

SITUATED ANIMALS: A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST EXCESSES IN POLITICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I explore the ramifications of political theory being freed from two opposed extremes of biologism and social constructivism because, ultimately, the human animal is *both* a biological creature and capable of becoming. While it has been highly significant for humanistic scholars to challenge the governing authority of the “hard sciences” as the prime site of legitimacy in modern scholarship, the position of critique has transformed into one of outright and unqualified hostility. I resist this commitment to show that work at the intersection of the human biological sciences and political theory need not amount to political conservatism or pessimism.

To this end, I address two questions with the aim of (*re-*)situating the human animal as a common property in political theory. First, I explore and challenge the commitments that inform the strict social constructionist thesis. This move leads to a second consideration: what questions are open if we see the problem not as *biology*, but as *biological determinism*?

I make four arguments in this dissertation. First, I use Ernst Cassirer to show that “human” and “animal” can be integrated in a philosophical anthropology in a constructive way, one that avoids the reductionism implied in the term “animal” (or biological creature) and the naiveté of conceiving of human beings as though they are distinct from or wholly independent of nature. Second, I use Marxist materialism to integrate the human biological sciences with a meaningful theory of human freedom. Third, I work at the intersection of contemporary political theories of identity and the human biological sciences to reconcile the effects of “predispositions” with the effects of

our social identities. I do so in a way that resists essentialism. Finally, I use feminist scholarship to argue that the human biological sciences cannot be used to justify hierarchy, or rather, that “hard science” doesn’t in any meaningful sense say anything at all about equality.

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INTRODUCTION

BIOLOGY, THE SELF, AND POLITICAL THEORY

No matter what humanity's future holds, we will never shed our heritage as neural organisms, mammals, primates.

-- *A General Theory of Love*

Former Harvard University President Larry Summers sparked outrage when he suggested in a 2005 keynote address at a conference about diversifying the fields of math and science at Harvard University that the underrepresentation of women in the STEM disciplines might be due, at least in part, to innate differences between men and women in abilities relevant to math and science. Gendered outcomes in test scores in math and science, he argues, cannot be attributed to either overt discrimination or socialization because those explanations do not explain all the “distribution.” Dr. Summers is wrong, or at least fails to appreciate how socialization works to construct these outcomes. With respect to the STEM disciplines, the evidence suggests that there isn't a gender difference in innate ability, but in the confidence with which boys and girls approach math and science. Believing you have innate qualities that make you good or bad at something is likely to affect the way you handle certain tasks. For example, a girl who *believes* she is bad at math *because* girls are constructed as being bad at math is likely to internalize that message and underperform at math because of it. This confidence gap is attributable to socialization and curricula¹ – as Michael Cox and Richard Alm wrote at the time in the *New York Times*, riffing on Simone de Beauvoir's famous line: “scientists and mathematicians are made, not born.” But the Summers episode reveals a larger

¹ Nicole M. Else-Quest, Marcia C. Linn, and Janet Shibley Hyde, “Cross National Patterns of Gender Differences in Mathematics: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136:1 (2010), pp. 103-127.

movement. According to Dr. Summers, his objective was not to argue that men are naturally better-suited to the STEM disciplines, but to provoke a research agenda that could supplement the prevailing social science discussion that focused on social and environmental factors. He was suggesting, that is, that outcomes often attributed to socialization might actually also have a biological basis, or at least – perhaps most importantly – that we should *explore the possibility*.

There is a growing body of “popular” literature (that is, written for a primarily public audience) engaging the research agenda advanced by Dr. Summers from a variety of different angles. Former Vice President Al Gore, for instance, entered the debate in “bio-politics,” or the biological origins of some of our political leanings, during a media appearance, when he argued that conservatives and liberals tend to have temperamental differences in response to the same stimuli. Differences, he argued, that are rooted in biology. In addition, in his hugely successful book *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker argues that human behavior is substantially shaped by evolutionary psychological adaptations. Through an extensive review of scientific literature, ranging from discussions of personality to cognition to gender, Pinker challenges those who assume a “blank slate” or strict social constructionist view of human nature. The *New York Times*’ forum “The Stone,” where thinkers consider topical issues philosophically, regularly features various ways that the biological domain is contributing to our understanding of timeless philosophical questions such as free will and morality. Popular science journals are engaging the domain of biology as well. Against the prevailing socialization thesis, Robin Nixon of *Live Science* writes, a preponderance of research finds that “some of the differences exhibited by male and female brains are innate.” She continues, quoting

Diane Halpern of Claremont McKenna College,

We do socialize our boys and girls differently, but the contribution of biology is not zero.²

This research agenda has also had a profound impact on the U.S. public's consciousness. While erroneous, it has become common to refer to simple and direct genetic causation for many aspects of human behavior. The "God gene" is said to predispose human beings to spiritual experiences, while the "criminal mind" is a consistent theme in popular t.v. series and detective novels. While this popular conversation gets louder, however, there is stiff resistance to integrating the biological sciences in political theory and those engaged in humanistic scholarship. There have been some recent connections. In the philosophy of mind literature, for instance, cognitive science and neuroscience have been explored for a potentially fruitful integration. Work in neuroscience is also being entangled with important philosophical issues, such as free will, personality and decision-making, all of which change when a brain is altered by trauma, drugs or disease. There is work at the intersection of science and moral philosophy. For example, there is experimental work being done on the classic "trolley problems," which probe, in various ways, views of moral obligation and its relationship to brain chemistry. Serotonin, the evidence suggests, affects a person's disposition toward causing harm. In his book *Neuropolitics*, William Connolly takes up neuroscience to explore the brain's interaction with cultural conditions. Connolly has been exploring these connections for a decade. Economics continues to tinker with evolutionary psychology, which is radically altering the rationality assumption, theories of preference formation and group behavior. And there is also a growing movement to integrate biology

² *Live Science*, "Matters of the Brain: Why Men and Women Are So Different."

in empirical political science around the issues of political judgment and attitude.³ This list isn't exhaustive, of course, but these examples remain exceptions. It isn't an overstatement to say that those in political theory and the humanities have largely conceded the ground to those in the "hard sciences" and their popularizers. And this is important – even dangerous – ground to concede. After a review of the evidence, Jeremy Freese concludes that our biological dimensions are "causally related to the overwhelming majority of the individual-level variables studied as outcomes by social scientists."⁴

There really is a specter haunting the social sciences – the specter of the human biological sciences.

This small challenge to what might be called the strict social constructionist thesis, most certainly, hasn't been taken up in any serious way in contemporary political theory.⁵ While most political theorists believe that genetics may play some nebulous role in human behavior and politics, the prevailing view both implicitly but oftentimes, explicitly assumes that the environment, broadly understood, is the prime mover.⁶ Social constructionism has been useful to challenge what were profoundly problematic dogmas, such as sexism and racism, but it has now become so hegemonic that it is shutting down critical analysis of important contemporary political and social problems rather than

³ John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013); John R. Hibbing, "Ten Misconceptions Concerning Biology and Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (2013); Peter K. Hatemi and Rose McDermott, "The Genetics of Politics: Discovery, Challenges, and Progress," *Trends in Genetics* 28:10 (2012); John R. Alford, Carolyn L. Funk, and John R. Hibbing, "Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?" *American Political Science Review*, 99:2 (2005).

⁴ Jeremy Freese, "Genetics and the Social Science Explanation of Outcomes," *American Journal of Sociology* 114: 1 (2008), p. 5.

⁵ Tooby and Cosmides (1992) call this thesis the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM).

⁶ John R. Alford and John R. Hibbing, "The Origin of Politics: An Evolutionary Theory of Political Behavior," *Perspectives on Politics* 2:4 (2004).

stimulating it. While it has been highly significant for humanist scholars to challenge the governing authority of the natural sciences as the prime site of legitimacy in modern scholarship – by emphasizing that while the natural sciences can illuminate *how* almost everything works, they cannot offer answers to what is *worth* doing – after 1945, the position of critique transformed into one of outright and unqualified hostility. This has led to the point where one has to make an argument like the one I advance in this dissertation.⁷

It is time, as Peter Singer argues in *A Darwinian Left*, to take seriously the fact that human beings are animals, and that we bear the evidence of our evolutionary inheritance and genetics, not only in our anatomy and our DNA, but in our behavior, too. Nature, as Singer writes, does not stop at the “dawn of human history.”⁸⁹

What does it look like to do as Singer suggests though, and take the human animal seriously?¹⁰ There are several dimensions to this. My broad research interest is in

⁷ As Moi (1999) argues in a different context, the sex (the biological domain)/gender (social constructionism) distinction was an important tool to show that biological determinism was false. However, the distinction does no useful work “when it comes to producing a good theory of subjectivity” (6) and “a concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman (or a man) in a given society” (4–5).

⁸ Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 8.

⁹ While I am critical of Singer’s work in some respects, which I point out at times, I also find his work useful and draw on it throughout my dissertation. My ambivalence regarding his work is not an inconsistency. There is nothing inconsistent about someone’s work being useful and imperfect.

¹⁰ Could this also imply intervening in people’s biology? I briefly consider this question later when I integrate certain biological dimensions into a meaningful theory of human freedom. But there is clearly more. However, the onus is on the person who has this implication of my research agenda in mind to show a clear link between my position and that position, which is, in a word, eugenics. Eugenics is a simplistic view – of everything, including the science. But roughly, eugenics is the purposeful selection of genetic factors underlying certain characteristics deemed desirable. I assume that our particular genetic and evolutionary slates are arbitrary from a moral point of view. My IQ, like my sex, race, species, personality profile, and so on are undeserved. The “natural lottery” simply positioned me to be as I am. On this level therefore eugenics as such is not problematic; in fact, it might even be desirable. Suppose parents could opt into a program that allowed them to privilege empathy, at a genetic level, for their children. Suppose those same parents instead privileged self-interest or egoism. In a vacuum, I don’t find fault with either the parents or the eugenics program as such. The problem with the second parents is their poor values. What characteristics are privileged is a function of politics, however. And at this level, eugenics is deeply

exploring the ramifications of a political theory freed from the two opposed extremes of biologism and social constructivism because, ultimately, the human animal is *both* a biological creature and capable of becoming. To this end, I address two questions in my dissertation with the aim of re-situating the human animal as a common property in political theory. First, I explore and challenge the commitments that inform the strict social constructionist thesis. This move leads to a second consideration: what questions are open if we see the problem not as *biology*, but as *biological determinism*? My thesis is that work at the intersection of the biological sciences and political theory need not amount to political conservatism or pessimism. To defend this thesis, I make four arguments. First, I use Ernst Cassirer to show that “human” and “animal” can be integrated in a philosophical anthropology in a constructive way, one that avoids the reductionism implied in the term “animal” (or biological creature) and the naiveté of conceiving of human beings as though they are distinct from or wholly independent of nature. Second, I use Marx to show how we can integrate the biological sciences into a meaningful theory of human freedom. Third, I show how the biological sciences can be integrated into a contemporary political theory of identity in a way that resists essentialism. Finally, I use feminist scholarship to argue that the biological sciences cannot be used to justify hierarchy, or rather, that “hard science” doesn’t in any meaningful sense say anything useful or legitimate about equality.

As a methodological generalist, my research shares affinities with the movement toward mixed methods and problem-driven research in the social sciences, where the

problematic. Without a genuine democratic contestation of values and decision making, with so much power asymmetry in all areas of life, eugenics becomes *Eugenics*.

dilemma or question of concern determines which methods are made use of.¹¹ I join this discussion, using resources in the human biological sciences to think through the political theoretical implications. For purposes of this dissertation, for instance, I am not a phenomenologist, but, with respect to the broader issue of philosophical anthropology, phenomenology is useful to theorize the limits of biological reductionism vis-à-vis the question: what kind of animal is the human animal? I don't use a Marxist analysis because I am a Marxist but because it best illuminates a particular set of questions surrounding the relationship between biology and human freedom. In other words, in this dissertation, I will frame the broad purchase of engaging the domain of biology.

My research interests proceed from a basic assumption: human beings are a species of animal. We are an evolved species, shaped all the way down – as is all life – by natural selection, a process that leaves nothing untouched. Because we are a species of animal some properties are more important than others in structuring the world, and it isn't up to us, so to speak (i.e., they are important *in themselves* and not in relation to us), which these are.¹² The reorientation I am gesturing toward here – one of *de-anthropocentrism*, if you will – is a significant move because anthropocentrism crops up all of the time in our theorizing and interpretive frameworks in both subtle and explicit ways. Consider any statement of the kind: “X is natural to human beings.” The fallacy is clear: because human beings are a species of animal, *everything* we do is natural, by definition, just as everything all evolved life does is natural to it. Another form of this

¹¹ Ian Shapiro, *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics*, (Boston, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹² Sally Haslanger, “Feminism in metaphysics: Negotiating the natural,” *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (eds.) (Boston, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

claim is this: “there is nothing ‘natural’ about ‘nature’.” But this misunderstands what “natural” means. The human animal is constituted, in part, by the social world, but this doesn’t make human beings not animals – the social world is one manifestation, or better disclosure, of our animal expression. This follows logically, of course, but one might push back: is it true that everything an animal does is necessarily natural and if so how does that reconceive what we mean by natural? The concept of “natural” is an evaluative claim meant to carve out a distinction between human animals and all other life, not a descriptive one (or at least a descriptive claim so thick with evaluative undertones it isn’t useful). That is my central point; nothing more. Consider how, for instance, rationality (i.e., mind) has been pitted against emotion (i.e., body) and constructed as the dichotomy between *Human Being* and animal. More often than not efforts to categorize an action or experience as “natural” is an effort to put it outside the domain of “reason,” which is considered the domain of the *Human being*.

Political theory has always had a tendency to anthropocentrism, in the evaluative sense of “human centric.” It would be impossible for us *not* to experience the world as human beings, of course, much like a dog can’t help but be “canine centric.” This is a good phenomenological insight: our body *just is* our perspective of the world. But anthropocentrism is doing something different.

In ascribing design to the cosmos, Hume and Spinoza noticed how thinkers relied on anthropocentrism to make their case. From Plato to those in the Judeo-Christian tradition, all versions of the “design argument” for God’s existence are premised, implicitly, on favoring human forms of experience, often centered on human cognition (“rationality”) as an objective good *worth having*. God (or Nature) therefore “designed”

the universe in such a way as to (teleologically) realize this objective good. It is the end point or culmination of evolution; human beings are the desired-for outcome of this “design.” But, as Spinoza noted, if spiders had a language they would create design narratives that deify a “spider centric” experience of the world. The universe would be conceptualized as a spider web. The point is this: anthropocentrism isn’t merely a standpoint but, at bottom, an evaluation, and one that only makes sense when you consider the animal *making* the evaluation itself. If a rabbit defined intelligence the way human beings do, Robert Brault reportedly said, then the most intelligent animal in the world would be a rabbit, followed by the animal most willing to obey the commands of the rabbit. In trying to re-situate the human animal as a common property in political theory then, I have to displace the *Human Being* by exposing the work that anthropocentrism is doing. The domain of biology troubles our familiar sense of the human animal and the connections to “superiority” and “exceptionalism” we draw from it.

Before I do that, however, I respond to two specific criticisms of the research agenda itself. First, what does a modern biological approach to human behavior teach us? And second, what is the “value added,” so to speak, for integrating political theory with the biological sciences, from both ends – for the political theorist and humanistic scholar and the social scientist? This is a particularly pressing concern for the humanist given the historical baggage of past uses of “biologistic” explanations for political and social outcomes; the reasons, that is, for why humanistic criticism of “hard sciences” hegemony

transformed into outright hostility.¹³ And as such, most of my thoughts concern that end of the challenge. However, I will offer some thoughts as to the why a social scientist should read political theory and humanistic scholarship.

Against social Darwinism

Biology is best understood as a cluster concept, naming many related processes. I will use the phrases “biological dimension” and “domain of biology” to include our evolutionary history, genetics and environmental factors, such as experiences in utero, early childhood experiences and trauma, all of which shape the material brain. Evolutionary and genetic explanations are related, but distinct, with evolutionary explanations attempting to find “ultimate” explanations for species-typical behaviors. These explanations are not incompatible with individual differences within and across contexts. The level of analysis is key to distinguishing Social Darwinism from current biologically informed theories of human behavior. Social Darwinists used biology to explain group-level behavior. On this view, women do X, because their biology compels them to do so. This view is dangerous and, as important, wrong, scientifically. The level of analysis for current theories of biology is the individual. The relevant question is: why do individuals differ from each other? Current science helps us understand why you can have two individuals who come from the same culture, experienced the same education, confronted similar experiences and yet think and do different things. In this context, it is nonsensical to say: “Women aren’t good at science, because of genes.” It would only be sensible to say: “This person is *predisposed* to be good at science because of his/her genes.” *Predisposed* is the

¹³ Some more recent than others, of course: Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* purported to show a racialized distribution in IQ.

operable word. In other words, current theories of the relationship between behavior and biology are informed by and help to account for contingency. For the political theorist or humanistic scholar to insist that I isolate the role of biology to “prove that it matters” therefore is fundamentally in error. While I understand the thrust of their insistence, I must insist in the other direction: how do *you* know that human beings are socially constructed in the way this question presumes?

Genetic explanations therefore are focused on explaining individual differences, which may or may not be rooted in evolutionary adaptations. Both explanations are not at odds with environmental explanations. Indeed, they provide the mechanisms by and through which the environment has the effect that it does. Now, against the naive critique where one assumes cultural or individual differences necessarily negates the role of biology, human evolution, genes, and environment *interact* to shape human behavior. Language illustrates this well. Language is a human universal (a species-typical trait), but human beings vary in their facility for language (there are individual differences around that trait), and there is a biological window in which language is acquired from the social environment – children in England learn English while children in France learn French (this trait interacts with the environment).

This distinguishing feature leads to the next – modern science is foundationally *probabilistic*. Consider the image of our biological nature holding our politics, and our culture as a whole, on a leash. This metaphor is useful, particularly as it applies in both directions – our political life cannot be untethered, but neither can our genes from our politics and culture. “While the existence of a genetic leash is evident, its specific length and level of elasticity are largely unknown. Moreover, the extent to which we should

stretch it remains very much open to debate.¹⁴ The use of “foundationally probabilistic” above gets at the important point that foundation does not mean *determined*. As Gary Marcuse writes, “Nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises. Built-in does not mean unmalleable. It means organized in advance of experience.”¹⁵

Why should we pursue integrated scholarship?

“What is the ‘value added’ for political theory?” of such an integration some might wonder, particularly given all of the historical baggage of past uses of “biologistic” explanations for problematic political and social outcomes. I will say more about this below, but it is important to note upfront that in the wake of dangerous uses of biologisms arose an interpretive framework that militates against even *opening* the questions I am raising. This is the central problem I consider in my dissertation: to challenge this interpretive framework by showing how integration can take place without sacrificing important humanistic commitments. Many people, of course, are simply unwilling to entertain what I am trying to do. But for the few who are, I offer different ways of demonstrating the purchase of my proposed intervention that resists the pitfalls of bad past attempts. But why pursue this project, especially given its methodological and political “illicitness”?¹⁶ The case for integrated scholarship is actually rather straightforward.

¹⁴ Leslie Paul Thiele, *Thinking Politics: Perspectives in Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Political Theory*, (New York, NY: Chatham House Publishers/Seven Bridges Press, 2003), p. 39.

¹⁵ Gary Marcuse, *The Birth of the Mind: How a Tiny Number of Genes Creates the Complexities of Human Thoughts* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004), p. 34.

¹⁶ Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (Bronx, NY: Forham University Press, 2014).

First, simply put, human beings are a species of animal. We ought to inform our self-conception in light of Darwin, and other contemporary, cutting-edge understandings of a biological sort. The problem is that prevailing accounts of human beings are either willfully or strategically avoiding findings that are simply irrefutable. Some political theorists do so in bad faith, or a willful ignorance of the fact that human beings are biological creatures. However, this flight from the domain of biology

should be rethought both because it is wrong and because those who deny the existence of any behaviorally relevant biological differences are fast becoming this era's equivalent of the flat earth society.¹⁷

Whether or not biology “matters” in the human condition is no longer a debate in the behavioral sciences, in the same way that global warming isn't among climatologists, or evolution among biologists. The debates are now about *how* it matters. If political theory continues to ignore this, we risk talking to ourselves when we could be making contributions to normative questions that scientific discoverers uncover and either do not address, or comment on sloppily. Pinker's formulation is right: the problem is determinism.¹⁸ And *social determinism is just as normatively noxious as biological determinism*. Theorists ought to engage the evidence head on, and supply valuable tools in an interdisciplinary approach to the domain of biology, which is precisely *how* we avoid the problem of determinism. Many of the biologicistic popular attempts at integration show just how critical interdisciplinary work is. For those who strategically avoid engaging the domain of biology, ignoring the biological dimensions of human beings amounts to a “noble lie,” or an important untruth advanced for a good end. But this is not

¹⁷ John R. Hibbing, “Ten Misconceptions Concerning Neurobiology and Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (2013), p. 482.

¹⁸ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003).

an intellectually or politically defensible position for at least two reasons. I share the commitments of figures such as Plato, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, with all of their errors, followed current understandings wherever they took them, confronting *both* the discomfort and promise of that kind of project. These thinkers did so in an effort to *know* their subject(s) as completely as possible. There is honesty in this commitment as it runs the risk of fundamentally troubling our preferred reality, but such is the pursuit of knowledge. In this way, I see myself as engaged in an old project of sorts, where political theorists and those engaged in humanistic scholarship grappled with the ramifications of the friction and possibilities at the intersection of social constructionism and biology, and never shied away for political or strategic convenience from conclusions that they believed to be in keeping with current knowledges. I say “knowledges” because these thinkers were generalists, consuming anything and everything they could in the service of understanding and thought.

Humanists have done an exhaustive job of criticizing positivism and “biologism” but have not really understood part of the story of their appeal – that if the biological sciences did not also produce a variety of goods, their power would not be as intractable. But it offers these benefits precisely *because* human beings are animals with bodily or biological mechanisms that can be studied and revealed. My dissertation then is a methodological challenge to hyperspecialization, which is driven by a university modeled after a market economy, where value is reduced to efficiency and sheer productivity and “comparative advantage” is prized. As with any economy, there is value in the division of labor – everybody trying to do everything is problematic, and absurd. But it is naïve to argue that hyperspecialization in political science is merely a division of

labor. Rather, in carving out domains of knowledge, hyperspecialization legitimizes some while marking out others as illicit. In resisting engagements with the domain of biology after 1945, political theorists and humanistic scholars aren't merely shoring up what "we are good up"; we are establishing boundaries marked with warnings that scream: "don't go there!" This most certainly is happening from the other direction as well. Political theory is in a defensive position within political science precisely because hyperspecialization means: "this is what *real* political science is, and you are not doing it." This challenge, in other words, is to the *kind of theory* that hegemonic social constructionism commits us to, where social constructionism decides on its conclusions and priority in advance rather than opening these up to scrutiny.

Political theorists, moreover, ought to be more honest and transparent about their inevitable reliance on assumptions of an empirical sort. Political theory has always been a science to the extent that its subject matter is answerable to evidence, and engaged in questions and themes of recurring interest to human beings. Otherwise it is pure fiction or creative writing. This isn't to discount the importance of either. Imagining new possibilities is essential. The history of political theory shows how tremendously valuable the "pursuit of utopianism" can be. As Plato argued in *The Republic*, "ideal societies" stand as a "target" against which we can measure the inadequacies of actually existing societies. In other words, utopianism functions critically to reveal problems in the "real world." (From the Greek, "utopia" means "no place.") To this extent, utopianism isn't intended to be a realistic blueprint for society, but the aim toward which the "arrow" ought to be shot. Machiavelli, for instance, counseled would-be princes to set their standards extraordinarily high so that they will still be excellent even if they miss the

actual mark. The problem is that logical positivism's skepticism of normative claims has largely overdetermined how political theory is perceived within the broader discipline, in effect, making "utopianism" all that political theorists "do." Or worse yet, political theorists are not "practice oriented," some might believe, merely in "the business" of conceptual clarification and the repeated evaluation of centuries-old textual arguments. On this view, political theory is necessarily abstracted from politics. But political theorists – at least some of us, I hope – want to be seen as actually describing the world – things that *are*, and things that could *actually be*.

Case in point: what are human beings and what do we hope for through political action? Carl Schmitt observed that the "problematic or unproblematic conception of man is decisive for the presupposition of every further political consideration, the answer to the question whether man is a dangerous being or not, a risky or harmless creature" (1996: 58). Thiele puts it this way,

Political theory examines the rights and responsibilities, obligations and prerogatives of citizens and governments. To theorize about politics, therefore, is to investigate how human beings organize their collective lives. But what makes human beings different from other animals in this regard? The question of human nature arises for every theorist interested in the question of politics.¹⁹

"Human nature provides the timber with which every politics must be constructed."²⁰ Some theorists argue that human nature is such "crooked timber" that it requires sophisticated architectural engineering to achieve adequate results. Others have sought to straighten out the timber of humanity itself.²¹ While it is often unstated and worse *unproblematized*, work in political theory is overdetermined by the conception of

¹⁹ Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²¹ Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, p. 31.

human nature that informs it. From the varieties of brands of liberalism to those of communitarianism, Marxism, and feminism, all political theories rest on beliefs concerning human nature.²² Most political theorists, moreover, probably believe that they are making claims about human motivation, say, or reason that are grounded in empirical reality. Schmidt is pointing us toward the importance of our interpretive frameworks, but we certainly want those frameworks to fall within intellectually defensible parameters. That is, we can *and should* further refine these frameworks in light of the relevant evidence, and as we do, we might come to see that some just are not useful anymore, or that they are overly simplified and cannot be defended as credible.

What counts as “evidence,” of course, is overdetermined in an important way – evidence is expected to be empirical and arrived at in accordance with the scientific method. Of course science itself is similarly overdetermined. But surely the range of endeavors that can be called “science” remains useful. We can agree that science aims to describe reality (as messy, irrational and politically charged as that endeavor may be) and has contributed to an enormous body of knowledge. Our standard for useable work or work worth engaging within political theory should not be that *everything* in it is right or acceptable. In some cases perhaps the premises mean that we would rather not engage it since everything follows from them – which is an additional point the critic would make here. But that criticism is overdrawn, and ignores the idiosyncratic ways in which contingency works. In political theory we are dismissive of *individual* authors and positions but shouldn’t, as a result, ignore the *entire* enterprise. Within biology itself, of

²² Among these beliefs is the position that there is no human nature. This position begs the question: what do we mean by “human nature”? If the debate is between social constructionism (i.e., no human nature) and biological determinism (i.e., human nature), then the debate is no longer interesting.

course, there is a huge range of positions, too. Skepticism has served important political and intellectual ends, but does anybody *really* believe that we don't know more about the world in objective, descriptive terms today than we did a thousand, five hundred, or even one hundred years ago? As with Rousseau, I view progress as dialectical, where oftentimes as we make headway in one domain, this translates into a more "disenchanted," atomistic world in which we are less able to experience genuine happiness. I also agree with Rousseau that, as we try to treat our experiences of the world and the world itself more "rationally," we lose what we might understand as an instinctive attachment *to* or lived/bodily experience *of* the world. This manifests itself through what could be understood as the "psychic problems" that Rousseau identified. We increasingly want or desire things that hadn't even occurred to earlier human beings with the real tragedy being that we learn to want what we can't get because in the process of satisfying our needs, desire emerges. And the nature of desire is to never be completely satisfied. Moreover, where once, Rousseau thought, the site of suffering triggered an initial pre-reflective aversion that manifested itself as "pity" – a sentiment basic to the human condition as theorists as diverse as Mencius and Adam Smith argued – because of "reason," suffering now triggers efforts to *justify* the suffering. This has the consequence of pushing us further and further into ourselves at the expense of *humane* relationships and communities. These "psychic problems" slowly crop up in our conscious experiences, reminding us *via* the un- or subconscious of our profound lack, which reminds us that we are out-of-balance.

One can concede these points, however, while still admitting this: "to the extent that it seeks to render political life intelligible, political theory has to remain attentive to

the concrete sufferings and predicaments of people.”²³ Political theory therefore is *at the same time* descriptive *and* prescriptive or normative. There should not be, nor has there ever really been a separation. “Is” and “Ought,” that is, are only distinguishable at a conceptual level in political theory. Plato did not merely imagine a utopia by which to criticize existing regimes; he rested his Republic on the back of what he believed (and not completely inaccurately) was a genuine account of human psychology. Political theory does not simply offer a utopian vision of a good society, but also a conception of what human beings are capable of accomplishing regarding conscious social organization and why human beings might act to achieve such ends. As Lewis Gordon puts the task of the philosopher more broadly, against the growing ossification of disciplines, we should be generalists, aiming to develop accurate portrayals and to thematize everyday life.²⁴

This is the thrust of the critique of integrated scholarship for the social scientist. Political theory is often reduced to three primary tasks: conceptual clarification (what is race?), normative theory (what is worth pursuing?) and argumentative structure (if this X is your premise, Y follows). But that’s a basic error. At the intersection of the first two tasks is descriptive theory – to clarify what race is is simultaneously to describe how race is constituted and lived, and to critique its negative instantiations. Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* is not only a normative critique of colonialism in an effort to advance an alternative future, but a *descriptive theory* of the process of constructing a colonial subject, and the mechanism(s) of liberation. *Wretched of the Earth*, therefore, is social science. Sociogeny, for Fanon, which captures the relationship between the

²³ Fred R. Dallmayr, *From Contract to Community: Political Theory at a Crossroads* (New York, NY: Decker Publishing Company, 1978), p. 2.

²⁴ Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

socioeconomic and the psychological levels of the human condition, is precisely a critique of other psychological attempts to grasp the lived significance of colonialism. Therefore, if one of the aims of social science is more complete knowledge, as opposed to shoring up methodological boundaries (only *this* method yields “real” descriptions of human reality), then the social scientist has every reason to consider political theory and humanistic scholarship. This argument yields yet another reason for integrated scholarship, an old one, of sorts. When method becomes the primary mechanism for granting access to a domain of knowledge, the *method itself* can go unproblematized. This is the problem of calcified paradigms. Theoretical work therefore explores and illuminates what is missed in more narrowly focused and insulated empirical work.

More important, as Thomas Kuhn argued, “science” emerges when there is sufficient consensus regarding a paradigm for it to clearly dictate an entire research agenda while the theoretical work I am doing raises fresh questions about the viability of paradigms premised on a particular conception of the human being. Behaviorism, for instance, is not social science, properly understood. To describe a *behavior* is to offer an isomorphic explanation, whereas *action* incorporates questions of intentionality and meaning. Study of the human animal, as I will show, is fundamentally a study of action, which is the purview of social science. The error I challenge in this dissertation, however, is the hard distinction drawn between these two domains of knowledge. As I argue, while human beings engage in action not mere behavior they do so as biological creatures. A synthetic philosophical anthropology therefore illuminates the frictions between intentionality and meaning and the “subconscious,” which is best explored through an engagement with the domain of biology. In other words, current cognitive science

complicates, and quite radically in some ways, a commitment to the claim that human beings act intentionally. However, the conception of the human being that animates behaviorism, one that replaces the study of intention and meaning in human behavior with mere *mechanism*, I'll show, is too reductionistic to be useful.

Strategic avoidance for the political theorist has an additional cost. Empirical political science is increasingly hegemonic in the discipline, as are the “hard sciences” in public policy discussions. While political theorists vary tremendously in their approaches, with respect to engaging what the domain of biology has to offer head on, we are choosing specialization over a more generalist attitude, which will result in the increasing marginalization of the subfield. The subfield of political theory cannot afford to be anything other than robustly generalist in orientation.²⁵ Moreover, the willful or strategic avoidance of the domain of biology leaves the political theorists with only bad options: either ignore themes that require integration or do incomplete scholarship. The notion that political scientists more broadly undercut themselves by ignoring advances in other fields of research is hardly original, of course, but it is still underplayed, on the whole.

Still, while no longer defensible, social constructionism represents an ontological commitment, which, like all such commitments, overdetermines the way the discipline “does” its craft – from the kinds of questions we collectively ask to the kinds of policies we together pursue. The resistance within political theory to engaging the domain of biology is surprising though, when considered historically. It is so overwhelming in the discipline that we might assume that it always has been. But we would be wrong. It is important to note that my dissertation *re-situates* the human animal as a common theme

²⁵ This is particularly true in a job market when one department after another is demoting or eliminating the subfield entirely.

in political theory because, while Dahl (1961) was certainly right when he argued that political theorists often make a number of assumptions and assertions of an empirical sort without attention to existing empirical data, or even the possibility of gaining better empirical data, until rather recently in the history of political theory, our most basic assumptions and concepts were regularly entangled with the science of the day. Treating the biological sciences as either irrelevant or with outright antipathy has *emerged* relatively recently in the field of political theory.²⁶ Plato's politics follow directly from his understanding of the "tripartite human soul." Aristotle was so obsessed with studying anatomy that he would request that Alexander the Great bring him human and nonhuman animal cadavers back from his many imperial voyages for study. Given how important human psychology was to both Aristotle and Plato, it is probable that, today, they would be interested in, for example, the neuroscience of decision-making. Hobbes argued that, what he believed to be, the immutable characteristics of human nature ought to inform the very structure of society. And Rousseau conjectured about the malleability of the species barrier between human and nonhuman primates. The history of political thought has an orienting assumption: that political theory is not distinct from the, more strictly speaking, "human sciences." Political thought is *practice-oriented normative* theory. As Pinker writes of thinkers such as Descartes, Hume, Locke, Kant and Smith, and many others,

They were cognitive neuroscientists, who tried to explain thought and emotion in terms of physical mechanisms of the nervous system. They were evolutionary psychologists, who speculated on life in a state of nature and on animal instincts that are "infused into our bosoms." And they were social psychologists, who wrote of the moral

²⁶ Pinker notes that the intrusion of science into territories of the humanities has been deeply resented in his article for the *New Republic*, "Science is not your enemy."

sentiments that draw us together, the selfish passions that inflame us, and the foibles of shortsightedness that frustrate our best-laid plans.²⁷

I have a more critical view of the purposes to which the sciences can be put than most of these thinkers did, but we will theorize more maturely if we grapple with the ways in which who we are is already enmeshed and intertwined with the many ramifications of scientific findings (and that this can only be the case because we are also biological creatures). And we should not avoid what is true, even if the truth introduces very real difficulties.

What are the commitments that inform the ascendancy of strict social constructionism? That is the question I turn to in the next chapter because only by doing so can we denaturalize social constructionism, so to speak, and expose the central commitments that gave rise to it. Ultimately, I am exploring *why* the resistance to engaging the domain of biology is so stiff.

Before I do so, however, I want to reiterate briefly the ramifications of the integration I defend in my dissertation. This has several dimensions, among them are: if one of theory's aim is self-clarification, engaging with the domain of biology is a requirement of doing rigorous work. Plato, Aristotle, and all other "canonical" figures recognized this; hence, proceeding with this research agenda is consistent with the larger trajectory of political theory. This has the additional benefit of illuminating just how hegemonic and unthinking social constructivism has become. Moreover, while I insist on the full complexity of how genes and biology are made manifest, I argue throughout this work that they are at work in any meaningful understand of human freedom, identity construction and the much more foundational question of philosophical anthropology.

²⁷ Ibid.

Finally, understanding certain phenomena in biological terms has led as much to increased tolerance as to the shoring up of rationalizations for social policies that increase or further entrench existing inequalities.

CHAPTER 1 WHAT TOOK THE HUMAN ANIMAL OUT OF POLITICAL THEORY?

Biopolitics is an orientation to political inquiry that *acknowledges* the person as a complex, rational, emotional, and biological creature.

-- Thomas C. Wiegale

Political theory was *disentangled* from the domain of biology. Understanding why this occurred is important to appreciate fully some of the components of the resistance one encounters when engaging the domain of biology. In this chapter, I chart out this ascent of social constructionism. Through the lens of feminist critics of the relevance of biological sex differences and the controversies surrounding Social Darwinism in political science in the 1960s and 1970s, there are two decidedly *political* elements that need to be understood.

The politics

The first is political, but more explicitly informed by theory.²⁸ Biological sexism made patriarchy *inevitable*, i.e., biologism. Sexed distinctions of the body, on this argument, are pointed to as “causes of inequality.” Inequality then, becomes something of a “natural fact.” This was Dr. Summers’s hypothesis: innate differences in abilities in math and science result in or, put a bit softer, contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the STEM disciplines. In response to this approach to engaging the domain of biology, feminists and their allies began by showing how this approach confuses gender difference

²⁸ That’s mere tautology. There isn’t a conceptual or substantive distinction to be drawn between politics and theory here.

with biological sex difference. What is now called the nature of women, J.S. Mill wrote, “is an eminently artificial thing – the result of a forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.”²⁹ It follows that “natural patriarchy” confuses cause and effect in an important way, where “distinctions of body or mind or behavior are pointed to as cause rather than effect, with no realization that they are so deeply effect rather than cause that pointing to them at all is an effect. Inequality comes first, differences comes after.”³⁰ The naturalization of sexed identity, particularly in the division of care labor, was used to conceal the *manmade* appropriation of female labor.³¹ The shift toward the view that, for all intents and purposes, human beings are socially constructed was underway.

From this challenge came a broader attack on the *essentialist* implications of taking biology *too* seriously, that is, uncritically, implications that needed careful analysis, which the prevailing “scientism” around sex differences simply didn’t support. The implication is that there are properties “essential” to women and which all women share. The category “woman,” on this account, is a discrete, ahistorical group with common characteristics. This generalization had the theoretical and then political effect of urging mobilization around a single axis, which put pressure on *all* participants to identify that axis as their defining feature. This “reduction of identity” to a single category didn’t represent women who experienced themselves as “integrated selves,” positioned at the intersection of various cross-cutting axes of identity.³² The immediate

²⁹ John Stuart Mill, “The Subjection of Women,” in *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women*, Alan Ryan (ed.) (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 135.

³⁰ Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1989), p. 219.

³¹ Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³² *Ibid.*

political effect of this generalization was two-fold: its pure disciplinary function within the broader feminist movement and related to this, as both Mill and Mackinnon both noted above, the *elision of power* in constituting the generalization in the first place. Just as dominant groups in the culture at large insist that the marginalized “integrate by assimilating to dominant norms,” the same is true within some feminist practices. Dominant sub-groups may impose their vision of the “group’s identity” onto all its members, making their conformity to it a condition for their appearing at all.³³ The women of the Combahee River Collective challenged this, noting that the category “woman” elided the reality that it specifically represented the lived experience of the dominant sub-group, in this instance, white upper middle class women. Essentialism therefore conflicted with lived differences among women and could do nothing more than “invite determinism” and *discipline* in-group differences.³⁴ The concern then, to put this differently, is homogenization. This “flight from essentialism” has determined the theoretical landscape within feminist theory and practice. This resulted in an *overcorrection* toward social constructionism, however, a shift that was taken up broadly in the social sciences and then made axiomatic. The silence around engaging the domain of biology, in other words, in critical ways in political theory is a manifestation of this larger reactionary flight from, or skepticism of, coherent claims about human nature (or “the self”).

We can frame this ascent of social constructionism in an additional way. Marx was concerned about the ways in which ideology penetrated or saturated knowledge production. Science *is* mired in social construction, and Marx (and feminists, both

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Marxist and non-Marxist, as noted above) knew it. As Marx writes (erroneously) of Darwin's *Descent of Man*,

It is remarkable how among beasts and plants Darwin recognises his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence.' It is Hobbes' war of every man against every man...³⁵

There are two important components to this. It is difficult to separate political and economic interest from science, but more important, scientific work is always undertaken through the use of categories and analogies that relate this work to the larger world of meaning with its other domains and registers.³⁶ Pinker correctly notes, however, that this criticism of the domain of biology is so ingrained that it isn't deployed as a testable hypothesis. It is taken as self-evident truth.³⁷ Ideology therefore penetrates knowledge production from both sides, so to speak. This should draw our attention to a way to problematize this commitment without discrediting it. Perhaps the problem is not social constructionism as such but *the way* we employ or deploy its guiding assumptions. Most people committed to social constructionism do not "do it," of course – in the sense of demonstrating how alternative claims are erroneous. This is one commitment informing the move away from any engagement with the domain of biology.

There is an additional political element that needs some brief explanation, as it is specific to political science. Social Darwinism was "almost foredoomed to failure" as a viable method to understanding politics because early practitioners weren't sufficiently aware that the "biology of the era was still unable to explain adequately biological, let

³⁵ http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_11_12.htm

³⁶ Nancy Leys Stepan, "The Role of Analogy in Science," in *Anatomy of Racism*, David Theo Goldberg ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

³⁷ Pinker, *Blank Slate*, p. 448.

alone social, phenomena.”³⁸ Some of the earliest proponents of a Darwinian account of human behavior, moreover, embraced biology in strictly ideological ways, advancing racist and sexist theories of natural inequality. It is not surprising therefore that the “great majority of social scientists took for granted that social behavior was, for all meaningful purposes, learned behavior.”³⁹ Although early members of the discipline did subscribe to what the later hegemony discredited, the political science environment “selected against” a biologically informed conception of human beings in favor social constructionism. The effort to explain this as solely a politicized distaste for these questions doesn’t fully capture the ascent of social constructionism, however. There is a crucial gut element here that needs to be considered as well. Simply put, we do not *want* to conceive of ourselves in biological terms.⁴⁰ Or even more simply put, we do not think of ourselves as animals – we shun the term and its connotations because of our *a priori* commitment to the claim that human beings are, in a word, “special.”

“What is human nature?” is a foundational question in political theory. Most theorists have responded to this question by trying to identify what makes human beings “special” or “unique” with respect to nonhuman animals. The question is: what makes human beings *different* from other animals? Not different in a neutral sense, of course, as in reptiles are cold-blooded and mammals are warm-blooded. This difference makes all

³⁸ Albert Somit and Steven A. Peterson, “Rational Choice and Biopolitics: A (Darwinian) Tale of Two Theories, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32:1 (1999), p. 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ For some, biology suggests a record or reality that should be discredited. Although biology is enabling in various ways, there is a sense in which we ought to rail against its stature since it appears to place a limit on our ability to transform toward a *preferred* reality – which would include, for some, altering one’s given biology. Libertarians are often hostile to engaging the human biological sciences for this reason. The validity of the evidence isn’t the central question for them, even if they insist otherwise, because the *engagement itself* seems to conflict with their preferred self-conception as “autonomous.” This is related to the commitment I am exploring here, but perhaps it is not entirely subsumed by it.

the difference, as it were, enabling human beings to *transcend*, or perhaps to *move beyond*, or perhaps to *tame* our lived experience as animals. For example, Aristotle characterizes human action in terms of deliberative choice and denies this capacity to animals. “Human beings can step back from various possible goals or ends and evaluate them rationally.”⁴¹ *Logos* is not truly *animal*, it would seem, but it is *logos* that makes us truly *human*. We lead double-lives perhaps, as animals and as human beings. Human beings are animals *who have* achieved emancipation from the animal-world, the world of nature. This is also true of the behaviorists, it is important to note, who, in their desire for human behavior to be “predictable” seem to conceive of human beings as more machine than animal, absent all our fleshy complexity. Behaviorism, of course, simply replaces the determinism of “nature” with some other overdetermining “mechanism.”⁴²

This move forges the dichotomy between nature and nonhuman animals and

⁴¹ Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Limits of Post Modernism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 89.

⁴²It is interesting to note the comfort with which we accept the essentialism here. As animal rights scholars and activists have long argued, speciesism is an unthinking assumption against taking seriously the interests of animals. To see this, consider how most people pre-reflectively believe hurting human beings is more significant (morally and empirically) than doing the same to other animals even though many other species are capable of being harmed, both physically and psychologically, to the same level of intensity as human beings. This is because, or so the argument goes, animals aren't human beings. That's the speciesism – the “moral sphere” traces membership in the species *Homo sapiens* (just as it used to trace membership around other groups such as being biologically male). (Speciesism is *not* the absurd position that human animals and nonhumans aren't different.) But what is it about human beings that can be used to justify this? Speciesism as such only begs the question. Here's the essentialism: there is some “uniquely human” characteristic that all human beings possess while all nonhuman animals do not. (Moral agency, language-use, and cognitive capacity are the usual suspects.) But immediately we see that this essentialism is simply another erroneous effort at homogenization. Many human beings don't possess this or that characteristic, not only the severely mentally disabled and babies, but all human beings throughout the life cycle will have a lived experience of “being human” that makes this effort at essentialism decidedly lacking and incomplete. And as before, this effort to homogenize has real consequences. For example, the degradation of the disabled and elderly, confining them to spaces that are “out of sight and out of mind,” could be understood as grounded in their perceived lack of autonomy, which is thought to be the “distinctively human” characteristic. In other words, the discourse doesn't seem to allow ascriptions of, say, dignity outside of this framework, which is both speciesist and disastrous, ethically and politically, for any human being who falls outside of it as all human beings, at some point or another, inevitably will, just as an empirical matter, but also for those who are constructed as falling outside of it as, for instance, Marx stressed with respect to the dehumanization experienced by the proletariat throughout his work.

forms of human-ness, where the former is assumed to be determined while the latter is open to transformation. Alasdair MacIntyre notes the importance of self-conception in his *Dependent Rational Animals*. He argues that the failure to think seriously about the “bodily dimensions of our existence” is rooted in, or at least certainly reinforced by, the extent to which we conceive of ourselves and imagine ourselves as *other than* animal. Such defective modes of self-understanding and imagination, he writes, at the “level of everyday thought and practice seem often to coexist without any notable difficulty with a theoretical acknowledgement of the past evolutionary history of human beings. We become in consequence forgetful of our bodies and of how our thinking is the thinking of *one species of animal*.⁴³ Our thought therefore is the thought of an animal; our rationality is animal rationality.

What explains this basic approach to understanding human beings? My intuition is that hubris is at work. Any engagement with the domain of biology is interpreted as a *leveling* process, in effect collapsing the difference in significance we ascribe to human beings and all other animals. This is equal parts a strategic, because we do not want to stop exploiting animals, and philosophical move, because we want to conceive of ourselves as superior to nonhuman animals. These two parts are at work in co-constructing the “special-ness” of human beings. We clumsily exaggerate the gulf between human beings and other animals, to mark-out qualitatively the insuperable line, to borrow from Jeremy Bentham, between human and nonhuman animals, in spite of the fact of evolution and the many refutations of these attempts to carve out *the* (singular)

⁴³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings need the Virtues*, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1997), pp. 4-5, *emphasis added*.

difference.

My position is that much of this resistance can be summarized as: it just doesn't *feel* right. This is an inarticulable (and often inarticulate) feeling, in fact, which reveals just how far down this hubris goes. Georges Bataille argues provocatively, but insightfully, that this fear and shame of our "corporeal nature," of the body, is the ultimate "existential driver" toward domination. In an act of fundamental alienation, the human disdain for our biological nature is transferred to those constructed as nature's proxies (black and brown people, women, animals, e.g.). In other words, in the first instance, domination isn't political; it is a deferred attempt to "master" our biological condition most importantly, death, which is interpreted as defeat, or as smallness and servility. In this way, denying our nature as biological creatures is fundamentally hubristic. (This false consciousness is so engrained human beings may be "programmed," genetically, to deny the role of biology in their behavior, which constructs our sense of self that relies on the "ennobling vision of the disembodied mind."⁴⁴ ⁴⁵) This could be put more philosophically. Nietzsche's critique of the valorization of rationality in the Enlightenment, and subsequent psychoanalytic challenges to the privileging of consciousness over the unconscious both share affinities with my argument as they are both aimed at concretizing human beings in an important sense; the aim is to expose as delusional the sense of ourselves as minor gods, outside the tug and pull of our biology. I want intentionally to entangle these criticisms with the conception of *animal*. We don't want to engage the domain of biology because of the normative conception of human

⁴⁴ Gary Marcuse, *The Birth of the Mind: How a Tiny Number of Genes Creates the Complexities of Human Thoughts* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004).

⁴⁵ John R. Hibbing, "Ten Misconceptions Concerning Neurobiology and Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (2013), p. 520.

beings that follows from it.⁴⁶⁴⁷ So we will resist challenges to that conception of human beings until the end, so to speak, in an effort to avoid the consequences.⁴⁸ Different people therefore will concede the role of biology as it relates to the human condition, at least up *to a point*. And that point is *ideological* – i.e., it is not the result of considered judgment or an evaluation of the evidence.⁴⁹ Different people then, with different ideological commitments surrounding how human beings relate to nature more broadly (i.e., self-conception) will arrive at that point quicker than others.

I once had a conversation with a colleague that illustrates this point well. I want to recount this conversation, quoting, at times, from the conversation itself, while interspersing some analysis throughout.

⁴⁶ John R. Hibbing, “Neurobiology and Politics: A Response to Commentators,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:2 (2013).

⁴⁷ And ethical implications that follow from such a self-conception. Our continued exploitation of nonhuman animals for food, clothing, research and entertainment, when alternatives are available, is a holdover from a pre-Darwinian worldview; without such a worldview, there is simply no defensible line that can be drawn between our animal use and brutal exploitation. The most straightforward way to construct this ethical line is simply to assert that we are just “different” and therefore “higher” than nonhuman animals, which is question begging and, as Singer (1999) showed, cannot be sustained. But what if it could? In *Zoopolis* (2011), Donaldson and Kymlicka ask us to imagine that we encounter an alien species with cognitive abilities that far exceed even our most advanced computers, and who can engage in forms of moral self-control that far exceeds the human capacity. And imagine that this alien species enslaves human beings on the grounds that we don’t meet their conditions of “personhood,” or for entrance into the “moral community” (at least not to “the same degree” that members of their species matter, ethically). This hypothetical isn’t only important as a “consistency test.” It seems to me that the real work it does is to expose how it is *power*, not reason or considered judgment, carving out those “who matter” morally from those who don’t because, in the first instance, it is fundamentally an act of power that forces *some, but not others*, to justify their own existence on the terms set by the powerful. This is why self-conception is so important – by being “not animal” we never have to so justify. This hypothetical shifts our “subject position,” as it were, where we are the ones asked to justify ourselves on the terms set by a more powerful species. We are forced to see how the various ways we “ask,” so to speak, nonhuman animals to justify themselves are problematic because the entire project is problematic.

⁴⁸ This reminds me of those “creationists” who will rely on what a small handful of people say on GenesisWorks.org in a move that pretends that they actually care about what the evidence says. They don’t; it is a first assumption that evolution makes us “not-special” in the way they think about “special-ness.” If we are evolved animals, we are just different – a variation, that is, not special.

⁴⁹ I recognize that the “political” commitments I sketched out above are also ideological. I am using “ideology” here to draw out the important role of self-conception, or a strong attachment to a view of “what is means to be a human being.” This attachment often goes unproblematized, and yet it overdetermines how people will respond to my proposed integration.

What does it mean to be human?

It has been only a few hundred years that we have known that we are mammals, and only a few decades that we have understood in considerable detail how we have evolved, along with all other living things, from those simple beginnings – and even less time since we have begun to understand the relationship between our behavior and our genetics and evolutionary history.⁵⁰ We are the first generation of human beings to understand not only *that*, but in some cases *how* biology affects us.⁵¹

“How can this not inform political science?” I asked my colleague.

To which she responded: “What are the payoffs, so to speak, of considering the role of biology?”

In an intellectual environment such as ours the term “payoff” captures well the flavor of “rationality.” Without some strong indication that it will be “useful” to consider biology, she argued further, given the nefarious ways “biology talk” has been used, it is better to just not talk about it. This question is interesting given the straight-forward intuitive strength *against it*. A rather mundane example might be height. There is not, say, a “height gene,” and there are probably significant environmental effects. Easier access to better nutrition, most likely, is making us taller, on average. And yet height seems to be strongly heritable. This is true of a wide range of physical phenotypes. If I could gather your siblings and parents in a room, I might not necessarily *know* that you are all related, but I could spend a few moments looking at you and compare facial features, height, hair color and so on, and probably figure out that you are all related. If you and several random people were put into that same room, I could make similar observations, and

⁵⁰ Daniel C. Dennet, *Freedom Evolves* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 4.

⁵¹ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*.

probably figure out who is *more* related to somebody else, say, based on racial phenotype. People of similar racial phenotypes are more likely to share ancestors. Most will concede that biology is relevant when thinking about characteristics such as stature or perhaps weight. But behavioral traits, on the other hand, *we know* are caused by environmental factors. Our minds and socialization contribute to our behavior. Not biology. That is what makes human beings *different* than animals; it is what makes us “human.” So we see the standard dichotomy emerge here: nature *or* nurture. Nature does some explanatory work, but nurture and choice matter more with respect to human behavior (i.e., the socialization thesis). Biology, on this view, only matters insofar as human beings *make it* matter. But again, the straight-forward intuitive strength runs against this position.

Consider so-called “mental illness.” Most would be willing to concede, particularly those who have seen it first hand, that at least a susceptibility to “mental illness” “runs in families,” and probably occurs from the interaction of biological factors and environmental factors such as stress, a traumatic event, or poor nutrition. These environmental factors influence, or trigger, an “illness” in a person who has an inherited susceptibility to it. Those with Asperger’s syndrome, for example, typically have behavioral patterns that cause difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication. And there is evidence for a genetic link: observed higher incidence of family members who have behavioral symptoms similar to Asperger’s syndrome. But perhaps “mental illness” is too atypical to be useful, and can’t be employed to make a case for the interaction between biology and human behavior generally. (If defined somewhat broadly, however, “mental illness” is a widespread occurrence.) Artificial stimulants such as alcohol or nicotine affect social behavior *via* biological/physiological

changes; nobody would deny that. Perhaps though, naturally-occurring biological variation wouldn't do the same. We observe behavioral similarities between parents and children, similarities between how, say, a parent might usually respond to a given situation with how her child might usually respond to that same circumstance. Soon after birth, children show variation along behavioral dimensions such as temperament (emotionality, activity level, attention/persistence, sociability, or reactivity). Some children cry easily and intensely whereas others are more easy going. Some are highly active and always on the go where others are more sedentary. Some attend and persist in tasks for long periods of time where others' attention wanders quickly.⁵² Human beings are *born* different, behaviorally. Socialization isn't a sufficient explanation for this. (I often joke that some of my colleagues wear two hats when I discuss my project with them: as parents or people with siblings and as political scientists. It takes very little effort to persuade them of the importance of my project when they wear their parent hat, say – as they interact with their children, it is not an open or even a particularly interesting question whether biology is at work. But when they put their political scientist hat on, they urge me to consider missing variables and the problem of eugenics.)

After some of these considerations, my colleague wondered if “there comes a point during our maturation when we are able to ‘control’ these behavioral phenotypes, when we ‘tame’ them through, say, education.”

This is fundamental to the human condition, we might assume: over time, we move from childhood to adulthood, and we can understand this process as something like what John Locke describes in his *Second Treatise*: coming into “rationality” understood

⁵² Kimberly J. Saudino, “Behavioral Genetics and Childhood Temperament,” *Journal of Development and Behavioral Pediatrics* 26:3 (2005), p. 214.

as the capacity to critically assess belief and action. As J.S. Mill argued, a rational person (a “progressive being”) is one who *individually* is responsible for her beliefs and actions, ultimately capable of experiencing “higher forms” of human happiness. But again, the dichotomy emerges: nature, which has a broader domain than we first thought it did, and nurture. Adulthood seems to be the domain of nurture, which is to say, it is the domain of choice. Human adults can reflect upon their biological inclinations and choose, after critical assessment, to act against them. But that only raises the rather sticky question: at what point do we become rational? Is this merely a conceptual distinction, in other words, or a difference answerable to and driven by evidence? It must be the latter. But there does not seem to be any real intuitive support for the claim that behavioral predispositions that you can observe in childhood and young adulthood just go away in the sense that, to some extent at least, they stop affecting our temperament, for example, as full adults. John Stuart Mill saw this process as developmental, with no clear distinction between not-rational and rational – merely stages of emerging rationality, with no end point, and certainly no clear break from earlier stages. It would seem that what shifts are our understandings and circumstances that play a role in how certain sentiments or urges or dispositions are expressed. Yes, children change in noticeable ways as they age and with experience. But clearly we observe behavioral similarities such as aggression in response to perceived slights, a similar sense of humor, openness or closedness to new experiences, an analytical disposition and so on. In other words, there is not a moment or an accumulation of moments perhaps, when children radically shed their prior behavioral dispositions. If anything, we gradually learn better and worse contexts and forms for their expression.

It is true that certain patterns of behaviors and dispositions shift in almost everyone. For example, most adults are more patient than a two-year old because they are more fully and meaningfully integrated into social communities and therefore have a different understanding of the relationship of time and want. But the question at hand is: are there qualitative breaks in the way the socialization thesis – and my colleague’s position – implies? It does not seem to be the case. New experience builds on top of, and resists and alters those prior dispositions in complex ways. So there is real contingency here in the sense that nature and nurture are intertwined and in relation to one another – neither is deterministic. The issue is one of *predisposition*. And temperament, as a behavioral characteristic, affects how one might relate to other human beings, a variety of social situations and institutions. So human beings don’t *neutrally* approach, say, a new situation. One has a certain disposition toward new situations, generally, and those dispositions result from an entanglement with nature and nurture.

“What behaviors would be relevant, though?” my colleague asked. “I just don’t know how we would “measure,” say, in-built “conservatism” or “liberalism” – how could we ever know that?”

“So this is an issue of methodology, the “how to” not the “*should we*?”” I responded.

Stepping back a bit then, my colleague did not have a challenge to the more basic question: are biology and human behavior entangled in ways that are relevant, politically and socially? It was the details that concerned her. We might pose the challenge this way. Would knowing the root biological cause for differences, which are already apparent to us really change anything with respect to how we “do political theory”? Consider how human beings make decisions. Engaging the domain of biology immediately pushes against prevailing conceptions of choice. We “see” choice-making individuals (that is

“apparent to us”), but this is deceptive in an important way: it only accounts for proximal manifestations.

To which she responded, “I do wonder about the history of this kind of ‘biological talk.’ My mind is immediately drawn to theses like *The Bell Curve*, which argued that human intelligence is substantially heritable, and that this distribution is racialized.”

Indeed, genetics and social policy have been intertwined to redefine social problems as a matter of *individual* predispositions, thus challenging defenses of the welfare state that rely on accounts of collective responsibility. We might want to maintain the myth that what it is to be “human” is to exist “beyond” the domain of biology because the consequences of not doing so can take the form of reactionary conservatism. Science, moreover, is tainted in that it cannot be disentangled from racist and sexist understandings that cannot but suffuse data and experimental design. But this case is not closed. Biologically informed theories deal with individual differences and predisposition, not group differences or determinism; therefore coming to see individual differences as predispositions may increase “tolerance.” In instances when illness was thought to come from evil, societies punished those who were stricken with diseases that we now know to have biological roots; our increase in knowledge about the role of biology in “mental illness” has not led to less “tolerance” and understanding. In fact we are far less inclined to stigmatize today than we were in the past when mental illnesses were believed to be the result of individual moral weakness (or evil). The same is true of sexual orientation, of course. It may be true that it is more “tolerant” scientists who produce data that supports and helps to popularize and authorize a more “tolerant” view but in general better understandings do often break down or bracket knee-jerk aversions.

As a general matter though, as my colleague noted, considering the role of biology in human behavior does seem to have very deterministic implications. “Being human” is to be a “person,” which means that our lives, ultimately, are self-created in some important sense. We make our own choices. Social constructionists have to confront this problem too, just from the other direction, so to speak, as they emphasize the depth of socialization and social pressures in constraining what we think we can and cannot do. This is fundamentally an issue of self-conception, which may or may not be related to the evidence itself. In other words, the primary concern is about the possible normative implications of “biology talk,” not the strength of the argument for engaging the domain of biology as such.

“The *view* of human beings that follows from making the concession that we should think about biology has deterministic implications,” my colleague stressed.

What is at work here is the evaluative judgment implied in the concept of “animal” – “animal” is whatever is *not* “human.” To conceive of human beings as a species of animal is to *move beyond* the stricter biological issue at hand and into the field of evaluation. Science is ideological. Consider the important role that the idea of the “subhuman” plays in current instantiations of global gendered, racialized and economic violence. Human, Maneesha Decha writes, “is defined through the nonhuman and, in particular, the animal, and this binary [human/subhuman] has the contemporary effect of dehumanizing vulnerable human groups and thus exposing them to violence from which humans are meant to be shielded.”⁵³ This is truer, I suspect, if you have a lowly sense of what nonhuman animals are owed, ethically. If one thinks that nonhuman animals should

⁵³ Maneesha Decha, “The Subhuman as a Cultural Agent of Violence,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, 7:3 (2010), p. 4.

be treated with dignity, this could be less of a problem. If we raise the bar on what is owed nonhuman animals (and not just the particular pets of particular owners, which is fundamentally a property-relation) it would no doubt benefit human beings who are seen in lowlier terms as well. This implies that a contemporary liberatory project must incorporate into its politics food politics, environmental concerns and the issues raised by the animal liberation movement. It isn't true however that increased information as such does this work. That is the liberal fallacy – that if people only knew the harm they were causing, they would change their politics or practices. Some of the most brutal forms of animal exploitation take place at the hands of those trained in the “hard sciences,” those psychologists, for instance, who know the depths of animal cognition, hence their use of them as “models” for understanding human psychological phenomena, and yet react with hostility to anyone who suggests that we ought to be moving away from animal models.

After some prodding, it became clear that the strict socialization thesis does not work, my colleague thought, but engaging the domain of biology leads to the uncomfortable consequence of conceiving of human beings on terms that should only be reserved for nonhuman animals and non-animal nature. In her discussion of feminism's “push against nature,” Alcoff argues that feminists are *really* responding to the *thought* and *cultural practice* of categorizing women as “not-quite human.”⁵⁴ This too, was the crux of my colleague's critique. A particular debate in the field of bioethics illustrates this point well. Is “human enhancement” (*via* medicine or technology) desirable, dangerous, ethical?⁵⁵ Most are uneasy about “human enhancement.” “Enhancement” seems too

⁵⁴ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Roache and Steve Clarke, “Bioconservatism, Bioliberalism, and the Wisdom of Reflecting on Repugnance,” *Monash Bioethics Review* 28:1 (2011).

evaluative.⁵⁶ What is it about a human being that needs to be “enhanced”? The idea of “human enhancement” is very loaded; it suggests that human beings *need* improvement of the kind that cannot be achieved through will or determination. It sounds like eugenics, in other words, where the norm of “fitness” is some “superior human.”⁵⁷ But what about say the surgical enhancement of body parts? There is a difference between functional changes – prosthetic limbs, pacemakers, cosmetic changes – and human genetic engineering. That difference, however, is not empirical; it is *ideological and conceptual*, fundamentally grounded in an intuition that human beings have a special kind of “dignity” that is denied/compromised by the presumption that there is something about human beings that (might) need “engineering.” So as before, this is an issue of self-conception. And that self-conception is framing *how* we think about “human enhancement,” not the evidence as such.

My colleague was willing to concede that biology is relevant to human behavior, but only up to the point where the prevailing self-conception of human beings as “special” seemed to be intruded upon. This is the second commitment informing the move away from any engagement with the domain of biology. I suppose “formally,” I challenge this commitment by addressing the important issue of philosophical anthropology (or: What kind of animal are we, then?) in the following chapter where I

⁵⁶ There is also the egalitarian concern that efforts at “human enhancement” seem likely to enable those who already have to have even more and then to convince themselves – as they do – that they “deserve” it because they *are* more. This tracks well with my argument that conceiving of human animals as “special” is used as justification for the exploitation of nonhuman animals. Human beings *are more* than nonhuman animals, on this view; therefore, we deserve to exploit them for our purposes. This view is often expressed in this way: “Human beings didn’t fight their way to the top of the food chain to eat lettuce.”

⁵⁷ Anxieties surrounding these questions are often explored in comic books through groups of people who are hostile to the super powers of mutants or other superheroes. Consider, for example, the relationship between mutants and non-mutants explored in the latest *X-Men* movie franchise, where mutation (i.e., difference, not-human, not-natural) is constructed as fundamentally problematic.

argue that human beings are both biological creatures and capable of becoming. Those who see an inescapable tension in that position simply misunderstand what current science shows. But I do so more broadly in my dissertation by rescuing the human animal from its bad reputation as a determined, unfree, limited creature.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED PHILISOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY (OR: WHAT KIND OF ANIMAL ARE WE THEN?)

A curious correlation has prevailed between scientific rigor and coldness: the more factually grounded a model of the mind, the more alienating. Behaviorism was the first example: brandishing empiricism at every turn, it was thoroughly discomfiting in its refusal to acknowledge such staples of human life as thought and desire. Cognitive psychology bristled with boxes and arrows linking perception to action and had nothing to say about the unthinking center of self that people most cherish. Evolutionary psychology has shed welcome light on the mind's Darwinian debts, but the model declaims as illusions those features of human life lacking an obvious survival advantage – including friendship, kindness, religion, art, music, and poetry.

-- *A General Theory of Love*

The biological sciences are an important resource for the humanist, but they should not be taken up uncritically as they do not represent a new foundationalism, i.e., determinism. (Applied ethicists like Peter Singer use the human biological sciences badly to move in this direction, for instance.) Political theorists should, when engaging the domain of biology, continue to contribute to a conceptual framework to theorize the *limits* of the biological sciences. To put these limits plainly – science cannot provide explanations of meaning and significance. “Science is a newcomer to the business of defining human nature, but thus far it has remained inimical to humanism. Seekers of meaning are turned away at the door.”⁵⁸ In this chapter, I explore this limit somewhat indirectly, by laying out, to use the philosophical parlance, my philosophical anthropology. Or far better stated even, in this chapter I answer the important question: what *kind* of animal are *Homo*

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

sapiens? This is an important question because I consistently use rather charged language: “human animal,” “biological creature.” But this language is overdetermined by human centered views of what animals *are*, what their purpose is and what they are capable of. As such, I need to do the work of defining the human animal in a way that resists that narrative. However, it is important to note that I do not intend to build a comprehensive system upon my philosophical anthropology, at least not explicitly, say, in the way that Rousseau does in his *Second Discourse*, or Hobbes does in the *Leviathan*. Rather, I explore the political implications of being a human animal through a consideration of what this means for accounts of freedom, identity construction and equality in later chapters. Still, an integrated anthropology carries with it important considerations of a political sort that I explore throughout this chapter.

“Symbolic animals”

To begin, it is important to appreciate that human beings are not a “special” kind of animal. That is far too normatively laden to be useful in any way. We have a unique evolutionary history, of course, which is to say, we are *different* animals, different from elephants or dogs or lizards. That is mere tautology. All different species of animal are “special” in this sense. But the claim, “human beings are special,” is something different as it slides between the empirical claim that human beings are merely different animals and the evaluative claim that we are, so to speak, first in all Creation. The second claim is not justified. Human beings do not differ by any absolute differentiation (i.e., in kind) from other species of animal. This is why it is nonsensical to speak of “higher” and

“lower” animals. Darwin himself made this clear when he scrupulously avoided uses of this kind of language. That is mere evaluation. Evolution does not produce “highs” and “lows,” just *variation*. It is also erroneous to call certain species of animal “less evolved” – evolution is not aiming at any particular end point(s) or outcome(s), where the “farther away” a particular animal is from that end point(s) or outcome(s) the “less evolved” she is. In other words, evolution is not a consciously directed process with aims or ambitions. Different species have simply evolved in whatever ways are most adaptive to their differing environments. Each form of life has a way of being maximally adapted to a given environment, thriving and contributing to discrete elements of its ecosystem.⁵⁹

Human beings, however, do differ in degrees along certain axis of differentiation, importantly, in the degree to which we can achieve a distance, so to speak, from the immediacy of stimuli. Whereas nonhuman animals live *in* the world, in an important sense, human animals live in a symbolic representation *of* the world.⁶⁰ What makes human beings *human*, on my view, is our use of symbolic forms.⁶¹ Ernst Cassirer argues that there “is an unmistakable difference between organic reactions and human responses. In the first case, a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the

⁵⁹This is the fallacy in everyday discussions of the food chain. Food chains merely measure the passage of energy between producers, who can produce their own food (plants, e.g.), and consumers, neither of which are understood as “better” or “worse.” (Chains, moreover, don’t have a top or a bottom; they are non-hierarchical, so to speak.) It is interesting to note that a recent study measuring trophic levels put *Homo sapiens* on the same level as some of the nonhuman animals we regularly exploit for food – pigs, for instance – nowhere near the “top” apex predators.

⁶⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

⁶¹ Note that this difference doesn’t make human beings “special” any more than a humpback whale’s use of a combination of the sun’s position, Earth’s magnetism, and stars to travel thousands of miles deep underwater in an astonishingly straight line despite weather and ocean currents makes them “special.” While it is key to perform a certain act of demotion for human beings it should be in the service of having a sufficient sense of wonder and appreciation for the range of living creates we cohabit the earth with.

second case the answer is delayed,”⁶² a delay not due merely to slower processing, but to *mediation*. Human responses to external stimuli are mediated through what Cassirer calls a “symbolic universe.” We experience events in the world around us as *charged* with significance and meaning – as desirable or not, as threatening, as exciting. And from this comes a range of interpretive possibilities through the range of meanings an experience or sign can have for us.

In other words, human beings construct meaning and, ultimately, “experience” out of the activity of navigating and negotiating the world, which involves interpretation and reinterpretation. We perceive and construct experience through assigning meaning to the perception. All experience takes on significance and history. Symbols are our way of encoding “sense data.” We might say that all perceptions of things are invested with meaning, even the most elementary. Instead of dealing with the things themselves, Cassirer continues, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself.⁶³ Human beings therefore are *symbolic animals*. Language, myth, art, history, science and religion are dimensions of this universe. Who we are is disclosed through these cultural forms.

All human behavior is ultimately negotiated through this field of meaning. This field provides our reasons for action, reasons that we are able to represent to each other and to ourselves, to trade back and forth. Perception, as Merleau-Ponty argued, has an *affective* dimension then, one that “contributes to the sorts of actions the perceiver sees the world as requiring.”⁶⁴ Nonhuman animals, by contrast, perceive their world by

⁶² Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 25.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, Sebastian Luft and Soren Overgaard (eds.) (New York, NY: Routledge Publishing, 2012), p. 108.

instinct or direct sensory perception, according to Cassirer. As with all other species, human beings have a “receptor” and “effector” system, which consists of specialized organs. In human beings, however, we find a third system, the *symbolic system*. Some nonhuman animals seem to use rudimentary symbolic communication. Allen and Beatrice Gardner, for instance, conducted an experiment where Washoe, a female chimpanzee, learned 130 signs of the American Sign Language. In one experiment, she was shown a picture of a duck and asked “what’s that?” She combined the symbols of WATER and BIRD to create WATER BIRD. She had not yet learned the word DUCK. Washoe was thinking through the relations between signs to conceive of something new, rather than merely reacting. But Cassirer means something specific by “symbolic.” A sign causes us to react in the face of the object, whereas a symbol causes us to *think about* the object, a move that allows us to isolate relations, or to consider an object in its abstract meaning. In other words, symbols are potentially *generally*-oriented. A piece of cloth can represent a nation and its values, for example, whereas a sign is like a picture of a star. A dolphin will go and tap the picture when asked if trained to do so. But for the dolphin, we might assume, a sign of a star doesn’t become a symbol that means, say, UNIVERSE or HOPE or FAMOUS ACTOR. It is a one-to-one relationship – the picture of the star is the picture of the star. For Washoe, I suppose, the new sign DUCK cannot be reimagined as, say, a symbol of GULLIBILITY. Symbols are open to more complex and, therefore, sloppy imaginings and associated meanings. This point is important, but silly at the same time. Of course, for the dolphin, a sign of the star doesn’t symbolize something like FAMOUS ACTOR. But that’s not really saying anything at all. We are talking about dolphins not human beings. Perhaps when a dolphin looks up in the night sky a star does symbolize

something. But we know that it does for human beings. And we know that to the extent to which human beings can supply interpretations of everything around them and, most importantly for politics *impose* these interpretations on the world; this ability is unparalleled within the broader animal community.

The symbolic universe opens up a new way, Cassirer argues, “the way to civilizations,”⁶⁵ to new forms of human organization. This is what Hannah Arendt calls freedom, rooted in *natality*. Freedom is the capacity for new beginnings, to do the unexpected, and to introduce novelty in the world. She writes,

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.⁶⁶

Or as Merleau-Ponty thought, the human order, through a movement toward language, is characterized by its ability to disengage itself from a concrete situation. Language is an expression of the acquired system of meaning corresponding to a person’s emotional experience of the world. But in *speaking* language, there is potential for rich ambiguity.⁶⁷ Because of our use of symbols, human beings are not bounded to the apprehension of the concrete, or of the immediate.

⁶⁵ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) pp. 177-178.

⁶⁷ Luke Garrott, *Authenticity and Ideology*, unpublished dissertation, University of Florida, 2001.

Mental representation is the mental imagery of things that are not currently seen or sensed by the sense organs.⁶⁸ Mental representations enable human beings to representing what they have never been experienced as well as things that do not exist. These may have either never happened or may be impossible, yet our brain and mental imagery “allows us,” to speak metaphorically, to imagine them. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point – human beings perceive the world as offering us possibilities for action. But this can manifest in various ways, including ways that go beyond the actual. “Human beings can perceive more opportunities for action than just those that are relevant to what they are actually doing, or to environments that are currently perceived. Our capacity to go beyond the actual allows me to act with respect to this or that *possible* environment.”⁶⁹ As Arendt argues, this is a process of constructing a distinctively “human world.” Human beings, she thought, have shaped the spaces we inhabit, making those spaces *thoroughly human* through our work, leaving behind enduring artifacts in a natural world that is, strictly speaking, utterly indifferent to human needs or interests. Without being talked about by human beings and without housing them, she writes, “the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object.”⁷⁰ Human beings can then impose their interpretations on the external world and mold a “human world” in and through interpretations of the physical spaces that we inhabit and negotiate. The future for “symbolic animals” is not only an “image” therefore it becomes an “ideal.”

⁶⁸ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, pp. 25-27.

⁶⁹ Romdenh-Romluc, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” p. 107.

⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 105.

Reaching far beyond our biological and practical needs, beyond the limits of the empirical life and finite experience, human beings can imagine a “new heaven and a new earth” (Cassirer, 1944: 54-55).⁷¹ Unlike other animals, this is to say, human beings do not live in an “eternal present,”⁷² but in a world of indeterminacy, and, importantly, in a *political world* where something new can be imagined. Loren Eiseley writes, poetically, that human beings have become “something the world had never seen before – a dream animal – living at least partially within a secret universe of [our] own creation and sharing that secret universe in [our] head with other, similar heads. Symbolic communication had begun. Man [has] escaped out of the eternal present of the animal world into a knowledge of past and future.”⁷³⁷⁴ This escape from the cyclical nature of the natural world allows for a radical opening of possibility. “Abstraction invents the possibility of a mental future...it can travel into the realm of the hypothetical.”⁷⁵ This is the possibility for generality, or for what Rousseau, in his *Social Contract*, thought was genuine politics. Human imagination, Arendt argues, lets us remodel experience, which enables us to project beyond cognition and aesthetic judgment, beyond the *ordinary*, and expand the realm of freedom into the “ideal.”

⁷¹ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, pp. 54-55.

⁷² Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1957).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁴ Eiseley overstates one point here, a significant one. Each person’s experience is not a private sphere (“a secret universe in [our] head”), where you don’t know what is going on in my head, and I don’t know what is going on in your head. In fact, what the “mental” is, so to speak, is made up of largely shared stuff (associations, valuations, evolutionary background). Perhaps there is a little bit of private material, but that primarily centers on the concepts we have and the individual *network* that links it altogether. This network is the computational center called the brain with a unique history of a complex interaction between our genes and the environment, including in utero. But, importantly, that individual network, because it is evolved (the brain of a member of the species *Homo sapiens*), isn’t radically individual either in the way many assume. And it is because of all of these shared meanings and associations that others can often “read us” even without the specific details.

⁷⁵ Lewis et al., *General Theory of Love*, p. 30.

That is why it would be correct to say that we learn to read our world and inscribe and constitute our relationship to it. And more, we can also see that this relationship is one in which we play the active role of making meaning while encountering a world of meanings already available to us.⁷⁶

Thoughts on an integrated philosophical anthropology

We need to disentangle a few things. To say that human beings are symbolic animals does not exhaust the challenge of understanding the genesis of those symbols or *how they are imbued with meaning*. Cultural norms, values and symbols communicate meaning. Cassirer argues that these mediate human responses to stimuli; they are the “universe” within which we couch our interpretations of the stimuli.⁷⁷ This is undoubtedly a socially and contextually situated process. But all experience is processed through biological interfaces. Our biological architecture, in other words, plays a role in shaping or guiding the process by which we produce meaning, as a stimulus becomes an experience *via* a brain (note: not a “mind” – nobody would disagree that experience is processed somehow, but the mind, it is assumed, is sufficiently detached from the body so as to save some conception of “free will” or free choice). That is a broad statement that, while true, and incredibly important, is not too revealing. Alford and Hibbing help us flesh this out when they argue that these biological interfaces can, at times, act like dispositions or orientations,⁷⁸ which suggests that cultural norms, values and symbols

⁷⁶ Lewis Gordon, “Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization: Toward the Postcolonial in Africana Political Thought,” in *Postcolonialism and Political Theory*, Nalini Persram (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 133.

⁷⁷ Taylor in the “interpretivist” tradition makes a similar argument.

⁷⁸ John R. Alford and John R. Hibbing, “The Origin of Politics: An Evolutionary Theory of Political

are *themselves* imbued in some way (as gut feelings), rather than just those things that provide us the material with which we do the imbuing, so to speak. In other words, our biological architecture in a loose but important sense is a system of meaning outside the symbolic universe, but still imbues that universe and experiences that that universe helps us “make sense of” with a felt significance.

One of the most consistent findings in the behavioral sciences is that liberals and conservatives have different personalities. Liberals tend to score higher on one of the five major dimensions in the Big Five personality trait tests – openness or the desire to explore, to try new things, to meet new people. Conservatives tend to score higher on conscientiousness or the desire for order, structure, and stability.⁷⁹ Even as we resist these predispositions, even as we critically take them up in creative ways, they nonetheless charge experience with significance. This significance, it seems, doesn’t become “meaning” outside a social order through which it becomes intelligible; but it is felt all the same. Conservatives who score low on openness may target contemporary marginal cultures and ways of life such as the queer community today out of fear, but, on an island all by themselves, the felt significance attached to their outside world would be the same: dark and scary. These predispositions, moreover, can also take the form of human universals. When any human being, anywhere, at any time, receives a certain input, say a glare from a stranger, that sensory experience flashes to the limbic brain, which sifts that event for its significance, based on a collaboration of its genetically specific wiring scheme and past experience of similar situations, while the neocortical brain integrates it

Behavior,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2:4 (2004).

⁷⁹ John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith and John R. Alford, *Predisposed*.

with its own symbolic functions.⁸⁰ Even though we aren't in the context of Papua New Guineans or 5th century monks or Egyptian kings we can understand these interpretations, the imbued significance that a glare from a stranger evokes – even if we resist it. While individuals are actively involved in giving the world meaning, our neuropsychology plays an important role in setting the conditions for the process by which we produce meaning. Still, this process is fundamentally interpretivist, but modified in a crucial way. As a “realist interpretivist” perhaps, the question is: how are experiences imbued with significance, and how can we account for the more intransigent ones? Certain predispositions, the evidence suggests, are rather sticky. Experiencing a sense of disgust when watching a gay couple hold hands when they walk down the street doesn't “prove” that homosexuality is, in some sense, naturally repulsive; clearly, the content of that repulsion is a political construction. However, the concept of “disgust” is most certainly not, and as it is innate, it produces feelings that don't easily respond to reasons.

This move points to an important intersection between the humanities and science that I want to explore, one that helps us resist reductionism, and from both directions – we are neither just “human” as the humanist's think, nor just “animal” as those in the “hard sciences” believe; we are, rather, human animals. When considering consciousness, Thomas Nagel explores the question: “What is it like to be a bat?,” concluding “that conscious experience is a subjective experience, and thus permanently recalcitrant to objective scientific understanding.”⁸¹ We can understand the physical processes that underlie bat consciousness but we cannot know what it is *really* like “to be” a bat. There

⁸⁰ Lewis et al., *General Theory of Love*, pp. 53-56.

⁸¹ Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83:4 (1974), p. 3.

is an explanatory gap between the “physicalist” account of bat consciousness, one that seeks to understand the material processes, and the lived experience of bat consciousness. The concept of homology, or the relationship between biological structures and DNA derived from a common ancestor, suggests that we actually can know quite a bit about what it is like to be a bat. Being a bat is another way of being a mammal, and we know a lot about what it is like to be mammals, because *Homo sapiens* are also mammals. The parts of our brains that govern emotion, planning, memory, self-awareness, environment modeling and empathy (all components of consciousness) were inherited from pre-human ancestors, and evidence from ethology and neurochemistry shows that those physical structures function in other animals just as they do in us. However, while “physicalist” accounts like this tell us about the material processes that, while they are necessary accompaniments when explaining bat consciousness only gesture toward the question: what is the phenomenology of the experience? Phenomenology examines the constitution of meaning from conscious reality. When Nagel wonders, “What is it like to be a bat?” he is moving toward a phenomenological explanation, and biology isn’t sufficient for this end. And as human beings are, fundamentally, meaning-making or symbolic animals, a full accounting of the human animal must incorporate phenomenology. This method shows the human sciences to be fundamentally more interpretive than exact.⁸²

In other words, the fallacy in the “physicalist” (or reductionist) account is that it elides the difference between a teleological and a subjective understanding of the behavior (in this case, consciousness) in question. In “Trouble in Mind,” Jonathan Miller writes,

⁸² Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*.

Consciousness may be implemented by neurobiological processes – how else? – but the language of neurobiology does not and cannot convey what it’s like to be conscious. If, as philosopher Thomas Nagel says, there is something it’s like to be a bat, there is something even more interesting it’s like to be one of us...Although consciousness exists by virtue of some physical property of the brain, just as bioluminescence exists by virtue of some chemical property of certain specialized cells, it is *not*, as bioluminescence is, an observable property of living matter.⁸³

Consider altruism. A teleological explanation of altruism turns on a few questions. How and for what end did altruism evolve? And what are the physical and neurochemical mechanisms that underlie altruism? These are important questions, but they fail to explain the lived experience of altruism. What does it mean *to* the human being who acts altruistically? It is for this reason that reductionism with regard to human beings fails (and bat consciousness, as Nagel argues). The movement of subatomic particles does some explanatory work when it comes to human response, but *only some*. The non-cognitive domain, Linda Zerilli writes, “raise[s] a series of philosophical and political problems about human beings as judging subjects that cannot be settled by reference to better or worse accounts of the human brain.”⁸⁴

Biologists use the language of proximate and ultimate causation to get at the distinction I am making here. A proximate cause of maternal bonding, for example, is love. This is the mechanism that “pushes behavior buttons in real time,” from the subject’s point of view. That is the phenomenological move. Whereas the ultimate cause of maternal bonding is adaptive fitness (maternal hormones and neurochemical circuits are the underlying physical processes). It is the adaptive rationale that led the proximate

⁸³ Jonathan Miller, “Trouble in Mind,” *Scientific American*, 267: 3 (1992).

⁸⁴ Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Embodied Knowing, Judgment, and the Limits of Neurobiology,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 11: 2 (2013), p. 514.

cause to evolve.⁸⁵ Both proximate and ultimate causation do important explanatory work, but ultimate causation only gets us so far. However, it would be substantially incomplete to begin and end at questions of “lived experience” alone. As a species of animal, our psychology and physical and behavioral phenotypes have been “touched” by our evolutionary and genetic history. My argument, of course, is not controversial, but its importance to a meaningful philosophical anthropology is understated. Those in the “hard sciences” (neurobiology, say) recognize that we have to distinguish between ultimate causation and how the behavior in question is actually instantiated. For instance, as I described above, evolutionary biologists understand more and more everyday about the evolutionary precursors to altruism. They believe it is an outgrowth from neuromechanisms “designed” to better propagate an organism’s genes, ultimately rooted in self-interest. But they don’t believe that altruism, therefore, is self-interested (i.e., that there is no genuine altruism). Because proximally, in the here-and-now, that is not how it is instantiated – instantiation points toward meaning-making, and the interrelationship between the two processes points toward a strong conception of human beings as symbolic animals.

Biological reductionists will not be satisfied with my argument at this point. They will concede that human behavior isn’t caused by genetic encoding in the commonly understood sense of “causation.” We respond in some sort of conscious sense to our environment. But *how we respond* to our environment is mediated by biological processes. Therefore, human beings are, ultimately, reducible to our biology, strictly speaking. This is true but overdrawn by its level of analysis. Human beings are animals,

⁸⁵ Pinker, *Blank Slate*.

but *the kind of animal* that *phenomenally* experiences, both in terms of simple raw experience, of course, but also in terms of experience saturated with content and significance. Data, for example, is interpreted through a background of significance, a background that charges the data with a certain kind of experience. Experience, for Merleau-Ponty, can't be anything but meaning laden within a background of assumptions, memories, associations, and, most importantly, *the body* that constitutes the intuitive coherence that things have for us. And, to push this further, we can access these "horizons of significance" consciously. Charles Taylor puts it this way. Human beings are "self-interpreting animals," certainly subject to delusion, but we enjoy privileged access to the meaning of our own activity because as purposive beings it can have a "point" for us. In short, writes Taylor of philosophical anthropology: "we humans can, and do judge actions by asking whether they are creating the person we want to be."⁸⁶ Human beings are "reflexive animals that voice the feelings, emotions, and aspirations which motivate us."⁸⁷

Human beings then, have two necessarily interrelated experiences of the world: a phenomenological experience and a more strictly biological experience. But we can't decouple the phenomenological level of analysis from the more, strictly understood, biological level of analysis. They are both thoroughly implicated in and in relation with the other. William Connolly writes of this "reciprocal movement":

Because cultural concepts and assumptions inevitably enter into each such account, it is perhaps wise to pursue a dynamic movement back and forth between phenomenological explorations of human experience, the findings of neuroscience, and evolutionary accounts

⁸⁶ Luke Garrott, 2001, *Authenticity and Ideology*, unpublished dissertation, University of Florida, p. 213.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

of how the most complex capacities arose. *None of these explorations sets a clean base from which the others proceed; each invites exchanges with the others when a new turn is taken in.*⁸⁸

As Merleau-Ponty thought, through engagement with science there is hope of a mutual clarification. Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences are beginning to integrate, but there is tension due to the presumed distinction between their respective levels of analysis. On the scientific side, phenomenology is sometimes misunderstood to be a form of introspective psychology, and sometimes considered simply irrelevant since the task of the cognitive sciences is often thought to be to explain the underlying, subpersonal (and therefore unconscious) mechanisms of cognition. To the phenomenologist, the cognitive sciences are in search of mere brain mechanisms or a third-person computational model, which is reductionistic, viewing human cognition as the result of information-processing in the brain.⁸⁹ To the phenomenologist, meaning and feeling “...are elusive vapors that mock objectivity’s earnest attempt to assign them to *this* gene or *that* collection of cells.”⁹⁰ To the biological reductionist, meaning and feeling are mere biological processes yet to be “mapped.” I come at this debate from a different angle. The phenomenological level affects the strictly biological level. Leading what we believe to be a meaningless life can lead to physical deterioration. Depression can cause changes in your body. But our biology affects our phenomenological experience as well. People with Asperger syndrome, for instance, have less ability to ascertain others’ feelings, and must work extra hard and differently to read affective cues and even then don’t “get them” in an internal way. Psychopaths have a core emotional deficit, lacking conscience, remorse and guilt.

⁸⁸ William E. Connolly, “Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 67: 2 (2014), p. 442, *emphasis mine*.

⁸⁹ Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology* (London, UK: Palgrave Publishers, 2012).

⁹⁰ Lewis et al., *General Theory of Love*, p. 11.

They don't *feel* the same range and intensity of feelings like others do. Studies suggest that the amygdala, the seat of emotion, is less activated in psychopaths when they contemplate moral dilemmas. "Right" and "wrong" might make sense at a cognitive level, but it does not *mean* anything – it takes on no felt significance. It is clear that processes of socialization literally change the brain. Corporal punishment during early childhood can change the brain's white matter. This, in turn, affects the person's experience of socialization processes. Both levels of human experience therefore are *saturated* with the other, and the study of each "provides presumptive evidence that the other must *somehow* take into account."⁹¹ Richard Dawkins writes,

What about things like jealousy and joy, happiness and love? Are these not also real? Yes, they are real. But they depend for their existence on brains: human brains, certainly, and probably the brains of other...species, such as chimpanzees, dogs and whales, too. Rocks don't feel joy or jealousy, and mountains don't love. These emotions are intensely real to those who experience them, but they didn't exist before brains did.⁹²

The common problem of "mind" and "brain" is relevant here. It is a paradox: while the "mind" is inherently the brain (what else could it be, strictly speaking?), the "mind" is not reducible to the brain. The underlying physical medium realizes mental states, but the physical medium itself (networks of neuropathways) is *experienced* meaningfully, which, in turn, reacts back on the physical medium through changes in neural pathways and synapses. In other words, due to changes in behavior, the social and natural environment, and bodily injury, the brain changes (this is known as, "neuroplasticity"), which affects the way that, for instance, meaning is made, or what

⁹¹ Connolly, "Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom," p. 442

⁹² Richard Dawkins, *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2011), p. 19.

thoughts can be thought. Maternal bonding within the first six months of an infant's life significantly affects the infant's brain, which in turn affects the way she reacts to, for instance, social interaction later in life (the meaning she assigns to certain groups she encounters, and so on).

The important questions given my philosophical anthropology, for both the humanist and the scientist, surround the entanglement: the processes of *how* the functions of the neuronal processes by which “meanings” come to be perceived are implemented, and the always culture-systemic and narratively instituted field in which meanings *mean* (Wynter, 1994).⁹³ *What* and *how* do meanings evoke? are the animating questions. The “hard” interpretivists therefore are both right and wrong. All action is contextually embedded and therefore, at one level, it is impossible to have a coherent explanation that binds together actions across contexts. However, biology offers a foundation through which we can understand *how* context matters. But to even begin to describe the experience of the human animal, we have to conceive of this foundation as the foundation of a thoroughly encumbered biological creature.

Human beings therefore exist within a rich background of symbols within which stimulus becomes experience and meaning is made; however, this is mediated by a biological architecture that ultimately reacts back upon the entire process.

The human animal therefore is a *situated animal*.

Having answered the important question “What kind of animal are human beings?,” in the following three chapters, I will explore what science does, can reveal,

⁹³ Sylvia Wynter, “but what does ‘wonder’ do? meanings, cannons, too?: On Literary Texts, Cultural Contexts, and What It’s Like to Be One/Not One of Us” *Stanford Humanities Review*, 4:1 (1994).

and offers the political theorist by integrating the human biological sciences into considerations of key humanistic commitments: human freedom, non-essentialism and equality. In the following chapter, I respond to the fear of determinism by showing how political theorists can integrate the biological sciences into a meaningful theory of human freedom.

CHAPTER 3

FREEDOM AND THE BODY REVISITED: TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY MARXIST FEMINISM

Man is directly a *natural being*. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand furnished with *natural powers of life* – he is an *active* natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities – as *impulses*. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his impulses exist outside him, as objects independent of him.

-- Karl Marx

Women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men.

-- Elizabeth Grosz

In spite of a long tradition in political theory that addresses how bodily attributes, including vulnerabilities, such as disease, aging, and death, enable or constrain human potential, many Marxist resist engaging with the domain of biology thinking its domain necessitates collapsing into determinism. In this chapter, I show this position to be mistaken. As a “site of ambiguity,” as Simone de Beauvoir usefully puts it in *The Second Sex*, the body is a necessary condition, of sorts, as it is the very condition of human possibility. But as with any material condition, its effect is undetermined, dependent on the formative activity of human agents.⁹⁴ As a Marxist feminist, I want to situate this perspective in a Marxist materialist framework to argue that the body, about which we gain additional knowledge through engaging the domain of biology, is a core feature of

⁹⁴ Samantha Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, H.E. Grasswick (ed.) (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2011), p. 70; Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 1.

the material conditions that can enable or constrain individual and collective freedom.

Dialectical materialism and biology

Marx's materialism involves a central tension between "naïve idealism," which holds that the world does not exist independently of human beings' ideas about it, or on the softer version, the world beyond our senses is unknowable, and "crude" or "one-sided materialism," which is the position that human beings are "of nature," passively subject to and determined by its forces, laws, and mechanisms. These "materialists" therefore are determinists. "Naïve idealists" though, as social constructionists, have to confront the problem of determinism too, just indirectly, as they emphasize the depth of socialization and social pressures in constraining what we *think* we can and cannot do. Here we see "naïve idealism" and "crude materialism" merge – the external world is the determinant. Marx, by contrast, saw these opposing positions as operating in a *dialectical* relationship. The "crude materialist" supposes that only one outcome could occur from a given condition, whereas the "naïve idealist" supposes that any outcome is possible; considered dialectically, however, this dichotomy is false. Human beings are determined by "nature" as, for example, we are given a world external to ourselves that forces us to labor in a certain way, and to toil through it because of our given biological necessities. The behaviors in which we must engage to meet our needs, moreover, are first shaped by our physical makeup – its demands, possibilities, and limitations. However, the external world is dependent on the formative activity of human labor as we transform nature to meet our needs and to align with our values or ideas; this is the inseparable link between purposeful human activity and the social form of human existence. Human beings can

only live and satisfy their basic needs through labor. Nature provides the materials, but it is labor that fashions them into values. In one of his *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote of his materialist doctrine: “men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and...therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing.” At any given stage in human development, the levels of production, and the social relations based on that level of production, shape our limits and possibilities and the options available to us. But it is men, Marx adds, “who change circumstances.”⁹⁵ Human beings, he argues in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*,

make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.⁹⁶

We do not choose the materials with which we work. They are given. The same is also true of our biology. We *work* with what we are given, however, and in so doing, we, to a degree, transform it. For Marx, therefore, reality is how matter is generated, organized, concentrated, and distributed. This includes the human brain, which is itself a result of the organization of matter in a particular way. While the brain is a structure that is a limiting condition – we are not capable of thinking and doing everything. The brain is also malleable as it changes (networks of cells that make up the constituent parts of the brain) in response to outside stimuli.

The material world, for Marx, is both limiting and the indispensable condition of possibility. Simply put, in shaping us, the material world is inescapable, but the *shaping* is also crucially underdetermined as it can proceed in multiple, different, decisive

⁹⁵ Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 144.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

directions. We are shaped in more and less free ways. For the materialist, freedom is always enacted within a given field of possibility. The goal is the reorganization of material conditions in enabling directions. Liberation for the materialist therefore “is a historical and not a mental act and it is brought about by historical conditions.”⁹⁷ We always occupy an organized social, economic, and political world of relations with others. We are never “unencumbered” by the external world, or, importantly, from the material condition that is our body. But our encumbrances can be either liberatory or oppressive, or some point in-between. In other words, freedom for the Marxist materialist is fundamentally “freedom *to*,” freedom “of action that is above all connected to an active self, an embodied being, a being who acts in a world of others and objects.”⁹⁸ In his devastating critique of social contract Liberalism, Rousseau makes this point in his effort to reconcile the fact of socialization with liberty. To do so he advances a form of standing (an identity, if you will) that is neither economic nor social but is attached to citizenship itself, through which we become both private subjects *and* citizens, both governed *and* self-governed. For Rousseau, because of the distortion of human nature and the resultant inauthenticity he explores in his *Second Discourse*, self-determination *within/over* the constraints imposed by our material conditions is moral liberty.⁹⁹ Various inequalities, he argues, while morally indefensible, are the inevitable result of developed human civilization, inseparable from human culture. The political project therefore is to alleviate its burden through a process of constant willing in an effort to transform our various

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom,” in *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Diane Coole, and Samantha Frost (eds.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 147.

⁹⁹ Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (Bronx, NY: Forham University Press, 2014).

encumbrances so that they are either democratic or legitimate in democratic terms.

For those who tie freedom to autonomy or what Isaiah Berlin called “negative liberty” materialism will seem to further shrink that which human beings can freely determine, or perhaps even respond to. Any effort to “close the system,” in other words, to encroach on the “open system” of choice and decision in conjunction with some “soft constraint,” might be seen as a form of determinism, where every decision and action is the inevitable and necessary consequence of antecedent states of affairs, or at least pessimism about what human beings are capable of achieving politically (we should not concern ourselves with grand expectations given “harsh realities,” says the pessimist).¹⁰⁰ This is particularly true, at a surface level at least, with respect to our biological material conditions. “Closing the system” might necessitate collapsing into a determinism that would function in conservative ways as biology seems irremediable, everlasting – “biology is destiny,” the saying goes – whereas the effects of the “environment” could be but a generation-away from disappearing. If individual differences constructed as important, politically or socially, have a biological basis, in other words, they may not be readily amenable to societally constructed fixes.¹⁰¹ Another way of putting this concern is this: biology suggests constraints that cannot be changed, by contrast to, say, a given economic structure, which is amenable to human activity. This critique while commonplace is mistaken, both theoretically and, as I described above, empirically.

There are a variety of views which seek to shift more and more into that over which we have the power to change, some optimistic with respect to how easy it is in fact to

¹⁰⁰ Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco, “Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics” *World Politics* 29:4 (1977), pp. 489-522.

¹⁰¹ John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013).

transform the material world, while others suggest that one never really can. (This parallels the “naïve idealist”/“crude materialist” dichotomy.) Marx is neither an optimist nor a pessimist; rather, he was comfortable with the tensions. Autonomy, for Marx, does not mean unburdened; it means having a say over those burdens – *how* biology matters, not *that* it matters. Autonomy, of course, is a situated concept, which must be theorized from within material conditions. The question is again: *how* do those conditions matter? And there are conditions in which we are far better situated, in which we more coherently live as human beings. I want to restate that slightly: there are institutional arrangements in which, because of the kind of animals we are, we are more or less likely to flourish. Structures of power operate on and through a biological context. Adaptation is precisely an account of the selection of those characteristics that better secured human forms of social relations given the constraints faced by early human beings. A more rigorous materialism merely extends this analysis given current science. Coming to meaningful terms – in the sense that these both limit and open possibilities for human development – with the role that the relations of production play in a given society requires contextualization, of which biological variation within that context is an important element. This move invites the development of a more rigorous Marxist materialism that, in grappling with concrete material dimensions of people’s lives, would include questions such as the following:

- What does biology suggest about modes of production most or least likely to contribute to human happiness and collective flourishing?
- How can we theorize the human body as a material condition?

There is also an empirical error in the critique of engaging the domain of biology that holds that “nature” means fixed and unchanging, one Marx himself made, that I want to revisit briefly. While Marx celebrated Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* for discovering the gradual process of natural transformation, considering it a natural history base for his own “historical materialism,” he was suspicious of Darwinian findings when applied to human beings (or to the “social field”) on the grounds that the biological sciences are mired in social constructionism. Recall that Marx wrote of Darwin,

It is remarkable how among beasts and plants Darwin recognises his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, ‘inventions’ and Malthusian ‘struggle for existence.’ It is Hobbes’ war of every man against every man...¹⁰²

Marx’s “approach to humanity” seems to “suspend the laws of evolution” at the dawn of human history, in effect, separating our theories of *natural* history from our theories of *human* history.¹⁰³ While eulogizing Marx, Engels said just that. “Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature,” he said, “so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.”¹⁰⁴ But this kind of flight from the domain of biology, as I stated earlier, “should be rethought both because it is wrong and because those who deny the existence of any behaviorally relevant biological differences are fast becoming this era’s equivalent of the flat earth society.”¹⁰⁵ To consider the domain of biology in good faith means rethinking certain deeply held assumptions *about* that domain. It is only when we think of biology as a crude determinist that questions

¹⁰² Friedrich Engels, “Engels and Darwin – Letter to Lavrov,” *Labour Monthly*, Dona Torr (ed.), (1936), pp. 437-442. Accessed 12/01/2014: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_11_12.htm

¹⁰³ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Engels, “Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx.” Accessed 12/01/2014: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>

¹⁰⁵ John R. Hibbing, “Ten Misconceptions Concerning Biology and Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (2013), pp. 475-486.

surrounding “biologism” arise. Marx’s central concern seems to have been that by giving Darwin a social and political application we would likely close off political possibilities in the sense described above (“closing the system”). This concern was warranted because Marx was reading a nascent Darwinianism, the popular view of which suggested that if we apply Darwin’s “natural laws” to human society the result might support the claim that inequality (intellect and moral capacity, for instance) is “written in our genes,” and overtime the “less fit” will be “out competed.” And we don’t really have a choice in the matter. Contemporary biology, however, tells us something different entirely.

“Differences in training and a lack of proper understanding of genetic methods and assumptions have resulted in several specious criticisms, often framed in debates juxtaposing nature and nurture.”¹⁰⁶ Such a simplistic view differs markedly from the actual scientific understanding of the role of biology in attitudes and behaviors and phenotype. “Nature versus nurture” debates assume that variation in a given trait is primarily due either to genetic variability or to exposure to environmental experiences while the current scientific view is that virtually all traits show gene-environment interaction (GXE). Biology is best understood as active in its own right, a move that pushes us “to relinquish the unidirectional model of causation in which *either* culture *or* biology is determinative and instead to adopt a model in which causation is conceived as complex, recursive, and multi-linear.”¹⁰⁷ There is interesting evidence to suggest, for instance, that physiological predispositions *mediate* how an event is interpreted.

Conservatives tend to have a more visceral and prolonged reaction to things viewed as

¹⁰⁶ Peter K. Hatemi and Rose McDermott, “The Genetics of Politics: Discovery, Challenges, and Progress,” *Trends in Genetics* 28:10 (2012), p. 527.

¹⁰⁷ Frost, *Feminist Epistemology*, p. 71.

impure such as newborn babies with physical deformities or rabid dogs whereas liberals more viscerally respond to pleasant images such as puppies. These biological processes interact with the environment by charging certain stimuli making some more salient than others, which is predictive of an individual's political ideology (on a Left/Right scale). Political ideology therefore in some sense is bottom up.¹⁰⁸ This suggests an *interactive* model between evolution/genes and environment and offers an approach for the ways in which Marxism could be a more rigorous science in its own terms, informed by and accounting for the *contingency* that was a core feature of Marx's materialism.

Genes provide instructions for the production of proteins, which are built and identified by a specific combination of amino acids (which in turn are constructed from complex organic molecules). As such, each protein has a chemical sequence that then interacts with other chemicals in the body, sometimes reacting directly with these other chemicals but often serving as enzymes that facilitate but are not themselves altered by chemical reactions.¹⁰⁹

As with the human condition more generally, where there is real human variation given the mode of production that prevails, particular historical and social conditions mean that biological predispositions manifest themselves in distinctive ways. Biology *influences* – that is the central claim. The overall body of evidence suggests that these factors shape, sometimes significantly, certain attitudes and behaviors.¹¹⁰ Agnosticism about the *process* therefore is warranted. But about the question itself, “Does biology matter?”, agnosticism is backward thinking. Engaging the domain of biology need not

¹⁰⁸ Michael D. Dodd, Amanda Balzer, Carly M. Jacobs, Michael W. Gruszczynski, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Hibbing, “The Political Left rolls with the Good, and the Political Right Confronts the Bad,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 367:1589 (2012).

¹⁰⁹ John R. Alford, Carolyn L. Funk, and John R. Hibbing, “Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?” *American Political Science Review*, 99:2 (2005), p. 154.

¹¹⁰ John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013); John R. Hibbing, “Ten Misconceptions Concerning Biology and Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (2013).

amount to political conservatism in which we lose what social constructionism, as used by the political left, ultimately sought to claim – that we can arrange political life in ways that can better honor the abilities, aspirations, and moral requirements of larger numbers of human beings. Biology does not constrain possibility in a strong sense. There is not a biological explanation *of* behavior. Rather, the process is fundamentally dialectical. As Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon write in *A General Theory of Love*,

Everything a person is and everything he knows resides in the tangled thicket of his intertwined neurons. These fateful, tiny bridges number in the quadrillions, but they spring from just two sources: DNA and daily life. The genetic code calls some synapses into being, while experience engenders and modifies others. The brain thus takes shape as a compromise between unyielding limits and nearly universal freedom. It is like a snowflake or a sonnet, whose innumerable members remain bound to an eternal integer. The polarity of water molecules constrains a snowflake to a six-sided polyhedron, and a sonnet comprises fourteen lines. The universe does not contain a seven-sided snowflake or a sonnet with fine quatrains. But within the expanse of these restrictions lie endless permutations of beauty. In the brain, a genetic blueprint directs the raising of rough neural scaffolds that serve as the cores of various subsystems. DNA thus reigns in the riotous proliferation of designs that a hundred billion cells could freely generate...But, as in a topiary, variety flourishes within the walls. Early experience trims a scaffold's semi-adjustable outline into a neural template: an assemblage of neurons and connections fine-tuned for function in a particular environment.¹¹¹

“Is” and “ought”...again

Let me be clear about what science cannot tell us in an important but brief aside. There are many dimensions to this, but for my purposes in this chapter, simply put, science cannot show us what we *ought* to do (or even necessarily what we *will* do). This could be

¹¹¹ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York, NY: Random House, 2000), pp. 148-149.

considered one of the animating insights in philosophical ethics in the twentieth century: there seems to be a conceptual difference between descriptive and prescriptive statements, or an inferential gap between “is” and “ought.” But I mean this in a limited sense. What is clear is that descriptive statements and prescriptive statements are not easily disentangled, but they can and should be in a somewhat limited but crucial sense, as I will show, when applied to political phenomena. Suppose I say, “You have a healthy baby.” I am making some kind of evaluation, one that can’t be made for just any baby. To be free of this or that disease, or to have weight within a certain range are simple descriptions, but health is a standard, a normative ideal at which we aim and seek to achieve. When we say someone is depressed, we seem to be saying that we can expect certain kinds of behaviors, but most of us also understand that we are saying they are in a condition that we should want to avoid. Facts then, may nudge evaluations in one direction or another. And of course our evaluations nudge our conceptions of the facts. We have standards of evidence that are normative – we should believe something when there is empirical evidence for it, and that affects the way we describe the world. On this point I agree with Hilary Putnam’s argument that the theory of knowledge supporting scientific claims of fact relies heavily on epistemic value judgments. “Facts represent an effort to understand a going-on – that is to say, circumscribing the going-on within some conceptual framework that enables us to make sense of what is taking place or what lies in front of us.”¹¹² In botany, we see the component parts of a single apple tree, by contrast to an orchard interconnected by thick roots. We do so because of an atomistic ontology, one that understands the world as composed of individuated parts.

¹¹² Aryeh Botwinick, *Michael Oakeshott’s Skepticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 65.

I concede this point, and yet, “is” and “ought” can be disentangled. When considering the insights of modern science, what we get out might be important suggestions about “what makes human beings happy or sad, what leads them to develop their capacities for knowledge, wisdom, concern for others, and a harmonious existence with their fellow creatures; *but ethical premises will not be among these discoveries.*”¹¹³ There is room for some confusion on this point, so I am going to belabor it a bit. What science cannot show us is what priority we ought to give to something like equality (or what equality means) as a moral and political ideal;¹¹⁴ or any other ideal for that matter. Evolution, in other words, “carries no moral loading. It just happens.”¹¹⁵ I recognize that that, itself, sounds like an evaluative claim – “evolution...just happens.” But that’s a mistake. Like those who challenged Aristotelian teleology, which imputed “purpose” onto the natural world, my argument is that what modern science helps us understand is that the human phenotype, for example, is utterly arbitrary, strictly speaking. Of course, in an erroneous yet politically and socially substantial sense evolution carries significant moral loading. For some, surviving means that one should have or *deserved* to survive; capitalist competition is rationalized as “natural,” or perhaps more to the point, because capitalism is now the only game in town it is the “superior game,” or consider the fallacy that because human beings are the “top predator” they are morally justified in exploiting nonhuman animals. But that is the error Singer is pointing to. Evolution as such carries no moral loading in the *prescriptive* sense. We can observe the tenacity of patterns without endorsing them. I prefer this formulation of the problem – the “is/ought problem”

¹¹³ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*, p. 12., *emphasis added*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

– by contrast to the “fact/value” distinction because it directs us toward the important prescriptive element. Of course “facts” and “values” are entangled. But “facts” do not have direct prescriptive (“ought”) content. We need further argument to move from facts about human beings and the world to normative conclusions about how we *should* behave, about how the world *should* be. Most human beings are altruistic, for example. Now suppose (as is the case) that modern science helps us understand why we have a tendency toward altruism. Does that story show us that we *should* behave altruistically? No. This is important to stress. Remember that social constructionism arose in response to claims of biological inequality. But biological inequalities (whatever it is we mean by that) are themselves not *morally* relevant. Moral and political equality does not require sameness. Indeed, the opposite is true. It is a moral, social, and political achievement when equality can co-exist with difference. In other words, equality is not a *descriptive* statement, but a moral one. “All human beings are equal” is not an empirical claim. In fact, it must not be because, as a matter of fact, all humans are *not* equal. We differ in whatever quality we are indexing for (e.g. strength, creativity). Equality, rather, is a value claim, and a prescription for *how* human beings ought to be treated. Moreover, grounding moral and political values like equality or freedom in claims about a “blank slate” opens them to the possibility of being overturned by future empirical discoveries. If the “blank slate,” moreover, indicates some sort of beginning equality, the discovery of differences between human beings takes on heavy moral loading indeed.¹¹⁶

The fact that “is” does not constitute “ought,” at least without further premises, does not imply that evaluative inquiry can go on in complete isolation from descriptive

¹¹⁶ Pinker, *Blank Slate*.

inquiry. We won't find normative claims in human biology, but what we understand about human biology is implicated in the "value question" in so far as values say something about what, ultimately, makes human beings happy or fulfilled and some of the practical difficulties in trying to realize some of our normative goals. My modest suggestion then, is this: *since descriptive and prescriptive claims are often unavoidably entangled, let's try to get the facts right.*

Theorizing the body as a material condition

How does "getting the facts right" improve our ability to get our prescriptive arguments right in the sense of being in line with our stated normative goals? I think there are several promising directions here, where engaging the domain of biology helps us understand important contemporary social and political developments. I explore two in this section. My central consideration is theorizing the body as a material condition, but I have an intuition that the effectiveness of institutional reforms is contingent on predispositions in an important way. And there are existing frameworks that help us theorize this.

In *A Darwinian Left*, Singer argues that some evolutionary psychology suggests that human beings, while capable of group living, naturally tend to be selfish and competitive. This is his basic assumption: the drive for status, power and the enhancement of the interests of oneself and one's kin is likely to obtain within any form of social organization. This psychological insight, of course, should be contextualized in one important sense. What *confers* status and power, for example, will look different in different contexts, but competitiveness as such is not constructed; it does not result from

how relations of production are organized. This is part of Singer's response to those who challenge him to explain why, if male aggression, which is evolutionarily "designed" this critic supposes, orients men to achievements in the external world, do we see men taking on more care giving responsibilities now that women's labor market participation rates are higher than men's.

No response is actually needed because the challenge is misplaced in the most basic sense as it confuses engagements with the domain of biology with biological determinism. That those most committed to a thick malleability conception of human nature, many classical Marxists, for example, or to a strong conception of individualism, many radical Liberals, for example, regularly commit this error is not a coincidence. Game theory and experimental psychology show that people will make short-term sacrifices for the good of others if structures are promoted that foster cooperation rather than competition, and that attempt to channel competition into socially desirable ends.¹¹⁷ Aristotle makes essentially this same argument in his *Politics*, and he does so as a student of both politics *and* the natural sciences of his time. Because of kin selection, human beings are capable of cooperation but engage in it quite warily. Large cities, on this view, make cooperative behavior difficult, because people living in them interact with each other only irregularly, and great disparities of wealth and power inhibit what cooperation might still be possible. Thus, what Singer calls "a Darwinian left" in pursuit of a more cooperative society should support a more egalitarian distribution of power and, perhaps most importantly, a de-urbanization of society where we might shift toward a more cooperative and community-oriented kind of society with local networks and thick civic

¹¹⁷ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*.

association.¹¹⁸ Marx would agree with much of Singer's theoretical framework. A defense of socialism presupposes a capacity *for* socialism on the part of human beings; if new relations and practices are thought able to have the effect in question (the establishment of a successful socialist society), in other words, human beings must be assumed capable, if only under the right circumstances, of developing the necessary qualities. These must be capacities potentially available to most, if not all, members of the human species.¹¹⁹ The difference then that Singer marks out between himself and Marx is largely definitional.

Socialism, for Singer, is crude egalitarianism, without competition. Singer challenges this as naïve because it fails to appreciate certain, what he believes to be, constants in human nature. The balance between competitive individualism and egalitarianism can be shifted, but competition is an inescapable part of human nature. Human animals are not infinitely malleable, carrying within our nature, as we do, the evolutionary baggage of our species.¹²⁰ Singer's argument that our genetic need for in-group attachments should lead us to push for non-urban, smaller, communal forms of social organization also runs against the classical Marxist perspective that the advances in productivity that come with urbanization and industrialization are prerequisites for escaping the burdens of physical labor. My purpose here is not to challenge Singer's interpretation of Marx, but to sketch out a theoretical framework for thinking about productive engagements with the domain of biology.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

¹¹⁹ Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 1983)

¹²⁰ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*, p. 53.

For some, however, biology suggests a record or reality that should be discredited. Although biology is enabling in various ways, there is a sense in which we ought to rail against its stature since it appears to place a limit on transforming toward a *preferred* reality – which would include, for some, altering one’s given biology. This critique is either a form of “naïve idealism” or it mystifies more than it reveals because its most important insight is the implicit acknowledgement that the body *is* a material condition that can enable or constrain individual and collective freedom – we simply refuse to admit it in those terms. For instance, most developed understandings of transgender politics have come out of theoretical circles committed to post-structural forms of analysis and most are subtle in their accounts of social constructivism. At the same time, those scientific developments that enable transgendered individuals to alter their bodies to better align with their gender identifications are not resisted as “invasive science” because these developments draw on advances in the domain of biology that open up possibilities of ways of understanding what it is to be a human being and sexed that are different from when these advances were simply absent.

Women who are capable of becoming pregnant face unique material constraints in the form of biological vulnerabilities due to a reproductive system that had to evolve costly adaptations to cope with the progressive development of larger and more complex brains. The human brain is greedy for energy and nutrients during fetal development, and its large size requires a large fetal head.¹²¹ Advances in reproductive health (the availability of blood transfusion, for instance) have made this process ever safer, which has drastically reduced maternal mortality rates. However, women today are still

¹²¹ Mahmoud F Fathalla, “How Evolution of the Human Brain Shaped Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health,” *Reproductive Biology Insights* 6: 1 (2013), pp. 11-18.

“burdened with a reproductive system that has evolved to serve well the survival and reproductive success for her life in hunter-gatherer society.”¹²² For example, there are many professional women who want to have children but who do not want this to interfere with their careers. They resent any suggestion that their “biological clocks” should overdetermine their options, but aging has incontrovertible detrimental effects on the ovary and uterus.¹²³ Delayed childbearing and fewer pregnancies have been shown to increase women’s susceptibility to reproductive cancers.¹²⁴ What enables these women to put off childbearing well beyond what any account of the “biological clock” would indicate is necessary? Novel therapeutic interventions developed in an effort to understand our biological dimensions well enough to make our bodies do things that align with our current values and aspirations. For some it is the ability to freeze their eggs; for others it is engaging in hormone treatment. And advances in contraception have been shown to reduce the threat of some of these cancers.¹²⁵ But there is a real dialectical tension here as many of these fertility hormones increase the chance of having twins and research suggests that older eggs and older sperm increase the likelihood of autism in children.¹²⁶

Science has also shown that persistent stress affects all parts of the body’s stress apparatus (the brain, heart, lungs, blood vessels, and muscles), which become chronically

¹²² Ibid., p. 16.

¹²³ S.M. Nelson, E.E. Telfer, R.A. Anderson, “The Aging Ovary and Uterus: New Biological Insights,” *Human Reproductive Update* 19: 1 (2013), pp. 67-83.

¹²⁴ SB Eaton, Pike MC, Short RV, Lee NC, Trussell J, Hatcher RA, Wood JW, Worthman CM, Jones NG, Konner MJ, “Women’s Reproductive Cancers in Evolutionary Context,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 69: 3 (1994), pp. 353-367.

¹²⁵ LJ Havrilesky, Moorman PG, Lowery WJ, Gierisch JM, Coeytaux RR, Urrutia RP, Dinan M, McBroom AJ, Hasselblad V, Sanders GD, Myers ER, “Oral Contraceptive Pills as Primary Prevention for Ovarian Cancer: A systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 122: 5 (2013), p. 1114.

¹²⁶ S.M. Nelson, E.E. Telfer, R.A. Anderson, “The Aging Ovary and Uterus: New Biological Insights,” *Human Reproductive Update* 19: 1 (2013), pp. 67-83.

over-activated or under-activated. Such chronic stress produces physical or psychological damage over time in the form of, for example, impaired immune functioning, and neuroendocrine change. Some stress, however, is “social stress,” as it were, which points to the demands that attach to social groups, and some social groups, such as black women, are particularly vulnerable. This structural vulnerability, in turn, makes black women vulnerable to stress reactions. In other words, black women are not only *exposed* to particularly noxious stressors such as “micro-aggressions” or everyday and subtle forms of racism and marginalization (“can I touch your hair?”; “what school did *you* attend?”), but these stressors are *salient* in specifically biological ways. Those who might be called “privileged” black women in the U.S., for example, (black women with Ivy League degrees) are particularly vulnerable to “social stress” due to the paradoxes of success.¹²⁷ Current opportunities newly open to them for self-determination combine with tenacious systemic oppression to create an impossible situation. Like all “black elites,” black women are models of “individual success” used to “prove” that systemic oppression no longer exists; all the while it is suspected that their success is *really* due to “hand-outs” in the form of affirmative action policies. Black women are at the same time hyper-visible, trotted out as “evidence” of “post racialism” and “post sexism,” while having to defend the claim that they are producing “real knowledge,” that their lived experience is a valid interpretive framework, and that they legitimately “belong.” Their success, moreover, is believed to carry a strong mandate both to directly aid the wider black community and carry the banner of black promise. Black women experience this

¹²⁷ Nina Johnson, “Black Privilege?: Status, Stigma and Meaning Making at the Intersections,” Presentation delivered at Temple University’s Center for the Humanities (CHAT) conference, “Peripheries: An Inter-Disciplinary Exploration of Locations, Groups, Issues, or Histories,” March 2014.

paradox in a variety of ways, but some are decidedly *biological* such as an increased susceptibility to ovarian cancer.¹²⁸

This outcome, it is important to stress, is not *due* to biology; it is an *effect* of the dialectic of their particular material condition (their female bodies, in this case). (Black men across classes exist in a similar dialectic as they suffer disproportionately high heart attack and cancer rates.) In other words, this is a “sociological model of stress,” which necessitates “an understanding of the specific disease outcomes that result from socio-environmental stressors that [black women] encounter and also requires *knowledge of the biological mechanisms* through which these effects are produced.”¹²⁹ A recent development in the study of the biology of trauma, which suggests that this “transmogrification of the body” is potentially reproducible as the children of survivors of different traumas (war veterans and survivors of genocide, for example) “may be born susceptible to PTSD, a vulnerability expressed in their molecules, neurons, cells, and genes,” adds an additional layer here. One way this vulnerability to PTSD might be expressed is the production of cortisol. PTSD is correlated with lower levels of cortisol, which is a steroid hormone that regulates the nervous and immune systems’ responses to stress, and there is evidence that this trait can be passed from parent to child.¹³⁰

In these cases extreme forms of social constructivism are dangerous. Responses that presume an absence or insignificance of the body are insufficient because oppression is experienced by embodied biological creatures. In each of these examples, biological

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Kristi Williams and Lianne M. Kurina, “The Social Structure, Stress, and Women’s Health,” *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* 45: 4 (2002), pp. 1111, *emphasis added*.

¹³⁰ Judith Shulevitz, “The Science of Suffering: Kids are inheriting their parents’ trauma. Can science stop it?,” *The New Republic*, November 6, 2014.

research and its offerings are crucial as they are changing – or, at least, amending – crucial aspects about how we should think about freedom, self-determination, and what human beings are and can do. These engagements with the domain of biology explore the foundation through which materialism *materializes*, and aim to develop interventions with the goal of changing material conditions in liberatory directions

Concluding thoughts

If, as some believe, Marxist materialism is fundamentally a theory of social conflict over which class controls the social surplus and division of labor (who gets what and who does what?, as Michael Buroway puts it), how does my intervention advance a Marxist project? The question itself is error. Marx was centrally concerned about the various ways that capitalism was *inhumane*: capitalism treats human beings like “animals,” not merely in the descriptive sense, but in the ways that our capacity for self-determination is undermined or denied entirely. In other words, Marxism isn’t merely about “who gets what and who does what?” in the strict material sense, but about the distribution of freedom possibilities, so to speak. Building on my examples – of surgery available to people seeking to change the sexes of their bodies; women trying to put off babies because of work trajectory pressures; highly successful black women – we see this wider point: the biological toll taken on the vast majority of people who must work to live. What does this mean for a truly contemporary Marxist politics in terms of the diagnoses and demands made? Simply put: advances in the sciences have opened up new questions about self-determination as we are changing what is considered possible and “natural” constantly. As the “market society,” as Sandel puts it, becomes more and more brutal and

limiting, we see the other side of the dialectic I have explored throughout this chapter: putting off child bearing or changing our sexes, but on the other side is heart disease and cancer. The Marxist may respond that for some so much is now available that we have radically increased the expectations of what a natural human life should entail but those few are able to do this as the vast majority of people are immiserated. But this is evidence of my argument: certain engagements with the “hard sciences” determine the contours of political possibility and, of course, their denial.

This intervention has a related advantage. Marx’s work is unapologetically anthropocentric. Human beings are fortunate to be in a relationship of superiority to nature so should exploit it in ways that enable us to stop exploiting each other. Human beings dominate nature, including nonhuman animals; the question is simply how to do it right. But, as I argued in Chapter 2 with respect to the role the “subhuman” plays in human domination, rethinking the human-nonhuman divide should be essential to a contemporary Marxist politics. Designating some human beings “nonhuman” enables us to exploit them, but if we elevated the status of nonhuman animals and treated them with dignity (allowing them the lives that their natures imply they need to flourish) then the fact that *not some* (the proletariat) *but all* (all classes of people) could be compared with nonhuman animals would not be a problem.¹³¹ In every class politics, the goal is to raise the situation of the bottom rather than enabling it to be systematically exploited so those a couple rungs up the ladder can fight over the resulting crumbs. A deliberate turn to biology magnifies the dilemmas of Marx’s foundational anthropocentrism raising questions about how central the human-nonhuman divide has been to enabling and

¹³¹ Note that this is different than *diminishing* the status, overall, of human animals.

justifying systemic exploitation of major portions of human beings and nonhuman animals. It does not follow, however, that human and nonhuman animals, as a descriptive matter, are “the same.” That is a nonsensical claim. The position that human beings are “exceptional,” which relies on the category of the “subhuman,” is, in the final analysis, an evaluative position.

It does seem, however, definitionally true that speaking about human beings and their behavior in any way that references biology is immediately *limiting*. This is different than a justification of oppression, however. Rather, biological modes of analysis have the effect of concretizing human beings in an important way – there are things *about us* that simply cannot be changed. And even without supplying any substance to that claim (*which things?*), this *approach* to understanding human beings seems deterministic. Critics of my proposed integration will no doubt equate biology with limitation or determinism.

They are right, in part. As these examples show, the body, as a material condition, is limiting. But, as I have shown, this critique is flawed because, as a material condition, there is a crucial dialectic to be considered. The body isn’t only a problem because it is a stubborn and unavoidable object limiting freedom – the body is *both* limitation and possibility. After all, I could not make this argument without a functioning body (including a brain), and there are aspects of our biology that enable us to develop technologies that help us overcome bodily limitations. We can and should therefore also study and understand our bodies in the many ways that underscore how they enable us to realize our aspirations.

The dichotomy between “determined” and “completely undetermined” is dangerously misleading. Human beings are not pure abstractions nor are we infinitely malleable – our bodies offer specific content that informs the directions we might seek. If we looked like octopi, we would have constructed a very different social world and might have very different aims. It was adequately addressing this distinctive human combination that caused theorists and activists alike to turn to social constructionism as a corrective to expose the nefarious politics that framed some groups of human beings as “naturally” limited in agency, talent, and potential. This was done by suggesting that the many “limitations” were not inherent shortcomings but only appeared so in a world that had been arranged for a different model of the “ideal person.” My argument in no way challenges that central claim. Instead, an integrated materialism simply makes our materialism more rigorous, and liberatory interventions less naïve. We can and must maintain both positions – human beings are animals but *animals with* capacities to play a central role in determining what it means to flourish and to create conditions that can enable their own flourishing. Put simply, human beings are a dialectic that needs to be considered more dialectically.

In that vein, in the following chapter, through an engagement with different political theories of identity, I challenge the critique that reading, so to speak, human beings through the biological sciences inevitability leads to essentialism.

CHAPTER 4

HOW SOCIOBIOLOGY CAN INFORM A POLITICAL THEORY OF IDENTITY

Engagements with the domain of biology have been resisted by humanists, in part, because the biological domain suggests an essential “script,” say, a set of interests and a disposition that are necessarily “a part of,” inseparable from, a particular person or group. In this chapter, I show how the biological sciences can be integrated into a contemporary political theory of identity in a way that resists this erroneous ontological move. While the biological dimensions are necessary for a rigorous account of identity, biology as such does not give us access to “something important” about a person. Biology is not properly “a who,” an identity, in other words, but theoretical accounts that detach identity from the biological domain, as I will show, are missing a foundation.

From this discussion comes a related consideration. It seems to me that it is a condition of being a “person” that we have something like a “practical identity,” or a coherent narrative and consistency in our evaluative stances, projects, and objectives. Without a “practical identity,” we see radically disunified or fragmented behaviors and beliefs. Human beings aren’t perfectly unified, of course, but nevertheless those attitudes that we are willing to “stand by,” so to speak, tend to be unified, at least this is true at the level of self-conception. Humanists have explored this tension, between the unified and disunified self, but their analysis is overdetermined by the social constructionism that informs much of their project. In this chapter, I argue that human beings can assess our attitudes deliberately in an effort to “unify” those “two selves,” but only under certain conditions, conditions that are, in part, decidedly biological. We are beginning to understand the various ways in which this disunification is *expressed*, and *how* to

overcome it through an integrated analysis.

“Sources of the self”

This is a chapter about identity, about which I owe much of my understanding to Charles Taylor.

There is no such thing as inward generation, monologically understood...The crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical character*. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. People don't acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us.¹³²

We define ourselves, according to Taylor, always in dialogue with – and sometimes in struggle against – the things our “significant others” want to see in us. This forms the *background* within which we engage in the process of identity construction. Thus my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overtly, partly internal, with others.¹³³ Pushing against theories of identity that rely on fixed and essentialist categories such as sex or race, Taylor incorporates into his “core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing dimensions of *time, space and relationality*.”¹³⁴ In other words, Taylor has a *situated* conception of identity.

For the philosophical liberal, by contrast, the initial state of the self is

¹³² Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, Amy Gutmann (ed.) (New Haven, CT: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 32-34.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Margaret R. Sommers, “The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach,” *Theory and Society* 1:23 (1994), p. 606.

conceptualized as an abstraction, *without* or at least *prior to*, encumbrances.¹³⁵ And it is from this “original position” that the self engages in “rational” deliberations over ends. Here the self achieves what Liberals call autonomy, where our commitments are “freely chosen.” We need autonomy *from identity* in order to exercise rationality and only *via* rationality can the self be “free and independent.”¹³⁶ The motivation for the liberal seems to be this: as social identities have a given-ness to them – as they are ascribed – they don’t result from “free agency.” This seems to be a form of liberalism that takes the fact of socialization seriously but in a decidedly liberal way. “Freedom” is liberty from the influence of external forces, external to “reason.” Not all forces external to “reason,” however, are external to the person as such, to the individual human being. Inclinations such as desire, greed, and anger can be part of a person but are still external to “the will” or “reason,” on this account. Inclinations, broadly understood, can enslave. For the liberal therefore the domain of biology presents a significant problem, both theoretically and empirically.) Identity then is an *a priori* problem where ascribed social categories can *only* operate oppressively.¹³⁷ As “autonomous choosers,” our commitments, values and concerns (our identities, in short) are possessions of the self, but never constitute the self. One consequence of this is to put the self *itself* beyond the reach of its experience, to secure its identity once and for all...no role or commitment could define me so completely that I could not understand myself without it.”¹³⁸

Identity therefore for the liberal, is in the main an individual affair. But that is a

¹³⁵ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.

¹³⁶ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³⁷ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.

¹³⁸ Sandel, *Liberalism*, p. 84.

basic error. “Individuals make their own identity,” yes, but that claim mystifies more than it reveals; the process of identity making does not happen under conditions of our own choosing, nor is there a “transcendental self” making choices outside of its identity.

Identities

...are both imposed and self-made, produced through the interplay of names and social roles foisted on us by dominant narratives together with the particular choices families, communities, and individuals make over how to interpret, and resist, those impositions, as well as how to grapple with their historical experience.¹³⁹

Identities are necessarily simultaneously oppressive and constructive. In other words, identities need to be considered dialectically. This tracks with a theme throughout my dissertation – as with identities, biology must be considered dialectically as it is simultaneously prohibitive *and* the very condition for possibility. “Consider what we mean by identity?” Taylor asks. It is who we are, “where we’re coming from.” As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense.¹⁴⁰ “Who am I?,” Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self*, is to answer questions about where I “stand,” my “framework,” which is to speak about the way things have significance for me. Identity is the horizon within which I take “a stand” on those important qualitative valuations – what ought to be done, what is Good, what is valuable?¹⁴¹ Identity is an orientation toward the Good, toward what’s of crucial importance or of fundamental value. Individuals arise within the context supplied by societies. A more realistic understanding of the self recognizes the social background

¹³⁹ Linda Alcoff, “Introduction,” in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mandieta (eds.) (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, “Politics of recognition,” pp. 33-34.

¹⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 42.

against which life choices gain importance and meaning; when adopting or questioning ends for reasons, those reasons are charged with significance within a background of valuations. When I question or reconsider my aims, that process is a situated one – I am a “me” that engages in that process of reconsideration.

[S]elf-reflection is never attained in isolation. Becoming self-conscious is a process that human beings achieve only when they grow up among other human beings, in linguistic or language-speaking communities. Consciousness, as the word itself indicates, is a “knowing with” (consciousness). We come to know things with others, by way of sharing the world in speech. Self-consciousness arises out of the human capacity to partake communicatively in the experience of others.¹⁴²

Alasdair MacIntyre believes that when I engage in practical reasoning, I try to determine what is best for one who occupies the roles that I occupy, which requires discovering what it means to be a teacher and husband and so on. And what it means to occupy these roles well. This is a process of self-discovery, which requires drawing from communal knowledge. But, the Liberal critic will respond, even if we do engage in self-discovery, having done so, we surely think we can *question* or *reconsider* or *reject* the values we discover. So practical reasoning is more deliberative than MacIntyre lets on – it is a process of individuals deciding what values are valuable.¹⁴³ But this criticism misunderstands the epistemological component of identity. MacIntyre is talking about *judgment*. In that deliberative process, I am reasoning *against* and from *within* a background of assumptions and valuations. Human beings therefore are situated reasoners. There is not any portion of the self that is not shaped through previous encounters with others. When we engage ourselves in acts of self-reflection we use

¹⁴² Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, p. 29.

¹⁴³ Retrieved from the web 10/01/2013: <http://web.missouri.edu/~johnsonrn/comm.html>

vocabularies that we have borrowed from what Taylor calls “significant others,” which I interpret broadly to mean our relationships, but also history, tradition, and culture, even as we try to navigate the tensions within them. And we often do this through recalling “dialogues” with others and broader discourses that suggest new or different “modes of being.” Human beings, for Taylor then, are “beings of meaning.” “Meaning” is constructed *via* our “social world,” which provides the semantic field within which we work, so to speak. These “languages” (i.e., the semantic field) are the terms in which our “meanings” are couched. Human beings act for reasons. But we only understand them insofar as they have meaning to us, which is a product of our “social world.”¹⁴⁴

Consider Michael Sandel’s important point. I did not choose to love my mother and father, to care about the neighborhood in which I grew up, to have special feelings for the people of my country, and it is difficult to understand why anyone would think I have chosen these attachments, or that I ought to have done so. Each of these examples can be used to make the point that oftentimes our most important encumbrances are those that are *not* chosen, “freely” or otherwise; those that cannot be accounted for on contractarian terms, in other words. Human beings are constituted by various communal attachments so close to us that they can only be set aside at great cost, if at all. The cost, of course, is deracination. This point has two dimensions: one ethical, the other epistemological. Putting aside the ethical dimension,¹⁴⁵ Sandel is pushing us to consider

¹⁴⁴ “Dialogue” then, is used equivocally. Dialogue, after all, is an iterative process, between at least two speakers. Identity, for Taylor, doesn’t seem to be the product of strictly exogenous factors. “Dialogue” suggests some inward engagement on the part of the speakers, which implies two distinct wills. However, according to Taylor, the “languages” we use to “dialogue” aren’t inwardly derived at all. All “languages” are shared.

¹⁴⁵ Although Sandel’s point here is persuasive. Certain kinds of relationships do seem to give rise to obligations that can’t be accounted for on contractarian grounds or by obligations owed to human beings as such. (Those latter obligations beg the question about why the moral community tracks with membership in

what our encumbrances do at the level of judgment. He isn't making the simplistic claim that he just believes that communal attachments are normatively important in a way the liberal does not understand. Those attachments rather, are constitutive. As both Taylor and MacIntyre argue, Sandel's point is that we "think" and "judge" from *within* communities.

Of course, we must account for the historical fluidity and instability of social categories, as well as the differences *within* those categories to resist the move to make the descriptive content of those categories and the narratives on which they are based be overdetermined or privileged by the experiences of some. Yet we must also account for the powerful salience and persistence of identities as self-descriptions and as predictors for how one is treated and what one's realistic life options are. In other words, identities, as Linda Alcoff persuasively argues in *Visible Identities*, are both "marked on the body" but are also *mediated* in an important sense. To use her example, being a parent is simultaneously relational, contextual and fundamental to the self. In one context, parenthood is inconsequential, in another context, parenthood is literally life defining. Moreover, some relational and contextual properties like parenthood profoundly affect how we are seen and interacted with by others. For some, parenthood has a rather narrow significance, merely a sperm donor, say. But for others, it is literally life defining; *that* particular parent simply can't conceive of him or herself as *not* a parent. Being a parent, in other words, is *who they are*. So being a parent means different things in different

the human species.) In a "burning house" scenario, when deciding if she should save her baby or the neighbors baby, a mother needn't resort to a coin flip. Both babies, as human beings, are equally owed her aid, and in contractarian terms, it seems reasonable to argue that the neighbors baby is indirectly owed her aid because of the mothers relationship with her neighbor (it is a self-interested exchange like, "I won't hurt you if you won't me"). Still, when she makes the decision in this scenario, she doesn't do so as a "person," unencumbered by relationships and roles, but as a person *bearing* the role of "mother." Discharging her obligations therefore requires that attention be paid to her child.

places and across time (it is socially constructed), but nonetheless, it is still fundamental to how some see themselves. Our social identities are thus “un-real” (essential and fixed) in a sense, but “real” in another in that they are profoundly significant in determining the state of the “worlds” that we inhabit. These identities affect our relations in the world. This in turn affects our “interior lives.”

The role of visibility needs special attention here. A visible marker like race is a sign that invites interpretation to discern what is behind it, beyond it, or what it signifies. We look for visible marks to suggest something about a person’s interior life (intellect or judgment, say). I often ask my students to imagine that on the first day of class I walked into the classroom with everything the same: gait, hairstyle, style of speaking, and basic disposition. But with one exception: I am wearing a dress. What reactions would that evoke? The answers I receive focus in on shock because of the rupture in gender norms and, more importantly, a mixture of confusion and anxiety because they don’t know how to interact with me. Our visible identities then, uniquely affect our relations in the world, not only our interpretation of conversations, media reports and “data” but they also determine in large part one’s public status. Our visible identities affect how we are seen by others, which constructs how we come to see ourselves. For Alcoff, race and gender are social constructs and historically fluid but they are still *fundamental* to the self. Because how other “see you” constructs how you “see yourself.” Otherwise these things like race and gender would not be “real” at all. How do our identities function as “interpretive horizons,” and how does, say, race *become* one of those horizons, especially if it is socially constructed? It has to do with the way people and institutions interact with you, overtime – the assumptions they make, the life opportunities you have, and so on.

And then how, in turn, you come to understand *who you are* by negotiating all of this throughout your life. So these “visible markers” tell us something about other people, and that matters to how we see them. And how others see us, as Taylor and Alcoff argue, matters for how we come to see ourselves. Otherwise race isn’t “real”; it is just a “brand.”¹⁴⁶

The metaphor of identities as “scripts” is useful here, at least as a way to better theorize how identities affect the bearer of those identities. Anthony Appiah conceptualizes identity along two different dimensions, the “individual” and “collective” dimension. These dimensions of identity provide “scripts,” or narratives that people deploy when shaping their life plans and in telling stories about their lives. It is important to note here, that we are “scripted”-in, which, for Appiah, is potentially a threat to individual autonomy, particularly when those “scripts” are tightly bound and/or lack “dignity.” Those “scripts” that constitute the “individual” dimension, however, such as the witty or the intelligent, do not have associative “modes of being,” at least in the same way that being gay or being black do (represented in the “collective” dimension). The “individual” dimension therefore, for Appiah, doesn’t provide any substantive content, let’s say, relevant when thinking about identity. So we might think about this as a metaphor. An actress takes-up a script and a character is born. The actress immerses herself in the character, taking on the thoughts and the feelings *of* the character. But even with the most “internalized” performance, there is a clear distinction between the actress

¹⁴⁶ How does one delineate between “significant” and “insignificant others,” to use Taylor’s schema? With respect to social identities, it would seem, as *individuals*, we aren’t doing the delineation; rather, this is a socially and politically constructed boundary. Of course, individuals relate to other individuals through relationship with varying degrees of significance, much of which is an individual choice. But the significance of, say, race, is most certainly not an individual choice, just as the *insignificance* of red hair isn’t either.

and the role she is playing, a role decidedly external to her. If there is any permeation such that the actress “internalizes” her performance in a way that affects her identity off stage; it is time bound, not fundamental. In a sense, she can take off the mask, even if it is a little sticky. Alcoff is pushing against this conception of identity. Identities are “sites from which we perceive, act, and engage with others.” Identities also, she continues, “influence our orientation toward and responses to future experiences.”¹⁴⁷ Identities, this is to say, must resonate with lived experiences, they create unifying frames for rendering experience intelligible; so identities make an epistemic difference (they are real, i.e.) *and* they are the product of a complex mediation involving individual agency in which meaning is produced rather than merely perceived or experienced. Identity therefore is the site from which we engage in the process of meaning-making. This is to say, identity is everything. We all “speak” from a location that is particular and constitutive of our “subjective existence” but we are not “contained” by that position.¹⁴⁸

This raises Toni Morrison’s question, one that gets at the core of Liberal resistance to the “encumbered self”: how can we be both *situated* and *free*? Oftentimes our “lived subjectivity” doesn’t map neatly onto our “socially identified” self. Identity categories aren’t neutral, but map onto terrains of power. There are denigrated identities, overdetermined by stereotypes and traits constructed as negative. Iris Marion Young calls this “cultural imperialism,” which refers to how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as one’s group is marked out through stereotypes and other demeaning valuations. Black men evoke fear because the intersection of those two categories (men and black) is

¹⁴⁷ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, p. 287.

¹⁴⁸ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.

constructed as “criminal.” Gay men are overdetermined by the assumption that they are essentially driven by their sexual appetites. This explains the contradiction that gay men shouldn’t be scout masters because scout masters have to spend too much time with boys, but heterosexual men can coach girls’ softball. Those with denigrated public identities can resist oppression precisely by maintaining something of critical distance, Alcoff argues, between how they are seen by others and how they see themselves by asserting: “How you portray me is not who I really am.” But the self, as both Taylor and Sandel recognized, depends on “the other” for its very substance, its characteristics, and its sense of itself in relation to the world. The other gives content to our self, and also affirms that our self-estimation is real and not just imagined. This interplay between “lived subjectivity” and our “social identities” constitutes our lived experience and thus, our subjectivity. This ongoing dialectical process, that is, constructs *who we are*. But how does it happen exactly, this “critical distance”?

Young argues that identity is “a product of social relations in profound and often contradictory ways.”¹⁴⁹ And even more forcefully, groups, she argues, constitute individuals. A persons’ particular sense of history, affinity, and separateness, even the person’s mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling, are constituted partly by her or his group affinities.¹⁵⁰ Note the qualifier, though: “partly.” She writes,

This does not mean that persons have no individual styles, or are unable to transcend or reject a group identity. Nor does it preclude persons from having many aspects that are independent of these group identities.¹⁵¹

This reads like it isn’t a strictly exogenous account of identity. Alcoff’s concept of “lived

¹⁴⁹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 228.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

subjectivity” could be similarly interpreted. “Lived subjectivity” is the idea that identity is not adequately recognized or exhausted by social categories. “Who I understand myself to be,” in other words, doesn’t map neatly onto my socially identified self. Those with denigrated public identities, therefore, can resist oppression precisely by maintaining a distance between how they *are seen* by others and how they see *themselves* by asserting: “How you portray me is not who I really am.” On first read, “who I really am” seems to connote something ontologically prior, in some sense, to the discursive contexts. “Lived subjectivity” is something endogenous to human beings, a claim that moves in the direction I do. But that first read is mistaken. Both Young’s qualifier and Alcoff’s “lived subjectivity” are pointing to the spaces created through the contradictions and inconsistencies between various group affinities and discourses that we negotiate. As we move among many groups with which we identify, the ideas and values they suggest to us are not all easily aligned, and there are contradictions as these discourses overlap. Identity is constructed as an individual moves among these various locations while dealing with the tensions between them. In other words, these are strictly exogenous accounts of identity *with* room for agency. A black woman lives at the intersection of these two categories: black and woman. But she can resist the denigration of, say, being overdetermined by her sexuality as black women often are in public discourses or passive victims of the cultural phenomenon of black patriarchy by drawing from other categories that also reside at that intersection – her religious identity, if liberatory, for example. Dominant constructions of “beauty” have been resisted in this manner as well as the relegation of blackness as such to the category of “ugly” or “dirty” is challenged by drawing from alternative constructions such as “black is beautiful.”

Note the common thread throughout: identity is dialectically constructed, and the product of a complex social, cultural and political process. Biology (outside of phenotype in Alcoff's case) is either resisted as having any substantive relevance at all, or ignored entirely.

Alasdair MacIntyre is something of an outlier. In his book *Dependent Rational Animals* he tries to find some space for initially understanding human beings as animals. MacIntyre argues that human beings are a "story telling animal." To answer the question, "What am I to do?" he argues, we have to answer, "Of what stories do I find myself a part?" This is a "thickly" embedded conception of identity. I "enter the stage in" my communities, broadly understood, and without those particularities of the history I find myself in, there would be nowhere for me to go. Moreover, those particularities are the roles into which I have been "drafted" (e.g. a son, a citizen) and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. To develop into independent reasoners (the human *telos*, according to MacIntyre) – a necessary condition for identity – human beings need "the virtues," which cannot be procured without prolonged help from others (that is dependency). It is here that MacIntyre explicitly links his ethics to biology. An important property of human animal nature is dependency, according to MacIntyre. Human beings begin life as dependent rational animals.

It is not clear that MacIntyre fully appreciates the significance of this claim. The field of genomics is making important contributions on this point. Given the interdependence of human beings at the genomic level, there is not a clear moment of distinction when we become "individuals"; dependency is an ongoing process within

nested systems – both biological and social. Philosopher of science John Dupre considers the implications of this with respect to the metaphysics of pregnancy. Against the idea of a fetus as a separate thing within a container, Dupre’s “process ontology” suggests that there is never an actual fetus, strictly speaking, but essentially a bifurcating process, where the fetus is actually a part of the mother. The moment of birth, moreover, is not an end to the ongoing bifurcating process, but a continuation of it – at least there isn’t a requirement that birth marks the moment of “individuation.” At any rate, human beings have, MacIntyre believes, a first animal nature and *in addition* a second distinctively human nature. Given the “dialogue,” to borrow from Taylor, implicit in MacIntyre’s account however, the latter, “human nature,” is what is really implicated in identity construction. In other words, his theory begins with a serious consideration of the *human* animal, but he reforms his account to emphasize what he believes to be the “special”-ness of human nature. MacIntyre argues that there is a clear line between our first animal nature and our second human nature, and it is the latter that is relevant to identity. But with that move, he has lost the initial starting point. When we “become human,” as it were, because of our unique (i.e., non-animal cognitive abilities) we outgrow our animal nature, and nothing of “the animal” remains. But if there is causal significance to being an evolved animal – which MacIntyre concedes there is, in the first instance – then it simply won’t do to theorize as if at some point human beings stop experiencing their biological nature. In other words, there isn’t a first, “animal nature,” and second, “human nature.” Human beings exist in what Gordon calls an “open dialectic,” which emphasizes, for my purposes here, and as I have argued throughout, the contingency inherent in

biological expression.¹⁵²

In a sense, I argue that we need to push Alcoff's account even further, towards what might be called an *objectivist* account of identity that relies on something of a double-move. The second move first. Alcoff is right to argue that identity is "real," phenomenologically. But identity is also "real" because *Homo sapiens* is an objective category, and thus in an important sense prior to *thinking* (i.e., human belief systems). Biology has a definite ontological status apart from human categorical systems. Consider Appiah's concept of "scripts" again. My theory of identity doesn't challenge Appiah on his own terms. As he understands it, something like personality doesn't have associative "modes of being" in the way that social categories such as gender and race do because a "script" is a set of expectations and prescriptions that we resist in ways, explore, and take-up creatively. However, Appiah doesn't ground his account of the "individual" dimension of identity in the relevant empirics that suggest that traits that can plausibly fall along the "individual" dimension are causally significant.¹⁵³ To capture that significance though, we need to move beyond the language of "scripts" and theorize how traits that fall along the "individual" dimension affect or shape how an individual *acts out* a "script" – genetics, on this read of Appiah, as Freese writes, "enter into dynamic models of social action at the point of explaining *why* individuals change differently in response to similar conditions."¹⁵⁴ Our bodies then should be conceptualized as the *posture* with which we approach our various "scripts." We are "thrown" into a discursive field *as bodies*, and our bodies affect the way we take that discursive field up. Social

¹⁵² Gordon, *Problematic People*.

¹⁵³ I agree with Alcoff completely. Identities aren't analogous to "scripts" that we are consigned to play out. But it is a useful metaphor in some ways.

¹⁵⁴ Freese, "Genetics and Social Science," p. 22.

constructionism therefore is incomplete, as both a theoretical and empirical matter.

I use “affect” intentionally here. A “hard” physicalist, by contrast, might say that biology “determines” the way we take up our “scripts.” But words matter, so we should be careful. The discourse surrounding “determinism” is premised on a false dichotomy: “nature” *or* “nurture.” But the two are so intertwined we simply can’t separate their significance so cleanly. Moreover, our postures themselves are affected by the environment as different environmental stimuli affect the *way* genes express and *what* genes do and do not express. “Nature is never given; it has to be continually remade.”¹⁵⁵ Saldanha uses the concept of *emergence*, “the nonnecessary, gradual, spontaneous, and constrained accumulation of organization and a larger ‘agency’ through the synergy of smaller forces,” to capture this. From Darwin, we know that human phenotypes, for example, “can be understood as continuous and multifaceted, not discrete or linear – as much products of isolation as of migration and miscegenation.”¹⁵⁶ Darwin did not speak of teleology, but of historical and geographical contingency. In other words, *context really matters*. Aristotle was right all along.

The moral virtues are produced in us neither *by* Nature nor *against* Nature. Nature, indeed, prepares in us the ground for their reception, but their complete formation is the product of habit.’ Our culturally induced habits build upon and in turn redirect our natural dispositions.¹⁵⁷

Consider personality, which is at least partially heritable, and is predictive of a wide

¹⁵⁵ Arun Saldanha, “Reontologising race: the machinic geography of phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1:24 (2006), p. 17

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, p. 37.

range of behavioral and social outcomes.¹⁵⁸

Personalities differ in at least five major ways: whether a person is sociable or retiring (extroversion-introversion), whether a person worries constantly or is calm and self-satisfied (neuroticism-stability), whether the person is courteous and trusting or rude and suspicious (agreeableness-antagonism), and whether a person is daring or conforming (openness-nonopenness).¹⁵⁹

Using twin studies, it is clear, Pinker argues, that much of the variation in personality – about fifty percent – has genetic causes. The evidence suggests, moreover, that only *five percent* of the variation in personality come from the parents and the home. The additional forty-five percent, it is believed, is attributable to unique events impinging on the fetus’ growing brain in utero, and peer group socialization.¹⁶⁰ Personality traits such as extraversion, openness and neuroticism, all consistently shown to be heritable, should therefore be included in our theories of identities because personality is our disposition toward the external world, we might say; a disposition that depends on the integrity of our brain, which is quite fragile. In a famous case, Phineas Gage was a railroad construction foreman who had a tamping rod go through his head and take away a part of his frontal cortex. He survived the accident, but his personality and behavior, as a result, changed in ways profound enough that friends described him as a different person.¹⁶¹ There are everyday cases of this too, where people spike their brains’ chemicals with alcohol or nicotine, which changes them. When the brain changes, it would seem, *you change* at least in ways relevant to the construction of identity. Importantly then, we should theorize the interaction between nature and nurture here. Those called

¹⁵⁸ Pinker, *Blank Slate*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

¹⁶⁰ Pinker, *Blank Slate*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“neurotypical” human beings in the literature have a brain architecture that impels them to socialize, i.e., to take-up “scripts.” But, pushing this even further, human beings also have predispositions like their heritable personalities that *restrict* the *range* of possibility. There is not infinite flexibility to how we take up our “scripts.” But the reverse is also true. Social structures constrain the expression of our genes; the range of possibility within the various “scripts” shift from time and place. In a system with more pluralism in gender roles, for example, we should expect to see a wider range of relevant gene expressions.

The “individual” dimension is the point of departure, the necessary first move in identity theory. This point of departure, however, is *not* “ontologically autonomous of one’s position with respect to others or to the external historical and social conditions generally because it requires *social articulation* to be a salient identity trait.¹⁶² We must think about bodies without “positing them as primary, pure, fixed, bounded, and self-transparent.”¹⁶³ Traits that fall along that “individual” dimension need to be nameable, and it isn’t clear how that would happen without contrast, or a social context. Biological factors are part of the picture but they, on their own, do not form identity – they need to be made manifest/disclosed and they will always do this in a world that is already also social, cultural, that is, discursively constructed. But this point of departure is “fleshy and material,” as Alcoff usefully puts it in *Visible Identities*. These biological factors are not properly a “who”; they do not, *on their own*, constitute identity. These biological factors are an unarticulated *what* that become part of *a who* only through social articulation.

Against post-structuralism human beings are not products of discourse *all the way down*.

¹⁶² Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.

¹⁶³ Saldanha, “Reontologising race,” p. 7.

But I do agree with post-structuralists in a sense, too. Whatever attributes are ontologically prior to discourse are not essential attributes that define a person's identity. In this way, I resist "thingification" or a form of reification where human beings are turned into objects ("things"), rendering them passive and determined. Mine is a middle-ground. This theory of identity begins prior to what Alcoff calls the "inner world of subjective experience," but it avoids the erroneous move to biological categories that are transcendent of the subject. Biology, as pre-social (in a sense) content, that is, is always already *emerging* in a social context. Biology, therefore, isn't sufficient to explain identity. My account resists determinism. I am not making any claims of direct causality between biology and identity as do, say, ideologies of sexism and racism that are predicated on a claim of causality between physical features and intellectual, moral, and emotional attributes.¹⁶⁴ It is also important to note that I do not argue that certain isolated biological features (say, the different roles men and women play in reproduction) *exhaustively* determine identity.

Judith Butler argues that there is no body unless invoked by signification. Discourse then, precedes sexual difference, to use Butler's example. Reliance on sexual difference as ontological truth is problematic because *a priori* we can't discard sexual variation as "abnormal." The tremendous diversity in human and nonhuman animal genders and sexualities runs against the comfortable binaries. This is true, but deceptive in an important way. We are "cultural beings by virtue of our nature," which, as I understand it, implies a couple of things.¹⁶⁵ We aren't socialized *to be socializable*. This pushes against the strict social constructionist account of identity on one level. But more

¹⁶⁴ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, p. 148.

¹⁶⁵ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, p. 161.

important, cultural practices and productions occur on a real material body. And that materiality isn't "*always*, or even, *only*, the effect of power."¹⁶⁶ The body is entangled in *meaning-making*. Thinking of our bodies presupposes a framework of meaning. Butler is right about that. But human beings are *both* "beings of meaning" and bodies. Beauvoir's concept of the *body-in-situation* gestures in this direction, but my account, perhaps, pushes it in a direction that Beauvoir wouldn't take it. The "real," therefore, is constantly "mediated." Beauvoir does stress that it is through situations that we make meaning of physical sexed differences, but she, like Alcoff, suggests that certain fundamentally different orientations of male and female bodies remain consequential – they need to have sense made of them, but they are *there*. While my theory of identity doesn't neatly divide the body from what is interpreted or mediated, the category of the body has a prior ontological status, with implications that come prior to the meanings human beings *assign to* that biology. It would miss the mark to overstate the mediation component. The body *isn't* "always in play."¹⁶⁷

Here I move away from Alcoff. To make this clear, I want to draw from her discussion of sexed identities as a way to discuss the broader theme of biology. Sexed identities, she writes, "are objective types based on the biological division of labor in human reproduction."¹⁶⁸ This *real* differential relationship to reproduction (or "possibility") between males and females can take any number of social forms, "it can be moved about the web, from the center to the periphery, made more or less determinate

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

over the construction of gender depending on cultural context.”¹⁶⁹ Sex categories therefore represent objective human differences. This relationship to reproduction exists in the female horizon, and it exists there because of the ways in which women are embodied. I strongly agree with Alcoff, but draw a different conclusion. For Alcoff, sexed identities even though objective don’t seem to do any real work prediscursively, aside from providing an objective referent for identifying “types” around sexed identity. But the body is experienced, in a sense, *prior* to perception. Alcoff may be right about the ontological status of gender, but her social constructionism commits her to the erroneous position that biological isn’t mediating how we take up and then experience social identities.

Political psychology and identity construction

Identity, Alcoff argues, is a position within historical events and structures, a site “comprised of experiences, basic beliefs, and communal values, all of which influence our orientation toward and responses to future experiences.”¹⁷⁰ But this theory misses the crucial *mediating* function of biological processes. These processes predispose us to *feel*, or to respond to environmental stimuli differently. In other words, the human brain acts as an information processing system, taking “inputs” (e.g. environmental cues) and transferring (or transforming them) into “outputs,” “distally in the form of behavior, motivation, and so on, and proximally in the form of, for example, physiological signals such as shifts in hormone levels and neurotransmitter patterns” (Lopez et al., 2011:

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 172.

¹⁷⁰ Alcoff, “Introduction,” p. 287.

51).¹⁷¹ Consider this biological dimension helps us understand why two individuals within the same social milieu, with the same social identities, have radically different experiences of the world, as it were, in terms of how they interpret and then make judgments about events. The stimuli they confront, while similar descriptively, differ in how they charged with significance. This move also helps us understand why the differences between these same two individuals might be so sticky, or rather, so difficult to move.¹⁷² Authenticity therefore means not only arousing our consciousness to our multiple situations, communities, traditions, gender, class, race, history, voluntary associations...to engage our interpretive faculties as Taylor argues, but also to reflect on those particularly sticky attachments to consider their proximate causes. My theoretical model takes the following form. There are three moving parts, as I understand it, separated conceptually for clarity's sake.

“Me” → Biological Processes → Social Context → (*reacts back upon*) “Me”

Alcoff uses the concept of “biosociological” to explain how, say, anatomical features are physical and less amenable to change, but only begin to determine a person's identity when meanings are attached to those properties. This is indirectly social constructionist, however. The concept “biosociological” is interesting though, but it needs to be rethought. This is especially important because Alcoff argues, correctly, that we need an account of the relation of identities to the self, that is, the relationship between ascribed social categories and, say, the phenomenology of the “lived experience.” For her,

¹⁷¹ Anthony C. Lopez, Rose McDermott, and Michael Bang, “States of Mind: Evolution, Coalitional Psychology, and International Politics,” *International Security* 36:2 (2011), p. 51.

¹⁷² Michael D. Dodd, Amanda Balzer, Carly M. Jacobs, Michael W. Gruszczynski, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Hibbing, “The Political Left rolls with the Good, and the Political Right Confronts the Bad,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 367:1589 (2012).

she seems to smuggle in an assumption that “lived experience” of consciousness is socially constructed, even if through a more complicated process that implicates the body. But as Alford and his colleagues show, biology influences the extent to which and how a subject’s behavior is contingent on her environment. The evidence suggests that political attitudes and behaviors, they write, “come not just from intellectualization or indoctrination but from something deeper,” that is, from genetic variables.¹⁷³ Genes influence “people’s outlooks and personalities, and it is these broad features that then predispose individuals toward suites of specific attitudes.”¹⁷⁴ Many of the forces shaping orientations, political and otherwise, do not reach the level of conscious awareness.¹⁷⁵ This move is complicated by human cognition, however. Being primed to understand our genetic predispositions might enable us to act differently. Human cognition has an “executive function,” in other words. Evolutionarily, it was “designed” to resolve the tension between our automatic responses and our goals (e.g. feeling tired while driving). Human cognition therefore is powerful but it is *purposive*, which means it is very taxing, by contrast to our easier, automatic responses. In other words, cognition works when there is *slow deliberation*. The conscious mind is but a small bit of what is happening in the brain, so to speak; most brain processes are simply fed up to our consciousness in bits and pieces, oftentimes in the form intuition or feeling or suspicion.

Perhaps more surprisingly, even when conscious reports are controlled, physiological responses of which people are not aware also make substantively and statistically significant contributing to explaining political attitudes.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Alford et al., “Political Orientations,” p. 153.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁷⁵ Hibbing et al., *Predisposed*, p. 479.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 480.

There is an analog here in the implicit bias or “unconscious racism” literature, which describes how lower-level, subtle biases against minorities, importantly racial minorities, operate at the *subconscious* level in ways we often don’t even realize; even explicitly anti-racist, otherwise well-meaning “colorblind” people are subject to cognitive biases that are grounded in persistent stereotypes. In the implicit association test, for instance, the large majority of white subjects (and a significant minority of black subjects) associate whites with positive traits and blacks with negative traits. Or in rapid priming tests, respondents consistently associate blacks with hostility or threat without conscious awareness that the implicit stereotype has been activated.¹⁷⁷ Participants can be given details of an assault case, as if they were in the role of jurors. When asked to remember the case details later, participants overwhelmingly *misremembered* aggressive conduct by blacks in the stories, even when such conduct did not occur, and they were far less likely to remember aggressive conduct by whites, even when, in the narratives given to them, it *did* occur. Priming research has also found that when participants are hooked up to MRI machines, that even when shown a black face on a screen *subliminally* (i.e., for such a small fraction of time that the conscious mind is unable to process it, though the subconscious mind can), the part of the brain known that processes fear responses and anxiety, lights up far more than when shown a subliminal image of a white face.¹⁷⁸ These implicit attitudes, however, while “difficult to access through introspection, are not wholly unconscious either: with directed introspection their impact can be somewhat

¹⁷⁷ Lincoln Quillian, “Does Unconscious Racism Exist?,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71: 1 (2008), pp. 7-8.

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth Phelps, “Performance on Indirect Measures of Race Evaluation Predicts Amygdala Activation,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 12:5 (2000).

controlled.”¹⁷⁹ Overtime, through conscious training, these subconscious biases can be changed. In other words, human beings can condition their automatic responses; our implicit architecture can change. But the “architecture” is there to begin with triggering our automatic responses. The importance cannot be overstated. Our “racist imaginary” can affect our interpretations and actions, and the constant repetition of an image or symbol “can literally produce changes in the brain” by activating and strengthening synapsis in the brain.¹⁸⁰¹⁸¹ “Norms reinforced in infinite ways consciously and unconsciously over hundreds of years, can literally change *how* we are able to think about these things.”¹⁸² The liberal would ask us to “choose” not to be racist (just look at a picture of Oprah Winfrey all day long, perhaps), but this elides any real discussion of the way structures construct the brain. So we have to integrate our understanding of implicit architecture with a better understanding with how it interacts with “the social.” This is an epistemological claim, really – it becomes our “horizon,” the situation from which we know the world. This might be understood as an effort to decolonize this knowledge. Everyday experience is ideological, i.e., the forceful imposition of ideas by centers of power onto peripheries. A more vapid understanding of, say, implicit bias reproduces domination by its first premise.

Most of our encounters therefore proceed within a framework of automatic responses. Consider how this affects Alcoff’s account of the role of visibility in identity construction. Alcoff argues that our visible identities (race and gender) affect our

¹⁷⁹ Quillian, “Unconscious Racism,” p. 7.

¹⁸⁰ George Yancy, *Look, a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹⁸¹ Joey Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer [In]justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), p. 26.

¹⁸² Ibid.

relations in the world in a unique way. They determine in large part one's status within their communities and the economy, but more importantly for my purposes here, they shape our interactions with other human beings. Alcoff stresses that we look for visible markers to suggest a person's status, intellect, judgment, authority, and so on. In other words, these visible identities function as heuristics. Those heuristics then, are, at least in part, rooted in our genetics. Socialization supplies the substance of our implicit architecture, of course – that point needs to be stressed. But that architecture is decidedly biological. Moreover, human cognition can condition that architecture in ways relevant to identity construction, but most of the time, we react to the visible markers automatically. When meeting somebody, our tendency is not toward individuation – even if we resist this tendency cognitively. Rather, we implicitly associate an individual with the social categories we ascribe to them (visible markers such as age, gender, and race). An individual, to the casual viewer, is the accumulation of characteristics that attach to their social identities. This in turn constructs how we come to see ourselves. Alcoff's central thesis then in *Visible Identities* is fully substantiated by social psychological research. The influence of gender, say, on our decision making with regard to leadership or positions in the field of security when looking through job applications often bypasses our conscious reflection. Indeed, when asked to justify a manifestly sexist decision in different experimental settings, respondents will come up with perfectly reasonable rationalizations. To the decision makers themselves, in other words, they are acting in good faith, sorting out the prevailing views of “relevant characteristics” of a leader or a police officer.

This, it seems to me, must significantly alter the way we conceive of everyday

behaviors like making decisions, or passing judgment as we are driven to act based on things beneath the level of conscious awareness. And when those beliefs or implicit attitudes won't respond to evidence because they aren't "rational states" they ought to be treated as things to be manipulated. Broadly then, the "interpretivist" tradition (here represented in various ways by Taylor, Sandel, and Alcoff) explores the ways that judgment, choice, and interpretation is entangled with evaluations and experience, much of which is implicit. But this happens through a biological architecture, which reacts back against the socialization process, or rather, is the very architecture that makes socialization and the process of making-meaning possible in the first place. "Interpretivism" therefore only *appears* to be, foundationally, a socialization thesis.

I now turn to my final consideration. Is the principle of equality threatened by engagements with the domain of biology? Beginning in roughly 1925, because of its association with proponents of alleged racial differences in intelligence and the eugenics movement, humanists campaigned against engagements with the biological sciences thinking it undermined progressive advancements. I argue that this concern, today, is misplaced for two reasons. First, as a logical matter, the biological sciences cannot be used to justify hierarchy because hierarchy is an evaluative, not a descriptive order of things. Second, I show how conservatives who take-up evolutionary psychology to justify "traditional" gender inequalities misunderstand the feminist critique, that, rather than denying difference, denies the negative *evaluation* of difference.

CHAPTER 5 WHY “HARD SCIENCE” CANNOT JUSTIFY INEQUALITY

Liberals do not deny that there are two biologically fixed kinds of human being – the male and the female; but they deny that there are two culturally fixed kinds of person – the masculine and the feminine. For the liberal, the division of [gender] roles, rights, and duties that conservatives defend is neither decreed by nature nor endorsed by the moral law... the real question raised by evolutionary biology and neuroscience is not whether those sciences can be refuted, but whether we can *accept* what they have to say while still holding on to the beliefs and attitudes that morality demands of us.

-- Roger Scruton

For conservatives like Roger Scruton, what science shows us with respect to gender roles is that they might not be as malleable as liberals hope. Science shows the “liberal hope” for gender egalitarianism “to be so much wishful thinking.” In this chapter, I will concede the empirical claim, for the sake of argument. Across time and context, “women almost always have the major role in caring for young children, while men are much more likely than women to be involved in physical conflict, both within the social group and in warfare between groups; men also tend to have a disproportionate role in the political leadership of the group.”¹⁸³ “Traditional” gender roles are adaptations, vehicles through which men and women differently pursued survival around reproduction. This is Scruton’s descriptive point of departure. From here, Scruton asks conservatives to accept the science as a means to defend a traditional division of gender roles for what it is – “the foundation of the most important personal relation that we have, which is the relation that binds a man and a woman in marriage.” This is a very familiar argument; Scruton is just

¹⁸³ Singer, *Darwinian Left*, p. 37.

resuscitating it with biologicistic language. The difficulty, on which I will focus in this chapter, is that rather than an implication of science, the claim that science justifies hierarchy, in this case around gender, is merely a lazy argument. At this point, the naturalistic fallacy is often used to critique this type of argument. Scruton seems to be suggesting that because traditional gender roles are “natural” we should adjust what we consider to be “good” accordingly. But it is a logical fallacy to draw any such direct normative implications from science. And Scruton knows this, as do both humanists and (most) scientists, and yet, it still happens again and again. I want to complicate the critique.

In this chapter, as a feminist, I do not challenge the division of reproductive roles as such but the *hierarchy* – where those attached to different roles have different levels of status – built up *around* those roles. In other words, differences in reproduction are not the target of criticism, nor have they ever been in any serious way. Rather, the evaluative entanglements – the rights and duties that accompany reproductive differences – are the concern. Gender/sex has never been merely a matter chromosomal makeup but the values placed upon that. The STEM disciplines and care work are differently valued, for example. Structural patriarchy helps us understand that. What, after all, does equality between the sexes mean? The first move gender egalitarians make is that from natural sexed differentiation gender valuations do not follow. “Masculine” and “feminine” are not neutral categories, but presuppose a whole set of evaluative claims that underlie the hierarchy between those “two culturally fixed kinds of person.” And science is absolutely silent on this. Indeed, Scruton is merely restating gender essentialism, and can be challenged as it has always been – for failing to take identity intersectionality seriously.

But I want to make a different move, and to do so I consider different feminisms.¹⁸⁴

“Against androgyny”

Many feminists accept the claim that women are, indeed, “closer to nature,” but re-evaluate “nature” (in the standard “nature”/ “culture” divide) as a source of power, knowledge, and strength. These feminists take the fact that women give birth to be central to female subordination; this is a cross-cultural reality for women. And that this biological difference matters to the *lived experience* of being a woman. “Culture does not transcend nature; instead, it disguises and mutilates it.”¹⁸⁵ These feminists therefore move “against androgyny” as a “transcendent ideal” because that implies a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities – the best of “men’s culture” and “woman’s culture,” say – as the valuable qualities are those unique to women.¹⁸⁶ This move turns patriarchal valuations on their head. We shouldn’t criticize women who subscribe to an “ethics of care” say, but we should re-value reproduction. But in doing so, these feminists challenged the assumption that “private institutions” are “natural,” that is, free of ideology and politics. In doing so, these feminists enlarged the domain of politics, pushing into the “private” sphere. What, exactly, is science contributing here? Science most certainly doesn’t legitimate “traditional marriage.” The question of equality,

¹⁸⁴ The reverse is also true, of course. Political leftists who draw conclusions about human equality from some descriptive claim such as, for instance, what might be understood as an innate human propensity for more and more freedom, commit the same fallacy. Many Marxists make this error. It is an unnecessary move, though. Suppose it weren’t true, and human beings, rather, seem to “naturally” desire more and more bondage. Would that make arguments that radical democracy is the only legitimate form of political, social and economic organization less true? No, because these are different conceptual claims entirely.

¹⁸⁵ Allison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (New York, NY: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1988), p. 97.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Catherine MacKinnon writes

is at root a question of hierarchy, which – as power succeeds in constructing social perception and social reality – derivatively becomes a categorical distinction, a difference. Here, on the first day that matters, dominance was achieved, probably by force. By the second day, division along these lines had to be relatively firmly in place. On the third day, if not sooner, differences were demarcated, together with social systems to exaggerate them in perception and in fact, because the systematically differential delivery of benefits and deprivations required making no mistake about who was who. Comparatively speaking, man has been resting ever since. Gender might not even code as difference, might not mean distinction epistemologically, were it not for its consequences for social power.¹⁸⁷

Gender relations are based on power, on this view. Norms around masculinity and femininity reproduce these power relations. Presenting a sense of nurturing, say, as an innate, biological trait represents a “legitimizing myth” in which women believe they are destined to serve as caregivers because of their genes. After all, you can’t fight nature, right? Women’s subordination, on this view, is natural, rather than political. The “traditional family” is then, at bottom, *evaluative*, not descriptive, at the very least the description is too entangled with the evaluative that it isn’t useful to conceive of them as different categories. Jean Elshtain pursued this line of argument in a conservative way by challenging the “public” masculine and “private” woman dichotomy common in liberal political theory, noting its dismissive attitude toward and/or outright antipathy to “care work.” Elshtain challenged some “second wave” feminist efforts to “liberate” women from the domestic sphere by questioning the assumption that women disproportionality performed the “care duties” because of patriarchy. Science therefore does not contribute anything to our understanding of hierarchy because hierarchy isn’t a descriptive claim,

¹⁸⁷ Catherine MacKinnon, “Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination,” from *Theorizing Feminisms*, Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (eds.) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 248-249.

but an evaluative one. So we might concede that science “proves” that “traditional gender roles” are standard (in some sense) across time and space (on average, of course). Conservatives like Scruton argue that this should be embraced as evidence for how “good” “traditional marriage” is, or how so-called “gender feminism,” which criticizes gender roles as such is bogus. But that’s bogus! Gender is problematic because gender specific language is laden with assumptions, which impose roles. The values being harmed are autonomy and choice – it is a pre-destined course, which violates dignity. Feminists aren’t saying then that women and men don’t have different roles in reproduction and childcare. And that this matters. Perhaps we gravitate towards them, “naturally.” What feminists are saying is that how we *evaluate* those roles is the problem. Therefore, science doesn’t “prove” anything that feminists haven’t already conceded. People can be meaningfully different and equal at the same time; equality is not synonymous with sameness. The real question for these feminists is: How are those differences evaluated? not: How are human beings the “same”?

“Choice feminism”

In her introduction to a symposium on “choice feminism,” Jenet Kirkpatrick notes that “choice feminists” are organized around four ideals and commitments, one of which is a rejection of judgment.¹⁸⁸ Feminism, on this view, is a battle fought for “the choice” to enjoy the role of homemaker. In her response essay in the symposium, Nancy J. Hirschmann criticizes this approach for ignoring the role of power in constructing

¹⁸⁸ It isn’t clear to me how this works, though. Are “choice feminists” making a normative judgment about the *act of making* normative judgments (“I’m judging you because you should not be judging”)? If so, there is an internal inconsistency here.

“choice.” In emphasizing the conditions of “choice” rather than “choice” itself, she highlights an important lack in “choice feminism”: the problem of hyperindividualism. In other words, “choice feminists” take a step back and reify the public/private distinction by making “choice” apolitical. But for my purposes, consider the intersection between these two approaches. For Hirschmann, being a homemaker as such is not problematic, what is problematic is that the “choice” to stay at home is effectively an “adapted preference” given conditions of structural sexism. We can imagine an egalitarian environment, however, where the conditions of “choice” were different, and we could reasonably ascribe agency to the woman who chooses to be a homemaker. But such a world is one where, importantly, the evaluations we make about remunerated and unremunerated work are egalitarian.

Conservatives make a similar mistake when they appeal to the creation story in Genesis to ground innate gender roles. I mention this because it takes the same form as Scruton’s argument. Men and women, they argue, are equal insofar as they both equally bear God’s image. But Adam was created first, with clear purpose: “dominion” over creation and leave to subdue it with his offspring. Eve was created as a “suitable helper” when one wasn’t found in the rest of creation. Adam was given authority to both name nonhuman animals and Eve. But this doesn’t indicate that Eve does not share equal authority with Adam. It only indicates that Adam was created first; being created first doesn’t prove Adam’s authority over Eve because, if so, since nonhuman animals were created before Adam, birds, fish, and the like would have “dominion” over human beings. Differences in reproduction, moreover, do not translate into differences in authority without some bridging evaluative premise. The evaluative move then, is located in Eve’s

purpose: she was created as a “suitable helper” *in pursuit of* Adam’s purpose. That indicates that Adam has some sort of authority, some status that Eve doesn’t have given that his purpose is distinct in an important sense from hers. His purpose takes logical (and, I suppose, spiritual) priority – she is relevant in so far as she can help him to advance and pursue his stated aims. Because one of Adam’s stated aims is to “multiply,” it follows that Eve is a *necessary* “helpmate” (outside of scientific intervention). This command is not about merely procreating, however, but about procreating for the purpose of raising God-fearing children, and on that point Adam’s role is activated.

Feminine/masculine and God-given sexed differences co-entail, on this view. Conservative Christians who defend “traditional” gender roles on this view forget this point: the only matter-of-fact relevant here seems to be God’s will to favor Adam (men) arbitrarily over Eve (women). This is arbitrary *unless* there is, in fact, some other relevant matter-of-fact, say, some biological difference between men and women that is relevant to leadership, and the setting of priorities or determining of purposes. But you will notice that no such matter-of-fact could be relevant as such; it could only *become* relevant after we get clear about what characteristics are important to leadership, which is an evaluative task as Aristotle argued long ago.¹⁸⁹ And so it goes for those who lazily use science to

¹⁸⁹ For Aristotle, the proper allocation of a “good,” in this instance, leadership roles, follows from the purpose of the “good.” And purpose, at least when speaking about social and political institutions, is fundamentally evaluative. In other words, if justice means giving people “their due” or what they “deserve,” we have to first ask: what are people due, or what are the relevant grounds for merit? The answer to that question depends on what is being distributed. In this way, justice is both teleological and, most importantly, honorific. In his famous example, flutes ought to be distributed according to the relevant excellence: the ability to play well. Because that is what flutes are for (its telos): to be played well. It would be unjust to distribute based on some other principle like the ability to pay for the flute, or what will bring about the “greatest happiness,” or chance. What is the purpose of politics, then? We have to answer that question before we can answer the question: who should have the right to govern, or how should political authority be distributed? For Aristotle, a polity exists for the end of encouraging goodness and a “shared

criticize “liberal hopes” for gender egalitarianism – they forget that the analysis must be focused on the implicit evaluative claims not reproductive differences as such.

Some might argue, similarly, that racial egalitarianism “goes against the genes” because in-group favoritism is a central aspect of human behavior. It is an evolved mechanism selected for the advantages of coalition affiliation. And there is some evidence that a characteristic like racial phenotype is an inflexible feature of this system given its visibility. For the sake of argument, I will concede the empirical claim here: human beings are innately tribal. Experimental evidence bears this out. Strangers can be randomly assigned to different groups, and they will begin to express out-grouping sentiments. Just introspectively, tribal psychology can be deeply pleasurable. When human beings don’t have tribes, we make them. But the conclusion that we are innately racist is still confused because we can make the tribes and tribal identifications by which we’re moved. Suppose we are naturally “groupist,” and racial phenotype makes for an easy characteristic to out-group on. The relevant issue for the racial egalitarian is not some naïve “post-racial” hope where we don’t “see race.” The issue is not about racial differences as such, but about the evaluations we *attach* to those differences. In other words, the relevant question is something like: who is the out-group? And science is

way of life,” and to cultivate good character. Otherwise a polity is “mere alliance,” or an agreement between “contracting parties” not to harm each other, or an institution that helps economic exchange. Politics is about cultivating our distinctive human capacities, in other words – our language and our ability to reason substantively. (Human beings are “political animals” because it is only *via* politics that we can fully realize our “humanity.” “Prior to politics,” human beings are not “fully human” or “self-actualized” – we are either “gods” or “beasts,” a “deformity.”) This gives rise to “partially valid claims” to rule between the oligarchs, the democrats, and the aristocracy as each group shares in civic virtue. Because each “claim” is “partially valid,” however, a just regime (the “mixed polity”) finds some “mean” between each extreme so as to not fully frustrate the other “claimants.” Aristotle thinks this is best realized by having a large middle-class (neither too rich, too poor, or too political), or class balance, to realize the virtue of moderation.

silent on that question. Racism therefore is not “natural.”

Legitimacy: force or politics?

Perhaps I am being unfair to Scruton here. Is he arguing that the science shows there to be a *true* feminine and masculine, a “natural script” to borrow from Butler (as opposed to prescriptions socially considered appropriate to a given sexed body)? Becoming a woman, on this view, is a “natural process.” Again “natural” is too loaded a term to be used usefully. Since human beings are a species of animal, by definition, *everything* we do is “natural.” But I am going to ignore this for a moment to make my point.

Socialization gives shape to and sets the conditions for the expression of what is already given by nature. The alternative view is that psychological differences between the sexes have little or nothing to do with evolution, but instead are socially constructed. Women and men, then, on Scruton’s view, may pursue different paths or approach the world differently as a result of their evolutionary background; I agree, tentatively. While we should resist the urge to reduce gender to sex, we shouldn’t assume that the *only* thing that explains sexed differences in preferences, for example, is socialization. One’s sex is, for the vast majority of human beings, determined by sexual reproductive organs, which are determined at the chromosomal level (XY or XX). (Of course, not everyone is XY or XX and for some people there is a disconnection between sex at the chromosomal level and neural level in ways that may account for the divergence between the sex of the body and sex identification.¹⁹⁰) These chromosomal differences give rise to differences at the

¹⁹⁰ Sex differences themselves, Judith Butler (1990) argues, do not escape discursive formation; presumptive binary sex differences discipline inter-sexed bodies into the more rigid sex classification scheme.

neural level and are likely linked to differences in what is desired. There is compelling evidence for sexual dimorphism, or phenotypic differences between males and females of a species, in the brain, cognition and behavior. This is also true at the cellular level.¹⁹¹ What I called the alternative view above, however, is *strategic* first and *descriptive* second.

Butler is useful to clear out some baggage that comes with Scruton's view. Gender discourses bring sexed differences in to being as a lived experience (Butler, 2006).

“When the doctor calls a newly born infant a girl or a boy, s/he is not making a descriptive claim, but a normative one. In effect, the doctor's utterance makes infants into girls or boys. We, then, engage in activities that make it seem as if sexes naturally come in two and that being female or male is an objective feature of the world, rather than being a consequence of certain constitutive acts (that is, rather than being performative).”¹⁹² I take this as a strategic move that reveals how “far down” social construction goes. This move therefore is useful to challenge certain erroneous descriptive claims about gender. Mary Wollstonecraft argued in the eighteenth-century that sexist social norms of genteel society and motherhood, combined with sexist legal institutions such as marriage and property, damaged women's rational capacities by depriving them of equal opportunities with men to develop their talents. Sexed differences, in other words, do not saturate the mind (or soul). But then I am making the additional move here. Even conceding certain descriptive claims about gender, those that remain after careful analysis, what remains is the essential challenge.

¹⁹¹ Simon Baron-Cohen, Rebecca C. Knickmeyer, and Matthew K. Belmonte, “Sex Differences in the brain: Implications for studying autism,” *Science* 310: 4 (2005), p. 819.

¹⁹² Retrieved from the web 9/10/14: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/#SexGenDis>

To Scruton, perhaps gender hierarchy seems natural to human beings, but that can only be the case *if* he indexes for force in a way that makes it a key determination of worth/value. This is why comparisons across the animal kingdom make sense. Look at nonhuman primates, he might argue: there is clear hierarchy around gender roles with males occupying the key “leadership” position (or whatever the primate equivalent might be), and females taking on the “domestic duties.” So we have *prima facie* reason to believe that a similar human primate hierarchy is natural. But that is misleading because the capacity to inflict physical force does not establish right. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau wondered: what is the origin of inequality among human beings, and is it justified? One answer follows Scruton: nature “created” men and women differently with respect to reproduction. Hierarchy, because this difference isn’t neutral on this argument, but is related to the differences in capabilities to use force, therefore, tracks with this natural division of reproductive labor. Rousseau recognized that this was a fallacy. He distinguished between two forms of inequality: *natural* inequality involves differences of strength, wit, ambition, and prudence; *artificial* inequality (i.e., moral, political) is established by convention and power. The fallacy is collapsing these two categories, and justifying one with the other. The bridge between the two, in other words, is comprised of socio-political constructions, or, and this is about as far as comparisons across the species barrier can go on this point, the bridge is based on force. But “might” does not make “right.” Force ought to be irrelevant in the socio-political sphere, where we index for other values such as rationality or moral equality or dignity or the ability to self-govern. Indeed, as Hannah Arendt argued, the use of force marks the end or absence of politics. (Carl Schmitt then, for instance, for an Arendtian, confuses violence and politics.)

Rousseau's concern is legitimacy, which is the proper analytical focus when considering human hierarchy. Considerations of physical expressions of power cannot constitute legitimacy; whatever we decide should be the proper value then, science must be silent. Moreover, as Hobbes pointed out, because we can "confederate," hierarchy based on force is always contested and unstable. This raises questions about its real ontological status within the human condition even when narrowing our analysis to force.

Barbara J. King makes this point in her essay, "Why Gorillas Aren't Sexist and Orangutans Don't Rape."¹⁹³ At times, male gorillas, who are twice as big and heavy as females, in captivity, may boss around the females. Are they sexist? Male orangutans are also much bigger than female orangutans and "sometimes physically restrain a female and mate with her even as she cries out and struggles." Is that rape? King says no to both questions because sexism and rape are "actions taken by men against women and these actions occur within, and are enabled by, uniquely human cultural systems of power and oppression." In other words, male gorillas and orangutans may use force to act badly toward females, but that is the extent of it because the force involved isn't an expression of "institutionalized male dominance." We cannot say rape *as such* is "natural" to human beings. It might be argued that forcible procreation was evolutionarily adaptive, but rape, because it is an expression of human male/masculine domination, is not. King is right, but I want to push her point further still. Against those who might look to science to show the "false hope" of egalitarianism as such, hierarchy itself has no definite ontological status in the human condition. Statements of equality are always prescriptive, and cannot be detached from the more general issue of hierarchy. (Peter Singer argues that the Left is

¹⁹³ Barbara J. King, "Why Gorillas Aren't Sexist and Orangutans Don't Rape," (2013).

naïve to believe that hierarchy is constructed; evolutionary psychology suggests hierarchy is a fixed characteristic of all human societies. But, as I will show, that is a basic error.

Phillip Ball writes,

If there's one characteristic shared by almost every human society, it is inequality: the existence of a social hierarchy. And though some might dream of utopias in which no one has any more power or importance than another, these social hierarchies always rear their head eventually.

Is this, in fact, a law of nature? The existence of a social hierarchy in a community can be adaptive, in the sense that it helps the community to function more efficiently. That's because the hierarchy can make it easier for any individual to get hold of useful, reliable information – where to find food, say, or how to get a plumber – without having to ask everyone. Or perhaps these hierarchical social networks facilitate the dispersal of useful information in communities that need to coordinate their behavior – all looking for food in the same place say – but which are too big for everyone to consult everyone else.¹⁹⁴

Ball's position is problematic in at least a couple of ways. First, what straightforward scientific case could possibly be made for privileging the status of the “coordinator” over those who are agents in the information exchange? An important implication of science is that human beings, *each and every one of us*, are the product of a complicated entanglement of biological and environmental factors. And therefore at a fundamentally scientific level, inequality is not a “law of nature” but a conditional fact – conditioned on the socio-political environment. There is no straightforward scientific reason, that is, for hierarchy, or privileging some groups (in the form of status) over others. “Tests of fitness,” besides being overtly racist and sexist, are decidedly unscientific. “Fitness” refers to differences in reproduction rates from one generation to the next; not “better.” Why is, say, “detached rationality” “more fit” than an intuitive

¹⁹⁴ Philip Ball, “Social status: why all men are not created equal,” (2012).

connection with nature (the analytic/holistic dichotomy) in any sense other than an evaluative one or, that is, because white male intellectuals in the Enlightenment said so? Moreover, even on the “fitness” argument, human beings have made our environments so thoroughly anthropocentric that any discussion of “selection pressures” is complicated from the start. Science helps us make this more robust insofar as it can supply empirical evidence relevant to the evaluative claims that we are indexing for. And it is clear that individual differences are far more important than inter-group differences.

More importantly, however, Singer showed this kind of position to be fundamentally confused when he wrote in his very important essay, “All Animals Are Equal,”

When we say that all human beings, whatever their race, creed, or sex, are equal, what is it that we are asserting? Those who wish to defend a hierarchical, inegalitarian society have often pointed out that by whatever test we choose, it simply is not true that all humans are equal. Like it or not, we must face the fact that humans come in different shapes and sizes; they come with differing moral capacities, differing intellectual abilities, differing amounts of benevolent feeling and sensitivity to the needs of others, differing abilities to communicate effectively, and differing capacities to experience pleasure and pain.¹⁹⁵

In what way then, are all human beings equal? Equality, Singer continues, is a “moral ideal, not a simple assertion of fact. There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to satisfying their needs and interests (equal consideration of interests is what Singer understands as “equality”). The principle of the equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among

¹⁹⁵ Peter Singer, “All animals are equal,” in *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Tom Regan and Peter Singer eds. (London, UK: Pearson Publishing, 1989).

humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat animals.” Hierarchy, by extension, is not an assertion of fact. Nor could it be without begging the question: why are we privileging this or that characteristic? While science may enable us to measure the presence or absence of a particular quality it cannot determine the salience or value of that characteristic, which is precisely what implicitly ground statements of hierarchy. Frantz Fanon would therefore seem to be right: you cannot have hierarchy without force.¹⁹⁶ Hierarchical *evaluations* of groups of people or characteristics and traits, that is to say, that which is the very basis of hierarchy, must be established, as they are not given by nature.

¹⁹⁶ For Fanon there is a difference between domination and oppression. The former was in evidence when the Germans occupied France. What makes oppression unique is the treatment of the oppressed as if they are not fully human and therefore outside of self-other relations that are the basis for ethical and political relations.

CONCLUSION

COMMENTS ON AN ECUMENICAL CONCEPTION OF POLITICAL THEORY

[C]reolization as a methodological approach reminds us that there is a point at which imperatives of loyalty promise to produce decadent scholarship... [I]f, in political terms, we could understand creolization as the generalizing of a shared, public will forged by individuals as they articulate what they seek in and through collectivities that comprise a polity, we could understand creolizing political theory as its generalizing as well.

-- Jane Anna Gordon

As a Graduate Associate Fellow with the Center for the Humanities at Temple University (CHAT), I was a part of a small group asked to put together a conference. All decisions were ours – the theme, participants and format. Our organizing theme was voices from the margins broadly understood: the exclusion of groups from a discourse, under-considered themes and methodological approaches. We called this conference: *Peripheries*. When deciding who we would like to invite to the conference I suggested Professor Kevin Arceneaux, in Temple University’s political science department, whose work critiquing the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) in American Politics, suggesting that political ideology, on a Left/Right scale, is partially biological, strikes me as essentially marginal. The various responses I received are well summed up with one in particular:

“I’m a humanist. I don’t care about the ‘hard sciences’.”

This illustrates a common assumption in the social sciences: biology and humanistic research are, if not incommensurable, separate domains of knowledge. Many political theorists and scholars in the humanities who express some sympathy for my

project do so in bad faith. I will be asked to justify *why* we should engage the domain of biology rather than *how to do so* – even if they insist otherwise. I resist this commitment entirely, and have defended a robust interdisciplinary research agenda. But I do so as a humanist, with an eye toward specifically humanistic concerns, most importantly: What is the nature of the human subject? Because this is my primary concern it is therefore very problematic that prevailing accounts of human beings are willfully or strategically avoiding findings that are irrefutable. Given this commitment, it is not defensible to avoid certain findings, even if it is strategically or politically advantageous to do so. Against those who have always been more ready to use the resources of theoretical argumentation to defend positions they preferred and thought would protect them, I seek to confront the full dangers of what the most cutting edge understandings suggest are true.

This project has been corrective, on two related fronts, which then yielded some generative moments. First, current approaches to understanding biology and the human animal are informed by and account for contingency. Or we might put it this way: the relationship between biology and the human condition, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is fundamentally dialectical. It is therefore a basic error to ask for proof of biological explanations *of* human behavior or of some other outcome such as why middle-class men are taking on more care giving responsibilities in the west. And second, it follows that I am not engaging in *biologism*, which is the ideological position that what biology demonstrates must be so with all of the political implications that uncritically follow. My dissertation will nonetheless be critiqued precisely for this reason: I fail to show a straightforward relationship between biology and political life, and how I deal with this relationship given my humanistic commitments. Much of my dissertation is

intended to demonstrate just how confused that critique really is. (In this way, I am more a Rousseauian who conceives of this relationship dialectically than a Hobbesian.)

From this, however, came genuinely fruitful moments where my efforts to integrate political theory with the biological domain showed promise. Because human beings are inescapably biological creatures *that* engage in politics, many questions of interest to political scientists are invariably linked to the domain of biology. The political theorist might respond that while this is true of political scientists in the way most Americanists and many Comparativists and International Relations specialists understand the term, the study of politics of interest to the theorist invariably involves considerations of normative questions, which are, in a very real sense, closed to the domain of biology. My dissertation challenged this view as both naïve methodologically and disciplinarily, and as wrong politically.

In chapter 1 I argued that humanistic critiques of the hegemony of the “hard sciences” in knowledge production and its deployment as a justification for racist and sexist discourses have been eclipsed by a more strictly speaking ideological aversion to *any engagement* with the domain of biology. As I argued above, this aversion is equal parts outright hostility and ignorance of what the domain of biology reveals about the human animal. In chapter 2 I explored the nature of the human animal directly, as I developed an integrated philosophical anthropology. I critiqued both interpretivism and “hard scientific” approaches to this question as reductionist: the human animal is a “symbolic animal” that doesn’t merely experience the world, but experiences the world as charged with significance and meaning; however, this process is mediated by a biological architecture. I used the concept “situated animals” to capture this reciprocal movement.

In chapter's 3, 4 and 5 I addressed the criticism that engagements with the domain of biology result in a form of determinism with politically conservative consequences head on. In chapter 3 I used Marxist materialism to argue that the body, about which we can gain significant knowledge through the domain of biology, is a core feature of the material conditions that can enable or constrain individual and collective freedom. In altering our understanding of what we can do with our bodies, biological developments have altered our material conditions. In chapter 4 I integrated a political theory of identity with the domain of biology in a way that resists essentialism. Conceiving of biology as the "posture" with which we approach our "public identities," I explore some of the ways in which our "predispositions" and biological architecture affect how we experience "social scripts." In chapter 5 I considered what, if anything, the domain of biology suggests about the principle of equality, or put differently: does biology justify hierarchy? I argued that those who draw conclusions about the principle of equality from the domain of biology commit a category mistake: equality (and hierarchy) is an evaluative concept, not a descriptive one, which places questions of equality (and hierarchy) outside the domain of science.

What's next (for me and for others)?

My dissertation is driven by the basic observation that human beings are animals – the brain is an organ just as much as the lungs. But then it gets complicated. Human beings are animals, yes, but we are *human* animals, who, just as bats, using echolocation, "see," not with their eyes, but with their ears, inhabit the world in wonderfully complex ways. Before, when engagements with the biological domain were pitched as a discussion

between opposites, “nature” or “nurture,” the claim that human beings are animals produced predictable responses: proponents lamented the so-called illusions of freedom and identity while opponents turned their critical tools toward dismantling the status of the “hard sciences” themselves (at least when applied to the study of human beings). This complication, however, should fundamentally change the discussion.

For “symbolic animals” like human beings, contexts mediate how a stimulus becomes meaningful, but this happens through a biological architecture, which shapes and guides the process. For the human animal, moreover, because we are real, biological creatures, aspects of *our* biological domain determine the contours of political possibility. On these terms, the “hard” and “soft” human sciences are not pitted against one another, but genuinely interrelated. Their domains are not dichotomous; rather, they are like concentric circles that overlap at various points. Now, they don’t lay atop one another perfectly. It isn’t at all the case that anytime a political theorist engages a question, she should be in conversation with a behavioral geneticist (or vice versa). But at those points of overlap, such a conversation should happen. I explored three of these points in this dissertation: questions surrounding freedom, political identity and the broader issue of philosophical anthropology. And I am confident there are more. For instance, because political theory is simultaneously a *prescriptive* and *descriptive* enterprise, in principle, theoretical work yields predictions or expectations that can be empirically demonstrated. This immediately opens up methodological considerations for the political theorist. As I argued in Chapter 4, an integrated political theory of identity raises questions about individual-level variation. Here emerges one of those overlapping points: political theory overlaps with the behavioral sciences in attempting to reconcile the effects of

predispositions, or deep-seated “tendencies” that arise from an amalgam of biology and early childhood socialization, with the effects of socially proscribed “scripts” or social identities.

This raises significant questions about organizing, politically, because of what it implies about the nature of some of our differences. If our political contests are not entirely the result of differences in socialization and misunderstanding, but from differences partially rooted in our biology that seems to yield a call for “tolerance,” not in its oppressive form, where hegemonic groups shore up their position in a hierarchy by “tolerating” the existence of marginalized groups (this is best expressed in the claim that one can “hate the sin but love the sinner”), but in a more honest sense. If we can’t “fight nature,” perhaps it is best to merely accept it and enable everyone to “be who they are”? But this isn’t a conclusion drawn from the empirical evidence; it is more a political claim, premised on liberalism being “right,” or at least the “only game in town.” Within certain domains, this position makes perfect sense – arguments about politics around the dinner table certainly look different on this account. Because current science emphasizes the important role of context, however, politics and institutions, yet again, must be the focus. And those politics and institutions are underdetermined by the empirical evidence. For the liberal, these should enable greater liberty so long as that liberty doesn’t infringe on somebody else’s liberty. But liberty isn’t as easily circumscribed in the way liberalism assumes it is. A homophobe beating up a gay man, for example, is a clear infringement of liberty. But that behavior is “made sense of,” even rationalized within a homophobic context, a context that not only justifies homophobia but, assuming that “disgust” is common in human animals, “activates” and directs its expression by constructing a target.

In other words, the political ramifications of this are far more complicated than merely “tolerating” a homophobic friend. The goal is to change institutions, not because we are socially constructed animals but because our biological “architectures” are underdetermined. Therefore, our *values* – what we hope to realize politically – while complicated by the domain of biology in ways I have explored in this dissertation, are still wide open. And our *politics*, while, at times, very complicated by the domain of biology in ways I have explored in this dissertation, are also still open.

The paradigm shift defended here, however, is so significant it is difficult to imagine what the alternatives (considerations, ways of asking old questions or new questions entirely) might be. My dissertation provides a framework and the correct ways to *ask the questions*, but more is implied here than answered. I don’t see this as a critique of my project, however. Rather, it is its biggest contribution.

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