

Social psychologists have discovered that even in heated ideological battles, common ground can sometimes be found.² Each side must acknowledge that the other is arguing out of principle, too, and that they both share certain values and disagree only over which to emphasize in cases where they conflict. Finding such common ground is my goal in the discussions to follow.

Chapter 16

Politics

I often think it's comical
How nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal,
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!

GILBERT AND SULLIVAN got it mostly right in 1882: liberal and conservative political attitudes are largely, though far from completely, heritable. When identical twins who were separated at birth are tested in adulthood, their political attitudes turn out to be similar, with a correlation coefficient of .62 (on a scale from -1 to +1).² Liberal and conservative attitudes are heritable not, of course, because attitudes are synthesized directly from DNA but because they come naturally to people with different temperaments. Conservatives, for example, tend to be more authoritarian, conscientious, traditional, and rule-bound. But whatever its immediate source, the heritability of political attitudes can explain some of the sparks that fly when liberals and conservatives meet. When it comes to attitudes that are heritable, people react more quickly and emotionally, are less likely to change their minds, and are more attracted to like-minded people.³

Liberalism and conservatism have not just genetic roots, of course, but historical and intellectual ones. The two political philosophies were articulated in the eighteenth century in terms that would be familiar to readers of the editorial pages today, and their foundations can be traced back millennia to the political controversies of ancient Greece. During the past three centuries, many revolutions and uprisings were fought over these philosophies, as are the major elections in modern democracies.

This chapter is about the intellectual connections between the sciences of human nature and the political rift between right-wing and left-wing political

philosophies. The connection is not a secret. As philosophers have long noted, the two sides are not just political belief systems but empirical ones, rooted in different conceptions of human nature. Small wonder that the sciences of human nature have been so explosive. Evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics, and some parts of cognitive neuroscience are widely seen as falling on the political right, which in a modern university is about the worst thing you can say about something. No one can make sense of the controversies surrounding mind, brain, genes, and evolution without understanding their alignment with ancient political fault lines. E. O. Wilson learned this too late:

I had been blindsided by the attack [on *Sociobiology*]. Having expected some frontal fire from social scientists on primarily evidential grounds, I had received instead a political enfilade from the flank. A few observers were surprised that I was surprised. John Maynard Smith, a senior British evolutionary biologist and former Marxist, said that he disliked the last chapter of *Sociobiology* himself and "it was also absolutely obvious to me—I cannot believe Wilson didn't know—that this was going to provoke great hostility from American Marxists, and Marxists everywhere." But it was true. . . . In 1975 I was a political naïf: I knew almost nothing about Marxism as either a political belief or a mode of analysis, I had paid little attention to the dynamism of the activist left, and I had never heard of Science for the People. I was not even an intellectual in the European or New York–Cambridge sense.⁴

As we shall see, the new sciences of human nature really do resonate with assumptions that historically were closer to the right than to the left. But today the alignments are not as predictable. The accusation that these sciences are irredeemably conservative comes from the Left Pole, the mythical place from which all directions are right. The political associations of a belief in human nature now crosscut the liberal-conservative dimension, and many political theorists invoke evolution and genetics to argue for policies on the left.

THE SCIENCES OF human nature are pressing on two political hot buttons, not just one. The first is how we conceptualize the entity known as "society." The political philosopher Roger Masters has shown how sociobiology (and related theories invoking evolution, genetics, and brain science) inadvertently took sides in an ancient dispute between two traditions of understanding the social order.⁵

In the *sociological* tradition, a society is a cohesive organic entity and its individual citizens are mere parts. People are thought to be social by their very nature and to function as constituents of a larger superorganism. This is the tradition of Plato, Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Kroeber, the sociologist

Talcott Parsons, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and postmodernism in the humanities and social sciences.

In the *economic* or *social contract* tradition, society is an arrangement negotiated by rational, self-interested individuals. Society emerges when people agree to sacrifice some of their autonomy in exchange for security from the depredations of others wielding their autonomy. It is the tradition of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, and of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, and Bentham. In the twentieth century it became the basis for the rational actor or "economic man" models in economics and political science, and for cost-benefit analyses of public choices.

The modern theory of evolution falls smack into the social contract tradition. It maintains that complex adaptations, including behavioral strategies, evolved to benefit the individual (indeed, the genes for those traits within an individual), not the community, species, or ecosystem.⁶ Social organization evolves when the long-term benefits to the individual outweigh the immediate costs. Darwin was influenced by Adam Smith, and many of his successors analyze the evolution of sociality using tools that come right out of economics, such as game theory and other optimization techniques.

Reciprocal altruism, in particular, is just the traditional concept of the social contract restated in biological terms. Of course, humans were never solitary (as Rousseau and Hobbes incorrectly surmised), and they did not inaugurate group living by haggling over a contract at a particular time and place. Bands, clans, tribes, and other social groups are central to human existence and have been so for as long as we have been a species. But the *logic* of social contracts may have propelled the evolution of the mental faculties that keep us in these groups. Social arrangements are evolutionarily contingent, arising when the benefits of group living exceed the costs.⁷ With a slightly different ecosystem and evolutionary history, we could have ended up like our cousins the orangutans, who are almost entirely solitary. And according to evolutionary biology, all societies—animal and human—seethe with conflicts of interest and are held together by shifting mixtures of dominance and cooperation.

Throughout the book we have seen how the sciences of human nature have clashed with the sociological tradition. The social sciences were taken over by the doctrine that social facts live in their own universe, separate from the universe of individual minds. In Chapter 4 we saw an alternative conception in which cultures and societies arise from individual people pooling their discoveries and negotiating the tacit agreements that underlie social reality. We saw how a departure from the sociological paradigm was a major heresy of Wilson's *Sociobiology*, and that the primacy of society was a foundation of Marxism and played a role in its disdain for the interests of individual people. The division between the sociological and economic traditions is aligned

with the division between the political left and the political right, but only roughly. Marxism is obviously in the sociological tradition, and free-market conservatism is obviously in the economic tradition. In the liberal 1960s, Lyndon Johnson wanted to forge a Great Society, Pierre Trudeau a Just Society. In the conservative 1980s, Margaret Thatcher said, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."

But as Masters points out, Durkheim and Parsons were in the sociological tradition, yet they were conservatives. One can easily see how conservative beliefs can favor the preservation of society as an entity and thereby downplay the desires of individuals. Conversely, Locke was in the social contract tradition, but he is a patron saint of liberalism, and Rousseau, who coined the expression "social contract," was an inspiration for liberal and revolutionary thinkers. Social contracts, like any contract, can become unfair to some of the signatories, and may have to be renegotiated progressively or redrawn from scratch in a revolution.

So the clash between the sociological and economic traditions can explain some of the heat ignited by the sciences of human nature, but it is not identical to the firefight between the political left and the political right. The rest of the chapter will scrutinize that second and hotter button.

THE RIGHT-LEFT AXIS aligns an astonishing collection of beliefs that at first glance seem to have nothing in common. If you learn that someone is in favor of a strong military, for example, it is a good bet that the person is also in favor of judicial restraint rather than judicial activism. If someone believes in the importance of religion, chances are she will be tough on crime and in favor of lower taxes. Proponents of a laissez-faire economic policy tend to value patriotism and the family, and they are more likely to be old than young, pragmatic than idealistic, censorious than permissive, meritocratic than egalitarian, gradualist than revolutionary, and in a business rather than a university or government agency. The opposing positions cluster just as reliably: if someone is sympathetic to rehabilitating offenders, or to affirmative action, or to generous welfare programs, or to a tolerance of homosexuality, chances are good that he will also be a pacifist, an environmentalist, an activist, an egalitarian, a secularist, and a professor or student.

Why on earth should people's beliefs about sex predict their beliefs about the size of the military? What does religion have to do with taxes? Whence the linkages between strict construction of the Constitution and disdain for "shocking art"? Before we can understand why beliefs about an innate human nature might cluster with liberal beliefs or with conservative beliefs, we have to understand why liberal beliefs cluster with other liberal beliefs and conservative beliefs cluster with other conservative beliefs.

The meanings of the words are of no help. Marxists in the Soviet Union

and its aftermath were called conservatives; Reagan and Thatcher were called revolutionaries. Liberals are liberal about sexual behavior but not about business practices; conservatives want to conserve communities and traditions, but they also favor the free market economy that subverts them. People who call themselves "classical liberals" are likely to be called "conservatives" by adherents of the version of leftism known as political correctness.

Nor can most contemporary liberals and conservatives articulate the cores of their belief systems. Liberals think that conservatives are just amoral plutocrats, and conservatives think that if you are not a liberal before you are twenty you have no heart but if you are a liberal after you are twenty you have no brain (attributed variously to Georges Clemenceau, Dean Inge, Benjamin Disraeli, and Maurice Maeterlinck). Strategic alliances—such as the religious fundamentalists and free-market technocrats on the right, or the identity politicians and civil libertarians on the left—may frustrate the search for any intellectual common denominator. Everyday political debates, such as whether tax rates should be exactly what they are or a few points higher or lower, are just as uninformative.

The most sweeping attempt to survey the underlying dimension is Thomas Sowell's *A Conflict of Visions*.⁸ Not every ideological struggle fits his scheme, but as we say in social science, he has identified a factor that can account for a large proportion of the variance. Sowell explains two "visions" of the nature of human beings that were expressed in their purest forms by Edmund Burke (1729–1797), the patron of secular conservatism, and William Godwin (1756–1836), the British counterpart to Rousseau. In earlier times they might have been referred to as different visions of the perfectibility of man. Sowell calls them the Constrained Vision and the Unconstrained Vision; I will refer to them as the Tragic Vision (a term he uses in a later book) and the Utopian Vision.⁹

In the Tragic Vision, humans are inherently limited in knowledge, wisdom, and virtue, and all social arrangements must acknowledge those limits. "Mortal things suit mortals best," wrote Pindar; "From the crooked timber of humanity no truly straight thing can be made," wrote Kant. The Tragic Vision is associated with Hobbes, Burke, Smith, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, the philosophers Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, and the legal scholar Richard Posner.

In the Utopian Vision, psychological limitations are artifacts that *come from* our social arrangements, and we should not allow them to restrict our gaze from what is possible in a better world. Its creed might be "Some people see things as they are and ask 'why?'; I dream things that never were and ask 'why not?'" The quotation is often attributed to the icon of 1960s liberalism, Robert F. Kennedy, but it was originally penned by the Fabian socialist George

Bernard Shaw (who also wrote, "There is nothing that can be changed more completely than human nature when the job is taken in hand early enough").¹⁰ The Utopian Vision is also associated with Rousseau, Godwin, Condorcet, Thomas Paine, the jurist Earl Warren, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and to a lesser extent the political philosopher Ronald Dworkin.

In the Tragic Vision, our moral sentiments, no matter how beneficent, overlie a deeper bedrock of selfishness. That selfishness is not the cruelty or aggression of the psychopath, but a concern for our well-being that is so much a part of our makeup that we seldom reflect on it and would waste our time lamenting it or trying to erase it. In his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith remarked:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would react upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would, too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but provided he never saw them, he would snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren.¹¹

In the Tragic Vision, moreover, human nature has not changed. Traditions such as religion, the family, social customs, sexual mores, and political institutions are a distillation of time-tested techniques that let us work around the shortcomings of human nature. They are as applicable to humans today as they were when they developed, even if no one today can explain their rationale. However imperfect society may be, we should measure it against the cruelty and deprivation of the actual past, not the harmony and affluence of an imagined future. We are fortunate enough to live in a society that more or less works, and our first priority should be not to screw it up, because human na-

ture always leaves us teetering on the brink of barbarism. And since no one is smart enough to predict the behavior of a single human being, let alone millions of them interacting in a society, we should distrust any formula for changing society from the top down, because it is likely to have unintended consequences that are worse than the problems it was designed to fix. The best we can hope for are incremental changes that are continuously adjusted according to feedback about the sum of their good and bad consequences. It also follows that we should not aim to *solve* social problems like crime or poverty, because in a world of competing individuals one person's gain may be another person's loss. The best we can do is trade off one cost against another. In Burke's famous words, written in the aftermath of the French Revolution:

[One] should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father; with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father's life.¹²

In the Utopian Vision, human nature changes with social circumstances, so traditional institutions have no inherent value. That was then, this is now. Traditions are the dead hand of the past, the attempt to rule from the grave. They must be stated explicitly so their rationale can be scrutinized and their moral status evaluated. And by that test, many traditions fail: the confinement of women to the home, the stigma against homosexuality and premarital sex, the superstitions of religion, the injustice of apartheid and segregation, the dangers of patriotism as exemplified in the mindless slogan "My country, right or wrong." Practices such as absolute monarchy, slavery, war, and patriarchy once seemed inevitable but have disappeared or faded from many parts of the world through changes in institutions that were once thought to be rooted in human nature. Moreover, the existence of suffering and injustice presents us with an undeniable moral imperative. We don't know what we can achieve until we try, and the alternative, resigning ourselves to these evils as the way of the world, is unconscionable. At Robert Kennedy's funeral, his brother Edward quoted from one of his recent speeches:

All of us will ultimately be judged and as the years pass we will surely judge ourselves, on the effort we have contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which our ideals and goals have shaped that effort.

The future does not belong to those who are content with today,

apathetic toward common problems and their fellow man alike, timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects. Rather it will belong to those who can blend vision, reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideals and great enterprises of American Society.

Our future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control. It is the shaping impulse of America that neither fate nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle, will determine our destiny. There is pride in that, even arrogance, but there is also experience and truth. In any event, it is the only way we can live.¹³

Those with the Tragic Vision are unmoved by ringing declarations attributed to the first-person plural *we*, *our*, and *us*. They are more likely to use the pronouns as the cartoon possum Pogo did: We have met the enemy, and he is us. We are all members of the same flawed species. Putting our moral vision into practice means imposing our will on others. The human lust for power and esteem, coupled with its vulnerability to self-deception and self-righteousness, makes that an invitation to a calamity, all the worse when that power is directed at a goal as quixotic as eradicating human self-interest. As the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote, "To try to do something which is inherently impossible is always a corrupting enterprise."

The two kinds of visionaries thereby line up on opposite sides of many issues that would seem to have little in common. The Utopian Vision seeks to articulate social goals and devise policies that target them directly: economic inequality is attacked in a war on poverty; pollution by environmental regulations, racial imbalances by preferences, carcinogens by bans on food additives. The Tragic Vision points to the self-interested motives of the people who would implement these policies—namely, the expansion of their bureaucratic fiefdoms—and to their ineptitude at anticipating the myriad consequences, especially when the social goals are pitted against millions of people pursuing their own interests. Thus, say the Tragic Visionaries, the Utopians fail to anticipate that welfare might encourage dependency, or that a restriction on one pollutant might force people to use another.

Instead, the Tragic Vision looks to systems that produce desirable outcomes even when no member of the system is particularly wise or virtuous. Market economies, in this vision, accomplish that goal: remember Smith's butcher, brewer, and baker providing us with dinner out of self-interest rather than benevolence. No mastermind has to understand the intricate flow of goods and services that make up an economy in order to anticipate who needs what, and when and where. Property rights give people an incentive to work and produce; contracts allow them to enjoy gains in trade. Prices convey information about scarcity and demand to producers and consumers, so they can

react by following a few simple rules—make more of what is profitable, buy less of what is expensive—and the "invisible hand" will do the rest. The intelligence of the system is distributed across millions of not-necessarily-intelligent producers and consumers, and cannot be articulated by anyone in particular.

People with the Utopian Vision point to market failures that can result from having a blind faith in free markets. They also call attention to the unjust distribution of wealth that tends to be produced by free markets. Opponents with the Tragic Vision argue that the notion of justice makes sense only when applied to human decisions within a framework of laws, not when applied to an abstraction called "society." Friedrich Hayek wrote, "The manner in which the benefits and burdens are apportioned by the market mechanism would in many instances have to be regarded as very unjust if it were the result of a deliberate allocation to particular people." But that concern with social justice rests on a confusion, he claimed, because "the particulars of [a spontaneous order] cannot be just or unjust."¹⁴

Some of today's battles between left and right fall directly out of these different philosophies: big versus small government, high versus low taxes, protectionism versus free trade, measures that aim to reduce undesirable outcomes (poverty, inequality, racial imbalance) versus measures that merely level the playing field and enforce the rules. Other battles follow in a less obvious way from the opposing visions of human potential. The Tragic Vision stresses fiduciary duties, even when the person executing them cannot see their immediate value, because they allow imperfect beings who cannot be sure of their virtue or foresight to participate in a tested system. The Utopian Vision stresses social responsibility, where people hold their actions to a higher ethical standard. In Lawrence Kohlberg's famous theory of moral development, a willingness to ignore rules in favor of abstract principles was literally identified as a "higher stage" (which, perhaps tellingly, most people never reach).

The most obvious example is the debate on strict constructionism and judicial restraint on one side and judicial activism in pursuit of social justice on the other. Earl Warren, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1954 to 1969, was the prototypical judicial activist, who led the court to implement desegregation and expand the rights of the accused. He was known for interrupting lawyers in mid-argument by asking, "Is it *right*? Is it *good*?" The opposing view was stated by Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said his job was "to see that the game is played according to the rules whether I like them or not." He conceded that "to improve conditions of life and the race is the main thing," and added, "But how the devil can I tell whether I am not pulling it down more in some other place?"¹⁵ Those with the Tragic Vision see judicial activism as an invitation to egotism and caprice and as unfair to those who have played by the rules as they were publicly stated. Those with the Utopian Vision see judicial restraint as the mindless preservation of arbitrary injustices—as Dickens's Mr.

Bumble put it, "The law is an ass."¹⁶ An infamous example is the Dred Scott decision of 1856, in which the Supreme Court ruled on narrow legalistic grounds that a freed slave could not sue to make his freedom official and that Congress could not prohibit slavery in federal territories.

Radical political reform, like radical judicial reform, will be more or less appealing depending on one's confidence in human intelligence and wisdom. In the Utopian Vision, solutions to social problems are readily available. Speaking in 1967 about the conditions that breed violence, Lyndon Johnson said, "All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs."¹⁷ If we already know the solutions, all we have to do is choose to implement them, and that requires only sincerity and dedication. By the same logic, anyone opposing the solutions must be motivated by blindness, dishonesty, and callousness. Those with the Tragic Vision say instead that solutions to social problems are elusive. The inherent conflicts of interest among people leave us with few options, all of them imperfect. Opponents of radical reform are showing a wise distrust of human hubris.

The political orientation of the universities is another manifestation of conflicting visions of human potential. Adherents of the Tragic Vision distrust knowledge stated in explicitly articulated and verbally justified propositions, which is the stock-in-trade of academics, pundits, and policy analysts. Instead they trust knowledge that is distributed diffusely throughout a system (such as a market economy or set of social mores) and which is tuned by adjustments by many simple agents using feedback from the world. (Cognitive scientists will be reminded of the distinction between symbolic representations and distributed neural networks, and that is no coincidence: Hayek, the foremost advocate of distributed intelligence in societies, was an early neural network modeler.)¹⁸ For much of the twentieth century, political conservatism had an anti-intellectual streak, until conservatives decided to play catch-up in the battle for hearts and minds and funded policy think tanks as a counterweight to universities.

Finally, the disagreements on crime and war fall right out of the conflicting theories of human nature. Given the obvious waste and cruelty of war, those with the Utopian Vision see it as a kind of pathology that arises from misunderstandings, shortsightedness, and irrational passions. War is to be prevented by public expressions of pacifist sentiments, better communication between potential enemies, less saber-rattling rhetoric, fewer weapons and military alliances, a de-emphasis on patriotism, and negotiating to avert war at any cost. Adherents of the Tragic Vision, with their cynical view of human nature, see war as a rational and tempting strategy for people who think they can gain something for themselves or their nation. The calculations might be mistaken in any instance, and they may be morally deplorable because they give no weight to the suffering of the losers, but they are not literally pathological

or irrational. On this view the only way to ensure peace is to raise the cost of war to potential aggressors by developing weaponry, arousing patriotism, rewarding bravery, flaunting one's might and resolve, and negotiating from strength to deter blackmail.

The same arguments divide the visions on crime. Those with the Utopian Vision see crime as inherently irrational and seek to prevent it by identifying the root causes. Those with the Tragic Vision see crime as inherently rational and believe that the root cause is all too obvious: people rob banks because that's where the money is. The most effective crime-prevention programs, they say, strike directly at the rational incentives: A high probability of unpleasant punishment raises the anticipated cost of crime. A public emphasis on personal responsibility helps enforce the incentives by closing any loopholes left open by the law. And strict parenting practices allow children to internalize these contingencies early in life.¹⁹

AND ONTO THIS battlefield strode an innocent E. O. Wilson. The ideas from evolutionary biology and behavioral genetics that became public in the 1970s could not have been more of an insult to those with the Utopian Vision. That vision was, after all, based on the Blank Slate (no permanent human nature), the Noble Savage (no selfish or evil instincts), and the Ghost in the Machine (an unfettered "we" that can choose better social arrangements). And here were scientists talking about *selfish genes!* And saying that adaptations are not for the good of the species but for the good of individuals and their kin (as if to vindicate Thatcher's claim that "there is no such thing as society"). That people scrimp on altruism because it is vulnerable to cheaters. That in pre-state societies men go to war even when they are well fed, because status and women are permanent Darwinian incentives. That the moral sense is riddled with biases, including a tendency to self-deception. And that conflicts of genetic interest are built in to social animals and leave us in a state of permanent tragedy. It looked as if the scientists were saying to proponents of the Tragic Vision: You're right, they're wrong.

The Utopians, particularly those in the radical science movement, replied that current findings on human intelligence and motivation are irrelevant. They can tell us only about what we have achieved in today's society, not what we might achieve in tomorrow's. Since we know that social arrangements can change if we decide to change them, any scientist who speaks of constraints on human nature must *want* oppression and injustice to continue.

My own view is that the new sciences of human nature really do vindicate some version of the Tragic Vision and undermine the Utopian outlook that until recently dominated large segments of intellectual life. The sciences say nothing, of course, about differences in values that are associated with particular right-wing and left-wing positions (such as in the tradeoffs between

unemployment and environmental protection, diversity and economic efficiency, or individual freedom and community cohesion). Nor do they speak directly to policies that are based on a complex mixture of assumptions about the world. But they do speak to the parts of the visions that are general claims about how the mind works. Those claims may be evaluated against the facts, just like any empirical hypothesis. The Utopian vision that human nature might radically change in some imagined society of the remote future is, of course, literally unfalsifiable, but I think that many of the discoveries recounted in preceding chapters make it unlikely. Among them I would include the following:

- The primacy of family ties in all human societies and the consequent appeal of nepotism and inheritance.²⁰
- The limited scope of communal sharing in human groups, the more common ethos of reciprocity, and the resulting phenomena of social loafing and the collapse of contributions to public goods when reciprocity cannot be implemented.²¹
- The universality of dominance and violence across human societies (including supposedly peaceable hunter-gatherers) and the existence of genetic and neurological mechanisms that underlie it.²²
- The universality of ethnocentrism and other forms of group-against-group hostility across societies, and the ease with which such hostility can be aroused in people within our own society.²³
- The partial heritability of intelligence, conscientiousness, and antisocial tendencies, implying that some degree of inequality will arise even in perfectly fair economic systems, and that we therefore face an inherent trade-off between equality and freedom.²⁴
- The prevalence of defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, and cognitive dissonance reduction, by which people deceive themselves about their autonomy, wisdom, and integrity.²⁵
- The biases of the human moral sense, including a preference for kin and friends, a susceptibility to a taboo mentality, and a tendency to confuse morality with conformity, rank, cleanliness, and beauty.²⁶

It is not just conventional scientific data that tell us the mind is not innately malleable. I think it is no coincidence that beliefs that were common among intellectuals in the 1960s—that democracies are obsolete, revolution is desirable, the police and armed forces dispensable, and society designable from the top down—are now rarer. The Tragic Vision and the Utopian Vision inspired historical events whose interpretations are much clearer than they were just a few decades ago. Those events can serve as additional data to test the visions' claims about human psychology.

The visions contrast most sharply in the political revolutions they spawned. The first revolution with a Utopian Vision was the French Revolution—recall Wordsworth's description of the times, with "human nature seeming born again."²⁷ The revolution overthrew the ancien régime and sought to begin from scratch with the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity and a belief that salvation would come from vesting authority in a morally superior breed of leaders. The revolution, of course, sent one leader after another to the guillotine as each failed to measure up to usurpers who felt they had a stronger claim to wisdom and virtue. No political structure survived the turnover of personnel, leaving a vacuum that would be filled by Napoleon. The Russian Revolution was also animated by the Utopian Vision, and it also burned through a succession of leaders before settling into the personality cult of Stalin. The Chinese Revolution, too, put its faith in the benevolence and wisdom of a man who displayed, if anything, a particularly strong dose of human foibles like dominance, lust, and self-deception. The perennial limitations of human nature prove the futility of political revolutions based only on the moral aspirations of the revolutionaries. In the words of the song about revolution by The Who: Meet the new boss; same as the old boss.

Sowell points out that Marxism is a hybrid of the two visions.²⁷ It invokes the Tragic Vision to interpret the past, when earlier modes of production left no choice but the forms of social organization known as feudalism and capitalism. But it invokes a Utopian Vision for the future, in which we can shape our nature in dialectical interaction with the material and social environment. In that new world, people will be motivated by self-actualization rather than self-interest, allowing us to realize the ideal, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Marx wrote that a communist society would be

the genuine resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man; it is the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and species. It is the riddle of history solved.²⁸

It doesn't get any less tragic or more utopian than that. Marx dismissed the worry that selfishness and dominance would corrupt those carrying out the general will. For example, he waved off the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's fear that the workers in charge would become despotic: "If Mr. Bakunin were familiar just with the position of a manager in a workers' cooperative, he could send all his nightmares about authority to the devil."²⁹

In the heyday of radical science, any proposal about human nature that conflicted with the Marxist vision was dismissed as self-evidently wrong. But history is a kind of experiment, albeit an imperfectly controlled one, and its

data suggest that it was the radical assessment that got it wrong. Marxism is now almost universally recognized as an experiment that failed, at least in its worldly implementations.³⁰ The nations that adopted it either collapsed, gave it up, or languish in backward dictatorships. As we saw in earlier chapters, the ambition to remake human nature turned its leaders into totalitarian despots and mass murderers. And the assumption that central planners were morally disinterested and cognitively competent enough to direct an entire economy led to comical inefficiencies with serious consequences. Even the more humane forms of European socialism have been watered down to the point where so-called Communist Parties have platforms that not long ago would have been called reactionary. Wilson, the world's expert on ants, may have had the last laugh in his verdict on Marxism: "Wonderful theory. Wrong species."³¹

"TWO CHEERS FOR democracy," proclaimed E. M. Forster. "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried," said Winston Churchill. These are encomiums worthy of the Tragic Vision. For all their flaws, liberal democracies appear to be the best form of large-scale social organization our sorry species has come up with so far. They provide more comfort and freedom, more artistic and scientific vitality, longer and safer lives, and less disease and pollution than any of the alternatives. Modern democracies never have famines, almost never wage war on one another, and are the top choice of people all over the world who vote with their feet or with their boats. The moderate success of democracies, like the failures of radical revolutions and of Marxist governments, is now widely enough agreed upon that it may serve as another empirical test for rival theories of human nature.

The modern concept of democracy emerged in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and was refined in the frenzy of theorizing that surrounded the American independence movement. It is no coincidence that the major theoreticians of the social contract, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, were also major armchair psychologists. As Madison wrote, "What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?"³²

The brains behind the American Revolution (which is sometimes labeled with the oxymoron "conservative revolution") inherited the tragic vision of thinkers like Hobbes and Hume.³³ (Significantly, the founders appear not to have been influenced by Rousseau at all, and the popular belief that they got the idea of democracy from the Iroquois Federation is just 1960s granola.)³⁴ The legal scholar John McGinnis has argued that their theory of human nature could have come right out of modern evolutionary psychology.³⁵ It acknowledges the desire of individuals to further their interests in the form of an inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The state emerges from an agreement instituted to protect those rights, rather than being the embodiment of an autonomous superorganism. Rights need to be protected be-

cause when people live together their different talents and circumstances will lead some of them to possess things that others want. ("Men have different and unequal faculties for acquiring property," noted Madison.)³⁶ There are two ways to get something you want from other people: steal it or trade for it. The first involves the psychology of dominance; the second, the psychology of reciprocal altruism. The goal of a peaceful and prosperous society is to minimize the use of dominance, which leads to violence and waste, and to maximize the use of reciprocity, which leads to gains in trade that make everyone better off.

The Constitution, McGinnis shows, was consciously designed to implement these goals. It encouraged reciprocal exchanges through the Commerce Clause, which authorized Congress to remove barriers to trade imposed by the states. It protected them from the danger of cheaters through the Contracts Clause, which prevented states from impairing the enforcement of contracts. And it precluded rulers from confiscating the fruits of the more productive citizens via the Takings Clause, which forbids the government to expropriate private property without compensation.

The feature of human nature that most impressed the Framers was the drive for dominance and esteem, which, they feared, imperils all forms of government. Someone must be empowered to make decisions and enforce laws, and that someone is inherently vulnerable to corruption. How to anticipate and limit that corruption became an obsession of the Framers. John Adams wrote, "The desire for the esteem of others is as real a want of *nature* as hunger. It is the principal end of government to regulate this passion."³⁷ Alexander Hamilton wrote, "The love of fame [is] the ruling passion of the noblest minds."³⁸ James Madison wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."³⁹

So external and internal controls there would be. "Parchment barriers," said Madison, were not enough; rather, "ambition must be made to counteract ambition."⁴⁰ Checks and balances were instituted to stymie any faction that grew too powerful. They included the division of authority between federal and state governments, the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches, and the splitting of the legislative branch into two houses.

Madison was especially adamant that the Constitution rein in the part of human nature that encourages war, which is not a primitive lust for blood, he claimed, but an advanced lust for esteem:

War is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement. In war a physical force is created, and it is the executive will to direct it. In war the public treasures are to be unlocked, and it is the executive hand which is to dispense them. In war the honors and emoluments of office are to be

multipled; and it is the executive patronage under which they are to be enjoyed. It is in war finally that laurels are to be gathered, and it is the executive brow they are to encircle. The strongest passions and the most dangerous weakness of the human breast—ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of fame—are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace.⁴¹

This inspired the War Powers Clause, which gave Congress, not the president, the power to declare war. (It was infamously circumvented in the years of the Vietnam conflict, during which Johnson and Nixon never formally declared a state of war.)

McGinnis notes that even the freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press were motivated by features of human nature. The Framers justified them as means of preventing tyranny: a network of freely communicating citizens can counteract the might of the individuals in government. As we now say, they can “speak truth to power.” The dynamic of power sharing protected by these rights might go way back in evolutionary history. The primatologists Frans de Waal, Robin Dunbar, and Christopher Boehm have shown how a coalition of lower-ranking primates can depose a single alpha male.⁴² Like McGinnis, they suggest this may be a crude analogue of political democracy.

None of this means that the American Constitution was a guarantee of a happy and moral society, of course. By working within the glaringly undersized moral circle of the day, the Constitution failed to stand in the way of the genocide of native peoples, the slavery and segregation of African Americans, and the disenfranchisement of women. It said little about the conduct of foreign affairs, which (except with regard to strategic allies) has generally been guided by a cynical realpolitik. The first failing has been addressed by explicit measures to expand the legal circle, such as the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment; the second is unsolved and perhaps unsolvable, because other countries are necessarily outside any circle delineated by a national document. The Constitution also lacked any principled compassion for those at the bottom of the meritocracy, assuming that equality of opportunity was the only mechanism needed to address the distribution of wealth. And it is incapable of stipulating the suite of values and customs that appear to be necessary for a democracy to function in practice.

Acknowledging the relative success of constitutional democracy does not require one to be a flag-waving patriot. But it does suggest that something may have been right about the theory of human nature that guided its architects.

The left needs a new paradigm.

—Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left* (1999)⁴³

Conservatives need Charles Darwin.

—Larry Arnhart, “Conservatives, Design, and Darwin” (2000)⁴⁴

What’s going on? That voices of the contemporary left and the contemporary right are both embracing evolutionary psychology after decades of reviling it shows two things. One is that biological facts are beginning to box in plausible political philosophies. The belief on the left that human nature can be changed at will, and the belief on the right that morality rests on God’s endowing us with an immaterial soul, are becoming rearguard struggles against the juggernaut of science. A popular bumper sticker in the 1990s urged, *QUESTIO AVTORITATIS*. Another bumper sticker replied, *QUESTIO GRAVITATIS*. All political philosophies have to decide when their arguments are turning into the questioning of gravity.

The second development is that an acknowledgment of human nature can no longer be associated with the political right. Once the Utopian Vision is laid to rest, the field of political positions is wide open. The Tragic Vision, after all, has not been vindicated in anything like its most lugubrious form. For all its selfishness, the human mind is equipped with a moral sense, whose circle of application has expanded steadily and might continue to expand as more of the world becomes interdependent. And for all its limitations, human cognition is an open-ended combinatorial system, which in principle can increase its mastery over human affairs, just as it has increased its mastery of the physical and living worlds.

Traditions, for their part, are adapted not to human nature alone but to human nature in the context of an infrastructure of technology and economic exchange (one does not have to be a Marxist to accept this insight from Marx). Some traditional institutions, like families and the rule of law, may be adapted to eternal features of human psychology. Others, such as primogeniture, were obviously adapted to the demands of a feudal system that required keeping the family lands intact, and became obsolete when the economic system changed in the wake of industrialization. More recently, feminism was in part a response to improved reproductive technologies and the shift to a service economy. Because social conventions are not adapted to human nature alone, a respect for human nature does not require preserving all of them.

For these reasons I think political beliefs will increasingly cut across the centuries-old divide between the Tragic and Utopian Visions. They will diverge by invoking different aspects of human nature, by giving different weightings to conflicting goals, or by offering different assessments of the likely outcomes of particular courses of action.

I end the chapter with a tour of some thinkers on the left who are scrambling the traditional alignment between human nature and right-wing

politics. As its title suggests, *A Darwinian Left* is the most systematic attempt to map out the new alignment.⁴⁵ Singer writes, "It is time for the left to take seriously the fact that we are evolved animals, and that we bear the evidence of our inheritance, not only in our anatomy and our DNA, but in our behavior too."⁴⁶ For Singer this means acknowledging the limits of human nature, which makes the perfectibility of humankind an impossible goal. And it means acknowledging specific components of human nature. They include self-interest, which implies that competitive economic systems will work better than state monopolies; the drive for dominance, which makes powerful governments vulnerable to overweening autocrats; ethnocentrism, which puts nationalist movements at risk of committing discrimination and genocide; and differences between the sexes, which should temper measures for rigid gender parity in all walks of life.

So what's left of the left? an observer might ask. Singer replies, "If we shrug our shoulders at the avoidable suffering of the weak and the poor, of those who are getting exploited and ripped off, or who simply do not have enough to sustain life at a decent level, we are not of the left. If we say that that is just the way the world is, and always will be, and there is nothing we can do about it, we are not part of the left. The left wants to do something about this situation."⁴⁷ Singer's leftism, like traditional leftism, is defined by a contrast with a defeatist Tragic Vision. But its goal—"doing something"—has been downsized considerably from Robert Kennedy's goal in the 1960s of "building a new world society."

The Darwinian left has ranged from vague expressions of values to workable policy initiatives. We have already met two theoreticians at the vanguard. Chomsky has been the most vocal defender of an innate cognitive endowment since he nailed his thesis of an inborn language faculty to the behaviorists' door in the late 1950s. He has also been a fierce left-wing critic of American society and has recently inspired a whole new generation of campus radicals (as we saw in his interview with Rage Against the Machine). Chomsky insists that the connections between his science and his politics are slender but real:

A vision of a future social order is . . . based on a concept of human nature. If, in fact, man is an indefinitely malleable, completely plastic being, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then he is a fit subject for the "shaping of behavior" by the State authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee. Those with some confidence in the human species will hope this is not so and will try to determine the intrinsic characteristics that provide the framework for intellectual development, the growth of moral consciousness, cultural achievement, and participation in a free community.⁴⁸

He describes his political vision as "libertarian socialist" and "anarcho-syndicalist," the kind of anarchism that values spontaneous cooperation (as opposed to anarcho-capitalism, the kind that values individualism).⁴⁹ This vision, he suggests, lies in a Cartesian tradition that includes "Rousseau's opposition to tyranny, oppression, and established authority. . . . Kant's defense of freedom, Humboldt's precapitalist liberalism with its emphasis on the basic human need for free creation under conditions of voluntary association, and Marx's critique of alienated fragmented labor that turns men into machines, depriving them of their 'species character' of 'free conscious activity' and 'productive life' in association with their fellows."⁵⁰ Chomsky's political beliefs, then, resonate with his scientific belief that humans are innately endowed with a desire for community and a drive for creative free expression, language being the paradigm example. That holds out the hope for a society organized by cooperation and natural productivity rather than by hierarchical control and the profit motive.

Chomsky's theory of human nature, though strongly innatist, is innocent of modern evolutionary biology, with its demonstration of ubiquitous conflicts of genetic interest. These conflicts lead to a darker view of human nature, one that has always been a headache for those with anarchist dreams. But the one that has always been elucidated these conflicts, Robert Trivers, was a left-wing thinker who first elucidated these conflicts. Robert Trivers, was a left-wing radical as well, and one of the rare *white* Black Panthers. As we saw in Chapter 6, Trivers viewed sociobiology as a subversive discipline. A sensitivity to conflicts of interest can illuminate the interests of repressed agents, such as women and younger generations, and it can expose the deception and self-deception that elites use to justify their dominance.⁵¹ In that way sociobiology follows in the liberal tradition of Locke by using science and reason to debunk the rationalizations of rulers. Reason was used in Locke's time to question the divine right of kings, and may be used in our time to question the pretension that current political arrangements serve everyone's interests.

Though it may come as a shock to many people, the use of IQ tests and a recognition of innate differences in intelligence can support—and in the past did support—left-wing political goals. In his article "Bell Curve Liberals," the journalist Adrian Wooldridge points out that IQ testing was welcomed by the British left as the ultimate subverter of a caste society ruled by inbred upper-class twits.⁵² Together with other liberals and socialists, Sidney and Beatrice Webb hoped to turn the educational system into a "capacity-catching machine" that could "rescue talented poverty from the shop or the plough" and direct them into the ruling elite. They were opposed by conservatives such as T. S. Eliot, who worried that a system that sorts people by ability would disorganize civil society by breaking the bonds of class and tradition at both ends of the ladder. At one end it would fragment working-class communities, dividing them by talent. At the other it would remove the ethic of noblesse oblige from the upper classes, who now would have "earned" their success and be

responsible to no one, rather than inheriting it and being obligated to help the less fortunate. Wooldridge argues that “the left can hardly afford to ignore IQ tests, which, for all their inadequacies, are still the best means yet devised for spotting talent wherever it occurs, in the inner cities as well as the plush housing estates, and ensuring that talent is matched to the appropriate educational streams and job opportunities.”

For their part, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (the authors of *The Bell Curve*) argued that the heritability of intelligence ought to galvanize the left into a greater commitment to Rawlsian social justice.⁵³ If intelligence were entirely acquired, then policies for equal opportunity would suffice to guarantee an equitable distribution of wealth and power. But if some souls have the misfortune of being born into brains with lower ability, they could fall into poverty through no fault of their own, even in a perfectly fair system of economic competition. If social justice consists of seeing to the well-being of the worst off, then recognizing genetic differences calls for an active redistribution of wealth. Indeed, though Herrnstein was a conservative and Murray a right-leaning libertarian and communitarian, they were not opposed to simple redistributive measures such as a negative income tax for the lowest wage earners, which would give a break to those who play by the rules but still can't scrape by. Murray's libertarianism leads him to oppose government programs that are more activist than that, but he and Herrnstein noted that a hereditarian left is a niche waiting to be filled.

An important challenge to conservative political theory has come from behavioral economists such as Richard Thaler and George Akerlof, who were influenced by the evolutionary cognitive psychology of Herbert Simon, Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, Gerd Gigerenzer, and Paul Slovic.⁵⁴ These psychologists have argued that human thinking and decision making are biological adaptations rather than engines of pure rationality. These mental systems work with limited amounts of information, have to reach decisions in a finite amount of time, and ultimately serve evolutionary goals such as status and security. Conservatives have always invoked limitations on human reason to rein in the pretense that we can understand social behavior well enough to redesign society. But those limitations also undermine the assumption of rational self-interest that underlies classical economics and secular conservatism. Ever since Adam Smith, classical economists have argued that in the absence of outside interference, individuals making decisions in their own interests will do what is best for themselves and for society. But if people do not always calculate what is best for themselves, they might be better off with the taxes and regulations that classical economists find so perverse.

For example, rational agents informed by interest rates and their life expectancies should save the optimal proportion of their wages for comfort in their old age. Social security and mandatory savings plans should be unneces-

sary—indeed, harmful—because they take away choice and hence the opportunity to find the best balance between consuming now and saving for the future. But economists repeatedly find that people spend their money like drunken sailors. They act as if they think they will die in a few years, or as if the future is completely unpredictable, which may be closer to the reality of our evolutionary ancestors than it is to life today.⁵⁵ If so, then allowing people to manage their own savings (for example, letting them keep their entire paycheck and investing it as they please) may work against their interests. Like Odysseus approaching the island of the Sirens, people might rationally agree to let their employer or the government tie them to the mast of forced savings.

The economist Robert Frank has appealed to the evolutionary psychology of status to point out other shortcomings of the rational-actor theory and, by extension, *laissez-faire* economics.⁵⁶ Rational actors should eschew not only forced retirement savings but other policies that ostensibly protect them, such as mandatory health benefits, workplace safety regulations, unemployment insurance, and union dues. All of these cost money that would otherwise go into their paychecks, and workers could decide for themselves whether to take a pay cut to work for a company with the most paternalistic policies or go for the biggest salary and take higher risks on the job. Companies, in their competition for the best employees, should find the balance demanded by the employees they want.

The rub, Frank points out, is that people are endowed with a craving for status. Their first impulse is to spend money in ways that put themselves ahead of the Joneses (houses, cars, clothing, prestigious educations), rather than in ways that only they know about (health care, job safety, retirement savings). Unfortunately, status is a zero-sum game, so when everyone has more money to spend on cars and houses, the houses and cars get bigger but people are no happier than they were before. Like hockey players who agree to wear helmets only if a rule forces their opponents to wear them too, people might agree to regulations that force everyone to pay for hidden benefits like health care that make them happier in the long run, even if the regulations come at the expense of disposable income. For the same reason, Frank argues, we would be better off if we implemented a steeply graduated tax on consumption, replacing the current graduated tax on income. A consumption tax would damp down the futile arms race for ever more lavish cars, houses, and watches and compensate people with resources that provably increase happiness, such as leisure time, safer streets, and more pleasant commuting and working conditions.

Finally, Darwinian leftists have been examining the evolutionary psychology of economic inequality. The economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, formerly Marxists and now Darwinians, have reviewed the literature from ethnography and behavioral economics which suggests that people are neither antlike altruists nor self-centered misers.⁵⁷ As we saw in Chapter 14, people

share with others who they think are willing to share, and punish those who are not. (Gintis calls this “strong reciprocity,” which is like reciprocal altruism or “weak reciprocity” but is aimed at other people’s willingness to contribute to public goods rather than at tit-for-tat exchanges.)⁵⁸ This psychology makes people oppose indiscriminate welfare and expansive social programs not because they are callous or greedy but because they think such programs reward the indolent and punish the industrious. Bowles and Gintis note that even in today’s supposedly antiwelfare climate, polls show that most people are willing to pay higher taxes for some kinds of universal social insurance. They are willing to pay to guarantee basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care, to aid the victims of bad luck, and to help people who are down and out become self-sufficient. In other words, people are opposed to a blanket welfare state not out of *greed* but out of *fairness*. A welfare system that did not try to rewrite the public consciousness, and which distinguished between the deserving and the undeserving poor, would, they argue, be perfectly consonant with human nature.

The politics of economic inequality ultimately hinge on a tradeoff between economic freedom and economic equality. Though scientists cannot dictate how these desiderata should be weighted, they can help assess the morally relevant costs and thereby enable us to make a more informed decision. Once again the psychology of status and dominance has a role to play in this assessment. In absolute terms, today’s poor are materially better off than the aristocracy of just a century ago. They live longer, are better fed, and enjoy formerly unimaginable luxuries such as central heating, refrigerators, telephones, and round-the-clock entertainment from television and radio. Conservatives say this makes it hard to argue that the station of lower-income people is an ethical outrage that ought to be redressed at any cost.

But if people’s sense of well-being comes from an assessment of their social status, and social status is relative, then extreme inequality can make people on the lower rungs feel defeated even if they are better off than most of humanity. It is not just a matter of hurt feelings: people with lower status are less healthy and die younger, and communities with greater inequality have poorer health and shorter life expectancies.⁵⁹ The medical researcher Richard Wilkinson, who documented these patterns, argues that low status triggers an ancient stress reaction that sacrifices tissue repair and immune function for an immediate fight-or-flight response. Wilkinson, together with Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, have pointed to another measurable cost of economic inequality. Crime rates are much higher in regions with greater disparities of wealth (even after controlling for absolute levels of wealth), partly because chronic low status leads men to become obsessed with rank and to kill one another over trivial insults.⁶⁰ Wilkinson argues that reducing economic inequality would make millions of lives happier, safer, and longer.

This well-populated gallery of left-wing innatists should not come as a surprise, even after centuries in which human nature was a preserve of the right. Mindful both of science and of history, the Darwinian left has abandoned the Utopian Vision that brought so many unintended disasters. Whether this non-Utopian left is really all that different from the contemporary secular right, and whether its particular policies are worth their costs, is not for me to argue here. The point is that traditional political alignments ought to change as we learn more about human beings. The ideologies of the left and the right took shape before Darwin, before Mendel, before anyone knew what a gene or a neuron or a hormone was. Every student of political science is taught that political ideologies are based on theories of human nature. Why must they be based on theories that are three hundred years out of date?