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Naturalism and Environmentalism: A Reply to Hinchman

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ABSTRACT

The values which are definitive of the humanist project, such as freedom and self-determination, are of central concern to environmentalism. This means, according to Lewis P. Hinchman, that environmentalists should seek a rapprochement with humanism, rather than rejecting it for its apparent anthropocentrism. He argues that this requires in turn the acceptance of those approaches to human self-understanding which are central to the hermeneutic traditions and the rejection of naturalist approaches, such as sociobiology, which is accused of producing deterministic, reifying, reductionist, dehumanising forms of understanding of human beings and human life. This paper seeks to show that sociobiology does not pose the kinds of threat to humanism and environmentalism outlined by Hinchman.

KEY WORDS

Humanism, sociobiology, naturalism, reductionism, environmental ethics

SOCIOBIOLOGY, CULTURALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: BASIC POSITIONS

A guiding thought of much modern environmentalism is that human beings are part of the natural world, not set over and above it. This means that human beings remain integrated into ecological systems, local and global, even while they change them, intentionally or otherwise. This fact of ecological interconnectedness is the basis upon which environmentalists have tried to develop ethical systems which attribute to human beings various moral responsibilities towards, and with respect to, the rest of nature (see, for example, Norton 1991)

The same guiding thought has operated in the natural science of biology since the advent of Darwin's theory of evolution. Human beings are there treated as another species of organism which has come into existence as the result of the processes of natural selection. Darwin himself began this project of applying evolutionary explanation to human beings, and in recent decades biologists have become increasingly drawn to the attempt to explain the development and structure of the human brain, and thus (on the basis of materialist presuppositions which remain philosophically controversial) the human mind in evolutionary terms. The boldest attempts to do this are embodied in sociobiology and its more recent manifestation in evolutionary psychology (Wilson 1980; Barkow et al. 1992).

In spite of the shared premise, there is no obvious logical connection between evolutionary psychology and environmentalism. Many evolutionary psychologists have in fact had nothing to say about environmental ethics, even if they are beginning to develop accounts of the evolutionary origins of human moral thought and action. On the face of it, given the usual interpretations of the naturalistic fallacy, it would be compatible with one's acceptance of any evolutionary account of the origins of human morality that one should hold humanity to have no moral responsibilities towards the natural world.

Contrariwise, many evolutionary ethicists are positively hostile to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. They regard them as specimens of the baleful rationalism and scientism bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment (Smith 2001: 121–5). As such, these approaches, in their view, have served to justify the purely instrumental and exploitative attitudes to nature which have created our current environmental difficulties. For such environmental ethicists the alternative view of human beings as having an essentially cultural mode of existence, in independence of their biological origins, is the preferred theoretical perspective.

However, some thinkers have sought to unite the two endeavours – both to develop an environmental ethic, and to give their support to the project of sociobiology. They espouse some version of naturalism – the attempt to explain human beings and their behaviour with many of the same concepts employed to explain non-human organisms. They seek to achieve important forms of interconnection between the social sciences and humanities on the one hand, and the natural sciences of biology and a biologised psychology on the other. The theory of evolution by natural selection is held to be the key idea – it unites the human species with all other life-forms, at least on this planet.

Edward O. Wilson, the best-known proponent of sociobiology, is the obvious example of this approach. He has written at length both in defence of naturalism and a form of interconnection between different explanatory levels which he calls 'consilience' and in defence of an extensive environmental ethic, particularly directed towards the preservation of biodiversity (Wilson 1998; 1992; 2002). He has sought to draw a connection between the two, finding the possibility of concern for non-human nature in an evolved tendency to value life which

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he has dubbed 'biophilia' (Wilson 1984). Another well-known environmental ethicist who has found a promising concatenation of ideas in sociobiology and environmental ethics is Callicott (1989).

How might this project deal with the naturalistic fallacy argument, already noted? The naturalistic fallacy takes its stand on the impossibility of any direct logical connection between fact and value. But this leaves open the possibility that factual claims about human nature may have an indirect bearing upon moral judgements. One might develop this possibility by arguing that an empirical theory about human nature does have a relevance to the issue of how human beings ought to behave, morally speaking, precisely because morality is not just any system of norms and prescriptions. It is a system of norms and prescriptions with a specific aim – to protect the well-being and interests of all beings whose interest and well-being counts.

This leads on to the claim that the idea of interests and well-being can not be articulated without taking up some position with respect to the issue of what kind of beings these are – what harms or benefits them; what is in their interests. An accurate grasp of their nature will be crucial to this endeavour, and it may plausibly be argued that all ethical systems take a view concerning what harms or benefits human beings and other morally-considerable beings. Of course, the idea of human nature is a battleground, with many of the protagonists arguing that there is no fixed human nature. But even so, the articulation of a moral system requires some view about what human beings are like – even if there is no fixity in this view, and so no possibility of a definitive system.

If this line of argument is correct, then sociobiology and environmental ethics may well turn out to have important interconnections. The view of human nature put forward by sociobiology will probably have implications about what conduces to human well-being. This in turn will have implications about how (at least) human beings should be treated, given the aims of a moral system. And, given that other things than human beings will have interests and the possibility of well-being, an environmental ethic directed towards, and not simply with respect to, the non-human will, *prima facie*, become open to development.

On the face of it, this possibility ought to make the sociobiology/environmental ethics connection at least worthy of detailed and sympathetic investigation by environmentalists. However, Lewis Hinchman, in a stimulating discussion, has recently put forward an argument designed to persuade environmental ethicists not to pursue, and indeed actively to attack, the project of inter-linking sociobiology and environmental ethics. Hinchman offers a critique of this project which focuses upon what he takes to be important moral values which apply to human beings, values championed by the tradition of humanism. He does not seek to show that the unification of sociobiology and environmental ethics will lead to an objectionable view about human obligations towards, or with respect to, the natural world (though he thinks it is very hard to produce such an ethic from the sociobiological starting point). Rather, he seeks to show that

sociobiology, in its theorising about human beings, produces a view of human beings, and of moral thought in particular, which cannot sustain, and, indeed, actively undermines, key humanist values. Insofar as these values are of importance to environmental ethicists in general, the latter have good reason to break off any attempt to participate in the project of uniting sociobiology and environmental ethics.

Of course, if environmental ethicists were not to find these humanist values of interest it looks as though this argument would not cut much ice with them. However, the values in question – self-determination and the resistance to dehumanising forms of categorisation – are ones with which most environmental ethicists will wish to be associated. This is because concern for the well-being of all species encompasses concern for the well-being of the human species, and there are powerful arguments for the view that self-determination and the resistance to dehumanising categories are central to human well-being. How, then, does Hinchman seek to show that humanist values are undermined by, or incompatible with, sociobiology?

HINCHMAN'S VIEW OF HUMANISM AND THE CASE FOR RAPPROCHEMENT WITH ENVIRONMENTALISM

Hinchman begins by characterising humanism throughout the ages as having a key set of adversaries – religious, scientific and bureaucratic forces which have from time to time 'seemed on the verge of reducing people to mere objects, devoid of will, dignity and choice' (Hinchman 2004: 4). In the course of combating these dehumanising forces, humanism has developed some key concepts which, Hinchman claims, are among its 'outstanding accomplishments, including the notions of individuality, dignity, autonomy and self-government' (Hinchman 2004: 4).

A key theme in Hinchman's version of humanism is the interpretivist perspective. He is a culturalist, and rejects scientism, emphasising the centrality of narrative, symbols, and hermeneutics in human self-understanding and the exercise of human autonomy. As he tells us early on 'We understand ourselves, our situation, and our political alternatives in the light of narratives that we construct linking past, present and future' (Hinchman 2004: 4).

Developing this theme, he later goes on to argue that

Early humanism thus veered from the intellectual trail that would eventually culminate in the construction of mathematically based physical sciences ... Instead, it pursued a course that would lead via Vico and Herder to Dilthey's conception of the humanities as methodologically distinctive, guided by an empathetic grasp of human action 'from the inside' (*Verstehen*) and oriented to historically and geographically specific cultural forms. (Hinchman 2004: 8).

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This concern with the unique and historical concreteness of human beings remains central to contemporary humanism, according to Hinchman. Human freedom and autonomy requires the rejection of ‘mass society’, a culture devoted to the immersion, and so loss, of self in ‘labour, consumption and the life processes’ (Hinchman 2004: 12). Humanism rejects, in the intellectual sphere, ‘naturalism, biologism, and behaviouristic social science’ (Hinchman 2004: 12–13). Both of these trends threaten the loss of historical awareness, the shrinking of our consciousness to encompass only the present, and the prevention of ‘conversations’ with the past’ (Hinchman 2004: 14). Another area of shrinkage which humanism combats is that of the private sphere, as our lives are regimented into a set of public spaces of interchangeable significance, devoted to work and consumerism.

Thus, Hinchman’s account of humanism seems to rule out the possibility that one might accept the emancipatory impulse of humanism but also view the scientific understanding of human beings as an indispensable means to achieve that emancipation – by, for example, revealing the truth about our nature, as opposed to all the fantasies and wishes with which our self-understanding is distorted. At this point one might compare this outlook with that of Mary Midgley, which couples a defence of the evolutionary, naturalist, understanding of human beings with an excoriating attack on what she takes to be the eliminative reductionism of sociobiology – at least in some well-known versions of that approach, such as that put forward under the ‘Selfish Gene’ banner (Midgley 1994). She thus sides with Hinchman in attacking sociobiological ‘reductionism’, but unlike him strongly defends the importance of the evolutionary approach to the study of human beings, especially with respect to the phenomenon, central to human life, of morality – encompassing the key humanist values of freedom and personal integrity.

We will return later to a more direct consideration of Midgley’s views. They represent an alternative conceptualisation of the connections between biology and human self-understanding which gives a larger role to the former than Hinchman appears to allow, while arguing against reductionism in a way that seems to save the personal viewpoint and human freedom which he thinks to be so important. It will also be necessary, however, to determine whether the form of reductionism that Midgley rejects can properly be laid at the door of sociobiology.

Occasionally Hinchman seems to be moving in the direction of Midgley’s position, for he allows that ‘mathematically based physical sciences’ have their legitimate place, even within some aspects of the study of human beings. But then he maintains that they must be scrupulously excluded from human self-understanding at the level of humanity proper, on pain of producing the reduction of people to mere objects, devoid of ‘will, dignity and choice’ (Hinchman 2004: 4).

He nevertheless makes one key distinction within the natural sciences, between the 'historical natural sciences' (Hinchman 2004: 9) and the non-historical ones. The former comprise such sciences as biology and geology, with respect to which Hinchman makes use of Hargrove's point that these sciences also 'generated historical statements that were "singular, contingent and historical"' (Hargrove 1989: 78). We have, then, a distinction between 'geometric' or 'Galilean' natural science aiming to produce 'abstract, universal, laws' (Hinchman 2004: 9) and the 'historical natural sciences and ecology as well as the humanities'.

It is possible, Hinchman argues, to 'trace a line of development that runs from Renaissance humanism' (Hinchman 2004: 9) to both of the latter modes of thought. This is helpful for Hinchman's attempt to reconcile humanism and environmentalism, for environmentalism is said to be inspired by the historical natural sciences with their focus on the concrete, specific and unique. If so, then humanism and environmentalism share a common intellectual root.

However, we should note in passing that this tracing of a common root, although helpful for Hinchman's project of reconciling humanism and environmentalism, causes problems for his attack on sociobiology. This is because, since biology is here cited as a 'historical natural science', the question immediately arises as to how he can properly object to the interest shown by environmentalists in the sociobiological approach. The latter involves acceptance of the process of natural selection – aspects of which might be expressible in abstract, mathematical terms, but the actual course of which, as Gould has strongly emphasised, is probably a completely unique, contingent and unrepeatable sequence (Gould 1989). This seems to align it with the historical, unique, narrative-laden mode of human self-understanding which Hinchman makes so central to his account of humanism.

Having presented his version of humanism, Hinchman notes the similarity between the contemporary critiques of environmentalists and humanists with respect to the dehumanising tendencies of mass, consumption-oriented, disenchanting societies. He therefore, as we have noted, seeks a rapprochement between humanism and environmentalism. In order to achieve this, he argues, each mode of thought must first correct its own errors. Humanism is to give up the denigration of nature and the treatment of it as a 'sphere of heteronomy'. What must environmentalism give up? It must refuse to 'embrace a reductionist naturalism and biological determinism' in its laudable quest to 'discourage *hybris* and reintegrate people with nature' (Hinchman 2004: 16). Humanists and environmentalists are both concerned about the 'destruction of the life-world' – a rich, unique, tradition- and culture-saturated, experienced world within which the individual finds his/her meaning and identity. The objectifying natural sciences, reducing the world of both human beings and non-human nature to a lifeless mesh of timeless abstractions, are implicated in this destruction (Hinchman 2004: 16–17).

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Hinchman needs to show, then, that naturalism is necessarily 'reductionist' in some objectionable (reifying, objectifying) sense; that biology is determinist (and thus all biological phenomena are to be explained in terms of efficient causality in accordance with universal laws). He needs also to show that treating human beings as evolved creatures involves environmentalists who do this in such pernicious forms of reductionism and determinism.

But, suppose that naturalism is not reductionist in any pernicious sense (not greedily reductionist, to use Dennett's phrase (Dennett 1995: 82–3)), but requires only that social sciences/humanities be consilient (to use E.O. Wilson's preferred term) with psychology/biology – that there be causal connectedness across levels of explanation, but not that the 'higher' levels reduce without remainder to the lower? Suppose that biology is not determinist, if by this is meant that it gives rise to predictive techniques? Suppose that biological explanation, insofar as it is evolutionary, is always irreducibly historical? Or that biology does not readily issue in universal laws – as many aver (Sterelny and Griffiths 1999: 364–8)? Would it be acceptable then for environmentalists to talk about human beings and the rest of nature in a vocabulary drawn from, *inter alia*, the biological sciences?

Probably not. What Hinchman appears to be against is not reification, objectification, reductionism and determinism, but the replacement of hermeneutics with any other mode of explanation of human behaviour whatsoever, whether that be reifying or non-reifying, reductionist or non-reductionist, determinist or non-determinist. What he seems to support is a picture of human life as largely dependent upon stories which people tell about themselves, which have unique meaning for them, and in terms of which they find their meaning and identity. He is happy to let this story-telling approach be spread beyond human life to encompass the non-human. What he seems unwilling to countenance is anything that replaces, or even supplements the stories.

This seems to imply that the stories are each unique, and do not embody any universal structures or forms. That is, to avoid the encroachment of scientising into narrative, structuralist approaches to narrative presumably would have to be eschewed. It would presumably be permissible for stories to make use of any universal traits in human and non-human life (such as that we are all mortal) – for these are recurring themes in all the stories which people have constructed to make sense of their world and their experience of it. But these are not the story itself. Human freedom is the freedom to make up stories about ourselves, constrained only by our own imaginations and what it takes to get others to listen and accept them as a form of 'truth'. Humanism thus seems to aim to preserve a symbolically-rich, freedom-conferring, endlessly-changing, world of human narrative, embodying meanings and values.

Thus, on this view, although the biological sciences may be recognised to contain an irreducibly historical element, and thus not to be like the threatening, rationalist sciences such as physics and chemistry, this would not be the right

kind of history. It is too 'objective', too 'given', too theory-driven. It lacks the warm, rich, yeasty quality of human narratives, their uniqueness and infinite variability. Hence, in spite of the warm words offered earlier which seem to align the historical natural sciences with the humanities, in the end the biological sciences are too objectifying and reifying in their import to be acceptable approaches to the human world, for a 'humanist'.

However, cracks arguably begin to appear in this position when Hinchman goes on to defend humanism against the environmentalist charge that it is inherently anthropocentric. He claims that 'self-determining freedom', one of the hallmarks of humanism, can only be exercised against a 'given' background of intelligibility established by institutions and cultural traditions that place demands on the moral agent (citing Taylor 1991). He says '... the matter of such decisions ... is anchored in objective factors, *including* obligations to the natural world' (Hinchman 2004: 18). He uses the phrase 'objective factors' again a bit later: 'humanism's commitment to freedom does not suggest that anyone should ignore the claims that objective factors such as the health of the land, wilderness or species preservation exercise on moral agents' (Hinchman 2004: 18).

This does not look like a completely hermeneutic picture of human life. There are objective factors, apparently, which constrain decisions - though apparently not sufficiently to remove self-determining freedom.

This obviously prompts the question of how these 'objective' factors are to be identified. Is there room for natural science here - for example, in determining what is the 'health of the land'? Granted, 'health' is a value term, so that there may be expected to be irresolvable differences of opinion about what is healthy. But medical science has a lot to say about the causes of human health and sickness - and it is a natural science. If human minds can be ill, or at least not thriving, just as can human bodies, why shouldn't scientific psychology, perhaps based upon evolutionary theory, also have something pertinent and objective to say on the matter of the conditions for sustaining human psychological health?

In other words, some room appears to have been created here for the possibility that sociobiology and evolutionary psychology may play an important part in the understanding and explanation of the distinctively human part of human life. However, this possibility is supposed to be extinguished by the direct arguments which Hinchman brings to bear on the whole project of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Let us now turn to consider these arguments.

THE CASE AGAINST SOCIOBIOLOGY: NATURALISM AND REDUCTIONISM

The cardinal sin of many environmentalists, from the point of view of a humanist, is apparently their tendency to adopt naturalism or biologism 'as the obvious conclusion from discoveries in the life sciences' (Hinchman 2004: 20). This then

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threatens to make ethics into a branch of (socio)biology (Wilson and Callicott are cited). He makes some immediate concessions – human beings are ‘subject to nature’s laws, descended from earlier primates and human intelligence, emotional life and some rudimentary kinds of human behaviour are the products of evolution’ (Hinchman 2004: 20).

The impression given is that these concessions are not terribly important. But the latter two, at any rate, are of epoch-making importance – for they align the human species with the rest of organic life in a single system of explanation. As Midgley emphasises, we can begin to treat our attempt to understand other creatures (who seem to lack culture and a richly hermeneutic form of consciousness) as connected with, though not as identical with, our attempts to understand ourselves (Midgley 1994). Arguably this alone is enough to justify the acceptance of naturalism by those environmentalists for whom the key thought is that human beings are part of nature, not set over against it as members of a different order of being.

Hinchman goes on to make a further important point which takes him towards the position of naturalism: ‘The challenge for the life sciences as well as for humanism is to investigate the evolutionary sources of human behaviour without *reducing* the internal, symbolically mediated experiences of human affairs to an external, mechanistic series of explanations’ (Hinchman 2004: 20).

What he is against here is apparently such suggestions as that:

- (1) moral obligations to the non-human world can be more firmly anchored in biological ‘facts’ than in cultural accounts (he cites Partridge 1984 and Callicott);
- (2) many symbols and products of the imagination are grounded in evolutionary history (for example, fear and awe of serpents and attraction to particular landscapes (he cites Wilson 1984));

With respect to (1), he argues:

the idea that people may have evolved a moral sense with a particular content should be rejected, on the basis that not everyone shares whatever sense and specific content is proposed, and then they have to be diagnosed as psychologically abnormal (Hinchman 2004: 21).

With respect to (2), he makes two main points:

- (i) such claims are the embodiment of an abstract, artificial, detached, view of reality. Instead of this, humanists require us to realise that in reality ‘we are always already enmeshed and enthralled – as participants, partners in dialogue, speakers of language and choosers of our courses of action’ (Hinchman 2004: 21).
- (ii) even if the evolutionary points are sound ‘..they can never completely explain our species’ symbolic interactions, since these are *in toto* emergent

properties, greatly overdetermined with respect to any possible biological antecedents.’ (Hinchman 2004: 21)

Then he offers a general observation:

The move to objectivise human conduct after the manner of Callicott and Wilson also has a cost: it now becomes difficult to say why anything, human or non-human, has worth or dignity at all, if it is just part of the machinery of evolution, DNA sequences or chemical reactions. To make a case for the dignity and moral status of a human being, *or* of an animal species or landscape, requires not just showing that we have an instinctive attraction to it, but that such sentiment is legitimate, rationally grounded and justified, that we ought to have it. That is a question which biology, by its very methods, is incapable of answering.’ (Hinchman 2004: 21).

The following reply may be made to these claims. First, how does one show that one’s sentiment is ‘rationally grounded and justified’ without pointing to natural facts about typical human reactions and building on these? Hinchman has already conceded that human ‘emotional life’ is the product of evolution. But if it is, then it must have a distinctive shape and character. This fact is arguably essential to moral debate and discussion. All moral discussion is ultimately *ad hominem*, resting on the question, concerning a proposed mode of conduct with respect to one’s fellow moral beings, ‘can you really live like this?’. It is the evolutionarily-produced distinctive character of the human intelligence/emotion complex which Midgley so forcefully argues to be at the heart of human moral life (Midgley 1994:128–84).

Further, all the traditions of moral argument, from Socrates onwards, posit a view of human nature, whether emotional, rational, or both – and argue for some judgements and reactions which are held to be natural or basic (even Kant thought a rational being cannot but value its own rationality). If biology and evolutionary theory can give us good reason to suppose that we do have an evolved human nature, it can help us to judge the issue between these rival accounts. This is not to say that it can settle any issues of substantive moral debate and argument – for that always involves the judgement of many competing claims and arguments, as Hinchman correctly notes.

Further, we already do judge some people as psychologically abnormal – precisely because they do not have normal emotional reactions or think in normal ways, so that they cannot feel the force of moral argument. We think we have to guard ourselves against such people, rather than argue with them. Evolutionary psychology may help us to clarify what we mean by ‘normal’ in such cases and help us to distinguish the moral eccentric from the psychopath. Of course, if sociobiology does intend to unearth genuine human moral universals with respect to the content of morality, it will count against any particular claim it offers that large numbers of human beings do not subscribe to a morality

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with that content. The ‘abnormality’ explanation risks becoming ad hoc, and so valueless, if used too readily.

What these replies show is that there is nothing new in the kind of consideration which is emerging from evolutionary perspectives. Biologists, in their theorising, are not doing something new and threatening in the field of ethics which humanists must resist. They are simply contributing to very old debates on a new basis. What Hinchman is perhaps threatened by is not the ‘objective, reductionist’ view of human life which he claims to detect in biology, but the sense that the endless debates about what human nature is really like may finally be being answered in a definitive way.

It is definitiveness or closure which he may be seeing as the real threat to the millennia of debate. But that should frighten no-one. Firstly, because, as already noted, no substantive moral issues are resolved by such knowledge, even if they are affected by it. Secondly, because human nature is not fixed by evolution – for nothing is fixed by evolution. We can envisage ways to alter our nature, if we choose to do so, although such alterations will always be based on where we currently stand and so be affected by the starting point (see Richards 2000: 115–7). There is no prospect that substantive moral debate will be in any meaningful sense foreclosed by any findings in biology.

Finding out the truth about human nature (the human brain) as an evolved phenomenon need not threaten anything important about human life, any more than finding out the truth about the rest of the human body did. As a result of the latter we have better medical science. Finding out the truth about the natural world demolished some options thought to be live – perpetual motion machines, and so forth. Just being able to explain in terms of efficient causality any aspect of human life and behaviour does not threaten with redundancy other levels of explanation. Finding, for example, that we have an evolutionary-produced preference for certain types of landscape tells us nothing about why one landscape artist’s work is preferable to another’s. Even if we may hope to achieve evolutionary explanations at even more detailed levels of aesthetic preference, individual creativity is not thereby threatened.

How should one reply to Hinchman’s more general point, that ‘it now becomes difficult to say why anything, human or non-human, has worth or dignity at all, if it is just part of the machinery of evolution, DNA sequences or chemical reactions’? One may first ask why should the fact that we are made entirely out of matter mean that we could not possess worth or dignity? This looks like a statement of anti-materialism. To vindicate this position Hinchman needs more than simply the idea that there are emergent properties between the biological and psychological levels. For there are emergent properties even in the levels of reality which no-one nowadays would classify as anything other than material.

It is hard to escape the view that what lies at the back of all this is old-fashioned dualism and the ‘mind-first’ view of reality (Dennett 1995: 26–8). This

holds that only mind has dignity and worth, and mind is a separate substance from matter, however complex the latter is. But naturalism does not require us to deny that the mind does encompass a set of emergent properties. What naturalism does require is what Wilson characterises as consilience. This requires that the level of mind has to be characterised in ways which are consistent with the lower, non-mental, levels, but does not view it as reducible without remainder to those levels (Wilson 1998: ch. 9).

It is this conception of consilience which provides an alternative to the eliminative reductionism which Midgley (and, probably, Hinchman) attributes to sociobiology and which leads her to reject it so forcefully. Eliminative reductionism seeks to eliminate one set of concepts and replace it with another one which is regarded as superior, perhaps in virtue of being more fundamental in some sense. But the view which E.O Wilson has propounded of the interconnections between the natural and social sciences does not seek to eliminate the latter, but to bring them into contact with the former in such a way that phenomena identified at the level of biology can be used to explain (and, admittedly, perhaps in some cases to explain away) the existence and character of phenomena at the psychological and social levels. This can work both ways. An explanation at the lower levels may be rejected because it conflicts with elements already accepted at the higher levels.

The aim is for a total, coherent system of explanation, in which phenomena at different levels are interconnected. The justification for distinguishing between 'lower' and 'higher' levels in such a picture is not that one set of explanatory theories and concepts is the only valid one, but that the pattern of explanation as a matter of fact runs mainly from the lower to the higher levels (physics explains chemistry, say, and not vice-versa) and thus that if a higher level of phenomena exists at any point then so must the lower ones (if there is a biological level, then there must be chemical and physical ones too, but not necessarily vice-versa).

On this view of consilience, sociobiology will be seeking to explain in evolutionary terms the emergence of such psychological phenomena as altruism, and may well do so on the basis of a gene-centred view, such as kin-selection. But this does not in itself preclude the need for concepts and theories peculiar to the psychological levels, arrived at by investigation into the nature of the phenomena peculiar to those levels. It does not commit sociobiology to accepting only gene-centred explanations of psychological phenomena. That would be greedy or eliminative reductionism. Such reductionism can be justified on occasion (we might, for example, show that ghosts are nothing but tricks of the light), but it is not required by the aim for a single system of explanation. A single system of explanation is not the same as a single type of explanation.

What this does mean, however, is that proponents of sociobiology, in common with many other thinkers, will not rest content with the idea that there just are different kinds of explanation for different aspects of phenomena, each with

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its own use and validity. They will seek to relate them to each other, to look for interconnections, and to try to determine, when there are competing explanations operating at the same level, whether it is possible to eliminate any of them on the basis of their incompatibility with those at some other level which have been fully established. This is not eliminative reductionism, although it does involve the elimination of untenable theories.

Midgley sometimes seems to suggest that there are just disconnected patterns of explanation of this kind, each necessary, and each doing different things (Midgley 1994: 63–70). But she is very far from averse to rejecting some theories, especially in the social sciences, such as Marxism and neo-liberalism, for their inadequacies with respect to their accounts of human psychology (Midgley 1994: 76–7). More positively, her account of the evolutionarily-produced forms of human sympathy show how key phenomena of human moral psychology may emerge from the biological levels (Midgley 1994: 141–50). It may be that as a matter of fact we will encounter types of phenomena which we can only explain by theories and concepts completely divorced from all the others we have available. But it is not clear that the attempt to produce consilience is in itself a pernicious activity, even if we can have no a priori guarantee of success.

Returning to Hinchman's discussion, we need to note that he attacks the view that Wilson's version of consilience effects a reconciliation between the natural sciences and humanism. It does so, he argues, only by relegating the latter to the task of interpreting and conserving what is already known, whilst it is the task of the sciences to provide new knowledge (Hinchman 2004: 22). But, he says, 'interpretation is – or can be – a form of discovery and knowledge'. In explanation of this claim, he says '... a new configuration of symbolic content (say an ethical theory, a historical explanation, a legal decision, or a fundamental ontology) has just as much inherent claim to be "knowledge" as does a sociobiological theory that attempts to base ethics on Darwinian adaptation' (Hinchman 2004: 23). His concern is that sociobiology attempts to replace 'critical-emancipatory disciplines' such as philosophy and political theory by biology.

However, this first of all seems to beg the question, by assuming that anything which claims to be knowledge really is knowledge. We are getting close to the 'anything goes' position of Feyerabend, in which all we have are different ways of talking, of which the natural sciences are only one specimen (Feyerabend 1975). At the very least some of the ingredients on Hinchman's list – the ethical theory and the historical explanation, say – need to be compatible with what science has discovered (Noah's flood won't wash as the explanation of fossils on mountain tops; an ethical theory needs to have some view of 'can' if it is going to suggest 'ought'). Some items on the list – the legal decision, say, or the 'fundamental ontology' either are not logically the right thing to count as knowledge (a decision is not a knowledge claim) or are simply impossible to assess in terms of knowledge – as are all the claims of revisionary metaphysics, as opposed to descriptive metaphysics (see Strawson 1959: 9–11).

Insofar as philosophy and political theory are critically emancipatory it is because they fuse together factual claims, norms/values and prescriptions. On the factual side, it is not clear why biology should not have enlightening things to say – and to enable us to reject conclusively some factual claims, thereby making some norms and prescriptions impossible to accept (showing there are no such things as races makes racism that much less plausible as a normative position; ditto with showing that male and female brains are virtually identical). It is not that sociobiology or evolutionary psychology aim to replace philosophy or political theory, but rather that they aim to make a significant contribution to these disciplines by linking the normative and prescriptive elements to other levels of knowledge.

It is certainly correct to say that philosophy (and the social sciences and humanities) have an unavoidable involvement in normative and prescriptive discourse. Even if biology as applied to non-human life-forms does not have such an involvement, sociobiology certainly does – at least when applied to human beings. It is indeed impossible to study how human beings are organised and socially interact without taking a view about how they ought to be organised and interact. This is because one cannot understand an example of human behaviour unless one grasps the values and norms used by the people whose behaviour it is. One cannot decide whether one has understood these without taking some view about whether or not they can be justified, or made intelligible. Finally, one cannot do that unless one has some view about what actually is a defensible or intelligible value to pursue in the circumstances in question. This line of thought pervades even the most ‘scientific’ form of social theory, as in the case of Marx’s concept of false consciousness.

For these reasons, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are taking a view of human beings which cannot but have implications for how we should order our lives. But what these implications are is going to be difficult to work out, and subject to all kinds of interactive considerations. It will not be a simple matter of reading off ‘ought’ from is. If some proponents of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have suggested otherwise then they have got too simple a picture of their own position. But there is nothing here which stands as a telling objection to naturalism in either ethics or the explanation of human behaviour. The project of sociobiology, via consilience, is a project of linking up levels of knowledge. It is not a matter of abolishing any of those levels. The linking up does not, because it cannot, leave the levels in the same condition as they were prior to the linkage. But it is only by begging all the important questions that one can suppose that the situation prior to the linkage is preferable to what obtains after the linkage.

The objections which Hinchman offers to naturalistic positions such as sociobiology are, however, as much moral as epistemological. He seems to suggest that what is really important in human life is what transcends the sphere of the ‘life-process’ of society – ‘... all that concerns physical survival, reproduction,

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territoriality, labour, etc.’ (Hinchman 2004: 22). But sociobiology can only deal with the life-process (biological) level – staying alive, healthy and reproducing ourselves. It then reaches up to drag down ‘higher cognitive’ processes to the ‘life-process’ level, by giving them ‘biological explanations’. This only seems a defensible move, he suggests, because our society has become so corrupt that we have devalued ‘experiences that transcend consuming and reproduction’.

This thought expresses a common concern, and a common reaction to any mode of thought which seeks to connect us with the rest of the natural world, rather than to separate us from it as the sole possessors of higher levels of thought and experience, such as art, philosophy, religion and ethics.

The whole picture is, once again, immensely question-begging. It assumes a distinction between the grubby and the refined, the base and the noble, the human and the animal, the material and the spiritual, which is now wide open to objection. One may as cogently argue that the ‘life-world’ is not grubby, base and ignoble. It not something we should seek to distance ourselves from. In particular, the historical story of evolution is simply stupendous, mind-boggling, and utterly fascinating. It may help us to feel at home in the world and to experience ourselves as a unity, not as intellectual ghosts trapped in loathsome physical machines. Again, this is a key idea of Midgley, who has spent much effort in exploring, and seeking to defuse, the fears lurking in the thought that human beings have some deep connections, via their evolutionary history, with other life-forms (Midgley 1979).

It has to be admitted, however, that this picture has its extremely dark side too – it is a tale of life-forms emerging by an immensely long process of death, suffering and destruction. Certainly, as Lisa Sideris has argued (Sideris 2003) the evolutionary approach to our self-understanding has some extraordinarily challenging claims for us to contend with – that the process has no pre-ordained end-point or purpose; that nature does not contain harmony and balance; that death and suffering are integral to it, not optional extras; that human beings can rely only upon each other for care, concern and compassion, and that these may have a fragile basis in our natures. The most troubling point of all is that our deepest moral concerns emerge solely and contingently from our evolutionarily-produced natures, not from some fundamental source within the very fabric of being. These are not just deeply disturbing thoughts, they are also very new ones, and will take a great deal of time to assimilate them and rethink our philosophical positions in the light of them.

But there is no reason to suppose that a correct or defensible response to them is to seek to reestablish an untenable form of dualism which enables us to salvage what we most value by divorcing it from our evolutionary history. If the evolutionary story is correct (and Hinchman seems to accept that that is the way it is looking at the moment) then we have to accept it and integrate it into our philosophy, art, ethics and spirituality. Arguably it is only a form of dualism which was developed during the long centuries when we accepted what Dennett

(1995: 74) refers to as the 'skyhook' accounts of this world and our place in it that leads us to look down on the 'life-world'.

Now we have good reason to adopt a completely different picture we can no longer take those older views for granted. Humanism, if it is committed to this kind of dualism, was a child of its times. Its fundamental values remain of crucial importance. We now have to find a way of supporting those values in the light of the new view we have been developing of ourselves. Hinchman has not given us yet any reason to suppose that that is impossible. It is not a claim of evolutionary theory, sociobiology or evolutionary psychology that we 'cannot in any sense transcend our hominid ancestry'. He has erected a straw man.

However, Hinchman goes on to make what appears to be a further telling objection to any attempt to link up an account of human ethics, and environmental ethics in particular, to the evolutionary perspective. He argues that it is very hard to see how environmental ethics can be deduced or explained on the basis of natural selection. After all, environmental ethics argues for the inherent worth of nature, and prescribes biodiversity or wilderness preservation even when our own survival or economic interests may be jeopardised. He notes that arguments for biodiversity offered by Wilson appeal to the importance of the natural world for the spiritual, aesthetic and moral dimensions of human life, not just to the narrowly self-interested causes of survival.

But this appears to ignore how evolutionary theory has come to account for the basis of morality and altruism in human beings (see, for example, Ruse 1986: Ridley 1996). The problem which the latter phenomena pose for evolutionary theory is that of explaining how any human individual (or any other individual organism) can take account of the interests or worth of any other. In the human case, kin selection and reciprocal altruism, and sexual selection in the case of love for offspring and spouses (Ridley 1996:133–5), can account for this. These are said to provide the biological basis for morality. They explain how human beings can be genuinely altruistic whilst still being purely evolved beings. They also explain why that altruism will be harder to extend to non-kin, non-offspring, non-group members. In such cases the intellectual virtues, such as consistency, may come in to remedy the gaps. But they will be less strong as sources of motivation – and they observably are (Baxter 1999: 40–1). Environmental ethics is a very complex activity, appealing, as do all ethical arguments, partly to emotional and partly to intellectual considerations. But there is no a priori reason why evolution by natural selection should not have provided within the human brain tendencies and dispositions which can form the basis for ethical systems involving the attribution of value and prescribing obligations, towards the non-human.

Clearly, human ethics, including environmental ethics, are data to be explained by evolutionary thought. They cannot be ignored. This means that if evolutionary theory cannot explain ethics it should be rejected as, at least in important respects, inadequate. But the theory does try to explain these phenomena. The

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explanations may not work, but then evolutionary theorists will have to try again. The theory should be given time to make its attempts. Only if evolutionary theorists were refusing to accept that there was anything in human ethics to be explained could environmental ethicists properly reject it.

CONCLUSION

None of the arguments of this paper amounts to a vindication of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, or any other naturalist approach to the study of human beings. They may all be seriously flawed as theories. But there has not yet been given any sound reason why ethical thinkers, environmental or otherwise, should reject naturalism as a promising approach to human self-understanding. Environmental ethicists, in particular, have no reason yet to suppose that the investigation of possible connections between sociobiology and environmental ethics, united as they are on the basis of the thought that human beings are part of nature, not separate from it, may not be a worthwhile activity.¹

NOTE

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