significance of particular human beings; it is a denial of any evidence of the reality of human freedom—a denial that is natural, not Historical.

While Locke thought that we somehow have enough natural freedom to make sense of the idea of *consent*—which keeps the individual from being sacrificed to any whole or cause or process greater than himself—Locke would *not* allow that the individual could have sufficient natural resources to fully protect himself from the forces surrounding him. Tocqueville, for one, said it was Americans' religion, not their theory, that protected them from the Historical temptation to employ all means necessary to secure a more perfect future. Americans learned from their religion that all human beings are equally great, and have been given the virtues worthy of beings

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with far more than a biological destiny—beings with souls. They learned from their theory that they are all equally isolated and insignificant and must work incessantly to secure themselves against hostile forces.

It is this mixture of Christianity with Lockeanism that keeps Americans from losing themselves in some vague, depersonalizing, Historical or mindlessly pantheistic view of indefinite perfectibility. They could sometimes live well in the present—while attending obsessively to their personal futures—because they did not always believe that their very being was in their own hands. Maybe Tocqueville's deepest and most prescient fear was that the erosion of Christianity in our country would displace Christian Lockeanism with something like an unsustainable Lockean Darwinism—which would eventually morph into an apathetic, hyper-individualistic pantheism.

### **The Lessons of 1989**

But both the Lockean and the Darwinian views of who we are seemed to be strengthened by the decisive defeat of the Historical ideologies in 1989. History, the anticommunist dissidents claimed, was defeated by human nature. It turns out that we are not free to secure for ourselves the unalienated, unobsessive end-of-History life that Marx called communism. We are unable to suppress the experience of individuality that is at the core of both the Lockean and Christian view of who we are as free beings. And we are unable to deconstruct completely the natural, social experiences that the Darwinian explains are fundamental to friendship, the family, the local community, the nation, and the church (or some socially religious equivalent). The communists were unable to free particular human animals from the narrow intensity of their social instincts—from the seemingly selfish, relational obsessions we associate with love. We are not hardwired, so to speak, either to be merely part of some impersonal collectivity, or to be wholly unalienated, immersed in a laid-back or hobbyistic way with whatever we happen to be doing in the present. History, in the most important ways, could not touch who we are by nature.

The Lockean could claim that the fall of communism was decisive evidence of the permanence of our ambiguous condition—that of being by nature free from nature. Our natural scarcity, we discovered, cannot be overcome once and for all by our labor. We must remain free or productive beings; our victories over nature must be continually secured by our work. And our pursuit of happiness will never be replaced by happiness itself. Our enjoyments will never be enjoyable or secure enough to free us from

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our restlessness. The highest degree of freedom we can really achieve is to become bourgeois bohemians, to embrace the most aesthetically pleasing and intrinsically enjoyable activities compatible with maximizing personal productivity. So being bohemian, contrary to Marx's hopes, can never form the whole of a human life. Because government and the division of labor are both necessities, the inevitable alienation brought about by both can never wither away. Our struggle against nature is a permanent feature of who we are, and in that respect, the Lockean can claim that we will always remain defined as natural beings.

The Lockean case is strengthened by the understanding that even in the life of the bourgeois bohemian, bourgeois trumps bohemian at every turn. Productivity—the fending off of nonbeing—is objectively real, but any aesthetic enjoyment is only subjectively experienced, or is relative to the individual. Marx might be right that bourgeois bohemians are powerfully constrained by the success of Locke, the bourgeois ideologist who evaporated the nonproductive virtues to the point of weightlessness. “Autonomy”—the word we use to express our proud freedom from natural or necessitarian concerns—turns out to be too empty to outweigh productivity as the decisive evidence of who we are as free beings. From the view of productivity, we can even say that our freedom is increasingly *defined* by necessity, in place of the illusions that made us seem more spiritual or soulful than we really are.

For a Rousseauian or Hegelian, the Lockean is saying that we now know better than ever that History can never come to an end. The Lockean response is that our freedom will always be driven by our opposition to natural necessities, which we can push back or tame only to some limited extent, even if we do not know exactly what those limits are. Marx was wrong to hope that nature can be completely displaced by human freedom, just as he was wrong to believe that the deepest human longing is to be free from the alienation that animated Historical progress. For Locke, it could not be simply true that free beings long to be happy, because simple or pure happiness would come at the expense of the pleasure they take in the proud misery of their freedom. We are, to some limited and perverse extent, happy in our distinctively human misery—which is evidence of our singular status in a cosmos that would be impersonal and meaningless without us.

But Lockeanes do not dwell, as the Thomist and existentialist author Walker Percy put it in the title of his 1983 book, on being *Lost in the Cosmos*. They focus instead on constantly transforming our environment to make ourselves more and more at home, and the cosmos more and

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more refashioned in the image of ourselves. The existentialists lack pride because they believe our longings are useless, and our freedom nothing more than absurd; the Marxists lack pride because they reduce it to a deceptive obsession that will wither away when we have finally completed the work of making ourselves fully at home here on earth. The pride of the Lockean is the mean between these deterministic extremes: the Lockean takes pride in the accelerating modern progress that is the evidence of our freedom, while refusing to lose sight of who he is as an individual, or of the fact that there is always more work to be done. We can hope to make ourselves more and more at home, but it is not good for man to believe he is *too* at home, even in the world he's made for himself. Some "homelessness," some sense of alienation, is the inevitable consequence of our spirited desire to display our singular excellence by controlling both our environment and who we are. Our pride or status would wither away if we became so happy that we thought there was nothing left to do.

Tom Wolfe, our novelist of manliness, sees better than anyone the real issue, from a Lockean or technological view, of what might be the status of human beings in the cosmos. According to Wolfe, in his 2006 Jefferson Lecture "The Human Beast," natural evolution came to an end the moment the distinctively human being—the being with language—appeared on the scene. How or why that happened is speculative, as is whether the distinctively human qualities should be called natural or Historical or the mysterious gift of a personal Creator. What is not deniable is that the emergence of the human introduced a discontinuity into nature. The cosmos was no longer a whole in which we, like the other animals, were merely accidental, unalienated, and dispensable parts. And from the beginning, the being with language became less interested in mere survival and more in his status or significance. That quest for status doubtless begins as an animalistic social quality shared with the other primates that emerged through evolution. But it was enflamed or, really, transformed by the presence of self-consciousness and the freedom possible only for beings with language. The human desire for status can manifest within any kind of group to which one belongs—including humanity writ large—but it is primarily the desire for personal significance. And one aspect of the distinctive, self-generated evolution of free beings is the gradual revelation that such significance is irreducibly individual or personal—not merely communal or Historical.

As soon as the being with language emerged, natural evolution was displaced by increasingly conscious and volitional evolution. Language, from this view, is primarily a weapon to make ourselves more significant by transforming our environment with ourselves in mind. We achieve

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significance through religion, which celebrates not just gods or God but also man, and through great accomplishments that stand the test of time. But we most effectively achieve significance, in Locke's view, through our technological conquest of nature, in which we willfully imprint ourselves upon what we have been given.

Certainly our technological achievements have established the singular status of our species on this planet. Dolphins, dogs, and pigs are cute, smart, and social beings, and in some sense they are dependent rational animals (to borrow Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase) just like us. But we have decided that dolphins deserve to live, and that tuna are dumb and ugly enough to exist only as our fodder; so dolphins' continued existence effectively depends on us, and ours does not depend at all on theirs. Dolphins are content enough with the lives nature has given them, and they lack the freedom and presumably the desire to transform what they've been given into something better with themselves in mind. From a Lockean view, no Darwinian has reflected adequately on the differences between people and dolphins, which are far more significant than the obvious natural similarities. Owing to human technological progress, those differences widen all the time.

### **The American Future: Lockean or Darwinian?**

The narrative of America that seems most convincing right now is the one that focuses on the liberation of the autonomous individual. As the Supreme Court said in its 2003 decision *Lawrence v. Texas*, which struck down anti-sodomy laws, what one generation of Americans deems a necessary and proper constraint on autonomy the next might consider oppression. The word *liberty*, the Court says, was inserted in the Constitution without any definition so that each generation of Americans could invoke it in pursuit of greater liberation—a more uninhibited pursuit of happiness. More than ever, the Lockean standards of autonomy and productivity are what establish our dignity, while standards based on the community and caregiving matter less than ever.

It is easy to question whether all this freedom has really made people more happy, and whether people really feel or are more significant than in the past. A Darwinian rejoinder to Lockean today might begin by showing that the project to achieve autonomy by detaching human beings from the inclinations of their social natures has not been good for the goal of personal significance at all. The Darwinian would claim that most people acquire personal significance—or a secure and dignified place in

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the world—in the context of friendship, the family, and a local community. People from large families, for example, are more secure in their significance than people from small families. Liberation from social contexts in the name of autonomy makes most people more anxious and disoriented, and they are given the daunting task of finding security and significance not only *by* themselves but *of* themselves. Insofar as the Darwinian point of our lives is to contribute to the perpetuation and flourishing of the species through our social devotion to our family and tribe, happiness and dignity come in doing the duty we have genuinely been given—and our natural desires are meant to support our natural duties. So it is as social beings that we are happy and significant.

On this view, the modern movements that promote excessive liberation—whether through communism, libertarianism, Lockeanism, or one of the amalgamations that originated in the permissiveness of the 1960s—are what Francis Fukuyama called, in the title of his 1999 book, *The Great Disruption* in the natural orientation of our species. What is good is what is genuinely desirable for animals such as ourselves, and the liberationist or Lockean privileging of the restless *pursuit of happiness* over *happiness itself* is based on a mistaken or unnatural view of who we are. By 1989, the Darwinian can say, it was clear that the failure of both communism and American 1960s radicalism should have signaled the end of the era of excessively individualistic experimentalism in the pursuit of personal significance. Neoconservatives even claimed that, with the end of the Great Disruption, Locke and Darwin became reconciled: we can see that we are just social enough naturally that the family and the social virtues will remain just strong enough to be useful in sustaining our liberty by limiting it. There was a new confidence that we are hardwired to be bourgeois—a confidence that recalled Thomas Jefferson’s proto-Darwinian theory, which claimed that nature could not be so perverse as to have made us *too* free to be able to live happily in society.

But Darwinism and Lockeanism can combine in far less dignified ways. Consider *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Tom Wolfe’s 2004 portrait of the “hook-up” culture and the philosophical nihilism that pervade today’s elite American universities. The emphasis of the Darwinian education is the insignificance of both the species and the individual: students in Wolfe’s novel are taught that the “I” that each of us experiences does not even exist, and that we are nothing but conscious rocks being pushed along by natural forces beyond our control. The Lockean teaching of autonomy shows up both in the softer social sciences and in the general freedom and complete absence of social discipline in the lives of the students, free from

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any paternalistic impositions on consenting young adults. The result is that the university's social life is remarkably uncommunal, unguided by the social instincts Darwin describes, more like a version of the Lockean state of nature in its unregulated competition.

The "I"—in the sense of "I am Charlotte Simmons," a particular being with a name—does not finally disappear but is emptied out, replaced with a shell constructed for the benefit of others in pursuit of success. At the end, Charlotte Simmons can distinguish all too clearly between her genuine insignificance and her wholly self-formed, utterly precarious social significance. The only student whom the novel shows escaping from the mixture of obsessive Lockean calculation and Darwinian natural insignificance is accidentally ennobled by a reading of Aristotle that allows him to see his nobility as a rational, social, and relational being—to see himself as a man with a soul who knows how to properly treat men and women with souls. Locke and Darwin agree that we are personally nothing by nature, and, Wolfe shows, our Lockean-Darwinian sophisticated society does not offer us enough to construct ourselves out of nothing. Our elite universities do little, to say the least, to help students figure out who they are and what they are supposed to do as free and dignified beings. Students do not take from college any sense that each of them is unique and irreplaceable, someone with the authentically personal destiny given to a being with a soul. Wolfe's novel is conservative in the most obvious sense: our theories need to be countered to conserve the truth about who we are.

Still, if anyone who opposes the fantasies of communism and the excesses of the 1960s on behalf of nation, community, church, and family is a conservative, then the true Darwinians today are conservatives, as the political theorist Larry Arnhart has argued, and so are not the sort of Darwinians we usually find in our universities. Darwinian conservatives see, for example, that modern Europe is in the thrall of a post-political, post-religious, and post-familial fantasy. It is trying to live without the social institutions that are indispensable for social animals such as ourselves, and it seems in general to be in denial concerning both the limits of biological beings and what is good about being one. So, quite perversely, Europeans are not having enough babies to keep the species going—denying their natural capacities to experience the pleasurable duties of parenthood. They are also denying, of course, the natural inevitability of being replaced for the benefit of the species. (And some sophisticated Americans live pretty much like these Europeans, low birth rates and all.)

Paradoxically, Lockean techno-evolution might have almost immeasurably increased the status of humanity in the cosmos, while depriving

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particular human lives of their real or natural significance. The ambiguously good news, from a Darwinian perspective, is that such an empty, insignificant, and unhappy way of life is naturally unsustainable, which might mean that a society that becomes too consistently Lockean goes extinct. Even Tocqueville underestimated how literally self-absorbing individualism could become, not seeing how Lockean principles would work themselves out in the high-tech era of contraception. The world's future might not belong to the high-tech West after all.

The Darwinian view is that the true significance or purpose of members of any species is in unconsciously serving its perpetuation—hence that we feel happy and dignified when doing our natural, social duties, without necessarily knowing why. But that dedication, it would seem, is not sustainable as a conscious directive to be followed by the species as a whole. Carl Sagan recommended in *A Pale Blue Dot* (1994) that we make species perpetuation our sacred cause, spreading humanity to distant planets to fend off the possibility of species extinction, whether by natural or human causes. But the fate of the species is not something that does much to motivate our individual decisions, however much science says it “should.” People can experience significance by devoting themselves to their children, but not by thinking in the Darwinian or impersonal sense of merely perpetuating their genes. Soon enough, after all, any given person's genes are dispersed into insignificance.

Ironically, as Wolfe suggests, it seems that any species smart enough to understand the Darwinian theory of evolution will progressively defy that theory by its own behavior. This is evident in the way that, today, those enlightened Americans who attribute Darwinian explanations to every aspect of their lives also tend to act quite consciously as free individuals against their natural inclination to spread their genes. The truth, perhaps, is that they are acting against what they believe is true by nature about their natural insignificance. Meanwhile, those unenlightened Americans who deny Darwinism (if not evolution) by believing in some narrative that secures their personal significance tend to behave as any Darwinian would predict, by pair bonding, raising their young, and then stepping aside for their replacements with a minimum of resentment about their biological limitations. Thus the (seemingly paradoxical) conclusion arises: any Darwinian genuinely concerned about the future of our species should demand that our schools teach that evolution does not describe the *whole* truth about who we are.

Darwinians would say that followers of Abrahamic religions who believe their religion presents a true account of who they are remain

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deluded; but Darwinians would also acknowledge that religion has an evolutionary explanation as a support for natural social instincts. Religion as a form of social bonding is salutary, but religion as an unnatural explanation for who we are is pernicious—particularly Christianity, which teaches that our experiences of alienation and anxiety point to the truth about who we are. It is an expression of the fact that members of our species alone long for an unnatural or real kind of personal significance, and so are consciously and radically dissatisfied with their biological existence. For the Darwinian conservative, the Lockean project for the mastery of nature (including the radical project of transforming humanity via biotechnology) is a secularization of the Christian uprooting of members of our species from their natural home. The Darwinian hostility to Lockeanism on behalf of the truth about our social natures is, finally, a deeper hostility to the pernicious lie that is the Christian account of personal freedom. From the Christian view, the Darwinian conservative promotes a return to the impersonal science of Aristotle, with Aristotle and Darwin uniting against Christianity, Locke, and Nietzsche in denying the reality of the person.

And this is where Darwinian conservatism fails: it is an obviously unrealistic denial of our freedom. Darwinism cannot explain the accomplishments in which we take the greatest pride; it enhances more than negates our anxiety at seeming to be leftovers in a world otherwise so well described by scientists. There is no Darwinian explanation for Mozart, Bach, Shakespeare, Socrates, the Chartres Cathedral, or even the love that animated the first Christian communities. If the good is merely the desirable, then there is not even any foundation for the ordinary sense of voluntary personal responsibility that causes us to praise and blame. And there is no room for free will—for *real* personal freedom. Even Aristotle knew that moral virtue depends on the incompleteness of materialistic or deterministic explanations of the universe. The truth, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it in a 1993 speech, is that the fall of communism was hardly the end of History or anything else. Insofar as we believe, following Darwin, that nature gives us no guidance—that it is deaf and mute on the purposes worthy of beings such as ourselves—we are more adrift than ever.

So if our choices really are Darwin or Locke, then we will inevitably choose for Locke, against what we have been given by nature. From the perspective of personal significance or purpose, Darwin merely confirms what Locke already knew: nature has provided almost worthless materials that we must transform through our rational and industrious efforts—through our technology. As technology morphs into

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biotechnology, the next stage in conscious and volitional evolution is our emerging capability to alter not only our natural environment but our own natures. Not only our bodies in some narrow, contextual sense, but our very moods, memories, and cognitive abilities are becoming resources to be directly manipulated and enhanced in the service of our unnatural personal freedom. Darwinism fails, most of all, to convince us that what we have been given is worth preserving if we are free to be better than merely biological—or at least free to indefinitely fend off our individual biological demise. From the Lockean view, there is more evidence all the time that we can choose for ourselves not to be merely species fodder. We may choose against our natural happiness and for the increasingly anxious pursuit of an ever-elusive personal security. But natural happiness is arguably just not all that possible for beings free enough to detach themselves from its unconscious enjoyment.

Finally, Darwin and Locke agree more than not on who we are by nature: insignificant parts of a process indifferent or hostile to our very being. They also agree that nature provides almost no support for our freedom, only disagreeing on whether it is possible that we are more than natural beings. The best evidence that Darwin teaches more of the truth about us is the anxious unhappiness of lonely individuals in feverish pursuit of anti-natural autonomy and dignity; free individuals cannot secure themselves all by themselves against the forces that surround them. The best evidence that Locke is closer to the truth is that free persons refuse to rest content with what Darwin says about who they are by nature. People know they are or should be much more than that.