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Does the enduring nature that evolution has bequeathed us provide a foundation for moral and political order, and what do we lose, or risk losing, when we accept our nature as merely enduring, rather than permanent? But accepting nature as enduring, rather than permanent does pose some new questions; if human nature is not permanent or metaphysically necessary, then can it serve as a bedrock concept for moral reasoning and political order, or will our nature become just one more “institution,” subject to the schemes and whims of bioengineers or even politicians? It is this idea, that science ought to direct progress in human biological nature the same way it is hoped by some that it will direct progress in history, society, and culture, that I believe defines transhumanism.

Transhumanism so defined is both a practical and a theoretical challenge to Darwinian conservatism: practically, attempts to reform or revolutionize human nature could undermine what Darwinian conservatism sees as the biological basis for our moral and political order. The challenge transhumanism poses to Darwinian conservative theory would be that it recasts what I take to be the central Darwinian conservative argument: Human nature places constraints on progressivism in social and political matters, therefore we should be conservative in social and political matters. Transhumanists say: Human nature places constraints on progressivism in social and political matters, therefore we should be progressive (or revolutionary) about human nature. Furthermore, for the transhumanists, we have every reason to be dissatisfied with our nature, since it was poorly and irrationally designed—the mere product of history, not reason.

In discussing transhumanism, I am going to be mostly focusing on what I would describe as relatively “moderate” transhumanists, but before getting into their arguments, I will make some more general remarks about transhumanism, particularly with respect to the relationship between transhumanism and evolution.

A stricter definition for transhumanism than the one I gave would arguably include only those plans that are committed to going beyond humanity, to creating some new and higher type of being, what the really dedicated transhumanists call the “post-human.” The explicit intention of replacing humans with something better, something not at all recognizably human has, I think, less to do with pessimism about evolution than with radical optimism about what modern technology makes possible. Once, such optimism applied to evolution as well. Nietzsche, for instance, whose idea of the overman could be described as a sort of precursor of transhumanism, wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that “All beings so far have created something beyond themselves.” The Social Darwinists and some of the early eugenicists also sometimes saw natural selection as a desirable force that could and should drive social progress.

But contemporary transhumanists do not see evolution as such a beneficent force—they certainly do not see *biological* evolution as something conducive to the human good. Rather, they see the progress or evolution of technology (as opposed to biology) as a kind of autonomous force that will liberate humanity from natural, biological constraints.

The chief natural constraint that concerns radical transhumanists is mortality. They imagine that in the future, artificial intelligence technology will have advanced to the point where we will be able to "upload" our minds onto a "non-biological substrate," freeing us entirely from the constraints of our biological nature to live eternally as a kind of disembodied software program. But this desire for immortality is not a response to some perceived defect in our evolved, biological nature. Mortality is not a constraint imposed on us by evolution; mortality is a basic condition of biological life as such. It is true that evolution, or natural selection, doesn't care about our individual longevity or mortality except insofar as we must live long enough to raise our young, but mortality is not a trait that life on earth developed because of natural selection, rather, mortality has been among the underlying conditions of natural selection and evolution.

Nature offers a consolation for mortality in the form of children—from an evolutionary perspective, children are a perfectly valid substitution for immortality, though transhumanists are probably not entirely wrong to be dissatisfied with this consolation. They might well paraphrase Woody Allen by saying "I don't want to achieve immortality through my kids... I want to achieve it through not dying." In this sense, immortality is a challenge to Darwinian conservatism, as it points to the incompleteness of a Darwinian approach to human aspirations and longings. Indeed, no naturalistic ethics can fully account for the human longing for eternal life.

And of course, a longing for immortality, or an aversion to mortality of course predates any understanding of Darwinian evolution. It might suffice to mention the Epic of Gilgamesh, but we can also consider the more recent political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, the rationally constructed state exists to protect citizens against violent death, while for today's transhumanists, rationally constructed technology exists to protect humanity against any kind of death.

Although the desire for immortality on the part of many transhumanists does not reflect a dissatisfaction with the Darwinian view of human nature, the transhumanist project more broadly does stem from a dissatisfaction and contempt for our evolved nature. A characteristic expression of this attitude can be found in Max More's "[A Letter to Mother Nature](#)," where More, an influential figure in the transhumanist movement, complains of the defects of the "human constitution" and goes on to propose seven "amendments":

Mother Nature, truly we are grateful for what you have made us. No doubt you did the best you could. However, with all due respect, we must say that you have in many ways done a poor job with the human constitution. You have made us vulnerable to disease and damage. You compel us to age and die—just as we're beginning to attain wisdom. You were miserly in the extent to which you gave us awareness of our somatic, cognitive, and emotional processes. You held out on us by giving the sharpest senses to other animals. You made us functional only under narrow environmental conditions. You gave us limited memory, poor impulse control, and tribalistic, xenophobic urges.

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We will fix all individual and species defects left over from evolution by natural selection. Not content with that, we will seek complete choice of our bodily form and function[.]

Though More speaks of gratitude, his willful demands (6 of 7 of his proposed “amendments” begin with the words “we will”) and his laundry list of complaints speak to his ingratitude at being the way that he is—a sort of bitterness at having been merely born to parents, and not being a completely self-made, autonomous, and simply rational will.

A similar combination of ingratitude and hubris toward our evolutionary origins can be seen in the writings of today's more moderate advocates of transhumanism and human enhancement. Allen Buchanan, a philosopher associated with Oxford University's Uehiro Center for Practical Ethics has argued in two recent books, *Beyond Humanity?* and *Better than Human* that evolution, which he describes as “unintentional genetic modification,” has left human beings with a decidedly imperfect and flawed natures. To illustrate his view that a Darwinian understanding of nature supports the project of technologically enhancing or fixing human nature, Buchanan is fond of quoting a rather poetic statement of Charles Darwin's on the shortcomings of nature: “What a book a Devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low & horridly cruel works of nature!” This gloomy remark was [made in reference](#) to something that Thomas Henry Huxley had said about the reproductive behavior of a species of jellyfish: “The indecency of the process is to a certain extent in favour of its probability, nature becoming very *low* in all senses amongst these creatures.”

T. H. Huxley is worth mentioning, because although he was an ardent defender of evolutionary theory (he was widely known as “Darwin's Bulldog” for his advocacy of the theory) he was also very suspicious of attempts to draw ethical conclusions from evolution or our evolved nature. Huxley saw the Darwinian view of nature as being very red in tooth and claw, and in his influential lecture *Evolution and Ethics*, he wrote that “the thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist.” And so, for Huxley, “the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.”

Today's transhumanists, like Buchanan, simply see biotechnology as a weapon in our war against the morally indifferent or pernicious “cosmic process” of evolution. Are Buchanan and T. H. Huxley right about the need to combat our evolved nature? Let us return to Darwin for a moment; Darwin, as Buchanan reminds us, spoke of a book that a Devil's Chaplain might write about the blundering works of nature. Was Darwin himself such a Devil's Chaplain, and what did he write on the works of nature, as compared to the works of man, in the book he did write, *The Origin of the Species*? From the chapter on “Natural Selection”:

Man can act only on external and visible characters: nature cares nothing for appearances, except in so far as they may be useful to any being. She can act on every internal organ, on every shade of constitutional difference, on the whole machinery of life. Man selects only for his own good; Nature only for that of the being which she tends.

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How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods. Can we wonder, then, that nature's productions should be far 'truer' in character than man's productions; that they should be infinitely better adapted to the most complex conditions of life, and should plainly bear the stamp of far higher workmanship?

And the concluding sentences of the *Origin of the Species*, words to stir the heart of every biologist, speak directly to the question of how we should value the kind of nature that the evolutionary process generates, and seem to stand in tension with the idea that the works of nature are simply “horridly cruel”:

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

And yet, philosophers like Buchanan are not entirely wrong that human nature is imperfect. But recognizing the imperfection of our nature is not a novel insight, and though it is in some respects deepened by evolutionary biology, it is largely apparent to common sense that man is not by nature *simply* good. Conservatives, of course, do not believe that human nature is perfect, rather, they recognize that cultural institutions are necessary to constrain and guide our natural instincts, even as our nature constrains and guides our cultural institutions.

Buchanan takes the conservative insight that human nature constrains social progress as a premise that justifies a program of biomedical enhancement to remove these natural constraints on social progress. Conservatives, Buchanan argues, are excessively cautious about reforms to both natural and cultural order—for progressives informed by Darwinian science and instilled with hope from biotechnology, not only society, but nature should be submitted to rational, scientific control.

This position points to a fundamental disagreement between progressives and conservatives. Should we conform to a predisposed order of things, not of our own making, or should we, as rational, autonomous individuals seek to order the world according to our own will? This question now applies, in principle, not only to culture, society, and politics, but to nature as well.

Does this transhumanist challenge mean that we need recourse to intellectual or moral resources beyond what a “Darwinian Conservatism” might offer? Do we need to abandon either Darwinism or conservatism in light of the possibility of changing human nature?

I think that conservatives can accept the theory of evolution and face the challenge of transhumanism that are raised by certain interpretations of Darwinian evolution. Conservatives need to be conservative about nature in just the way we have always been conservative about culture, society, and politics—preserving for and transmitting to future generations a predisposed order, not of our own making, but shaped over time by the actions of the generations that came before us.

Nothing human, nor anything biological, may last *forever*, but that does not mean we should not be grateful—it is indeed for that very reason we should be grateful—for the human things, and the natural things that we have inherited, and that we are entrusted to pass on to future generations.