

John Laurent, ed., *Evolutionary Economics and Human Nature* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003) pp. 240, \$125. ISBN 978 1 84064 923 9.

Eminent economist James Duesenberry said that while economics explains how people make choices, sociology explains why people have no choice. Economics and evolutionary biology are sister fields. They actually have a remarkable amount in common, not only in terms of the kinds of questions they ask and the methods they use, but in terms of the way they relate to and are perceived by the rest of the world.

Through an outstanding collection of essays by leading scholars, John Laurent explains how evolutionary economics has come of age. In his Introduction to *Evolutionary Economics and Human Nature*, he first of all clarifies what mainstream economics generally intends for institutional economics. It is the approach to the economic theory that studies evolutionary process, which sees its birth in the second half of nineteenth century, a season opened by the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Darwinism and evolutionary economics bring together contributions from authors who, building on Darwin's own insights and on developments in evolutionary theory, offer challenging views on how economics can use evolutionary ideas effectively: from Darwin's works on species many thinkers derive the theory of social discrimination, which simply considers man as an animal with intellect, and the poor and less endowed are "inferiors" and losers in the struggle for existence.

A blunt conception that smoothed the way for the strongest form of capitalism viewed as the survival of the fittest, and all the strong competition that follows, pivots around the theory of Dawkins' "selfish gene": to maximize their adaptation for the environment all the organisms must evolve continuously; *every grant of a lead* represents a cost, a loss of energy. This is a world where every form of benevolence may imply for the giver a diminution of adaptation and a correlative increase of adaptation for the others who are in competition for self-reproduction. If that is life, there is no time for charity, and every expression of altruism is a biological fault to avoid.

Nevertheless, Laurent soon becomes disenchanted with Darwin's reduction of humans to mere quantitative superiority, insisting that humans were not only quantitatively but also qualitatively distinct from animals. The author finds the mainstream conception too simplistic and inadequate for an understanding of social phenomena and deepens the inquiry to see if there are any sustainable reasons to reject the overwhelming conviction that considers competition as the pervasive law of natural economic interactions.

The author uses economic analysis itself as a powerful tool in understanding human behavior to discover the evidence against this predominant but drab conception of humankind. In stark contrast with the standard model of economic man, which many believe originated with Adam Smith, John Laurent demonstrates that this common conception provides an overly narrow view of self-interested "rational economic man," because the assumptions it suggests tell us very little about the human society and its complexities.

If we look solely at the works of Adam Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus, and Alfred Marshall, we find that their writings reveal a much richer vision of the human agent than that provided by the most complex of utility functions. The work of Charles Darwin himself undermines the mistaken notion that Darwinism promotes a view of human nature as greedy, uncooperative, and self-seeking: as a matter of fact, it gives us the evidence that humankind is something more than the actions regarded in an economic context. Consequently, no investigation of evolutionary economics can be complete if it ignores the importance of the social and psychological aspect; that's the reason why the author is firmly convinced of the appreciation of its bearing on the thinking of significant writers in economics, philosophy, and other fields of intellectual endeavor from the ancient Greeks on forward to the modern day.

Gnòthi sautòn, "know thyself!" is the pervasive and imperative dictate carved over the temple at Delphi. Geoffrey Fishburn (and many others with him) finds precursors of Darwin's theories starting from the ancients. From earliest times, the Greek thinkers had an understanding that man was neither god nor beast, but where exactly, and on what grounds he should be located between the two was not always clear. The main debate was over whether human beings are primarily self-centered or social. For Empedocles, as for Darwin, life is contingent: nature is a spendthrift, creating many unfit creatures, until some succeed in surviving in sufficient numbers and procuring descendants also adapted their surroundings. Plato and Aristotle may have believed that man is "by nature a political animal," but not all philosophers agreed: for Lactantius "there is no such thing as human society . . . each individual looks out for himself." Many centuries later, in his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes tells us almost the same thing. The "struggle for existence" in human affairs, as in the rest of nature, is still far from finding an end. Although the Greek philosophers were little inclined towards experiment, they bequeathed to us more than just a model of how the inquiring naturalist should proceed. If not all the scientists agree in their thinking about Aristotle as a precursor of the modern evolutionary theory, the eminent philosopher played an important role in dismissing the Empedocle's conception of "chance" and in introducing the question of "cause" for which the beginning of the motion is due. Aristotle has replaced speculation with fact, and his classification of animals in a single gradual *scala naturæ*, according to their degree of perfection, seems to have inspired the Darwinian conception of *Natura non facit saltum*, Nature doesn't make a leap.

Passing on to “St. Augustine on Economic Man” (chapter II), there are some important lines in his *The City of God* that indeed invite comparison with Darwin: “In the struggle for life some perish and other succeed; the less give way to the greater, and are changed into the qualities of the predominant type” (St. Augustine 1844, book XII, chapter 3). What is this if not the definition of the two most remarkable Darwinian principles: “the struggle for life” and “the survival of the fittest”? Nevertheless, in chapter nineteen, the Christian philosopher addresses the question of man’s political nature, pre-eminent in his notion of human nature with its propensity for sociality. For Augustine, civil society is part of the natural order—the present conception owes directly to Plato and his *Republic*. Of interest to our inquiry is the happy metaphor he adopts to describe the relationship between the single man and the whole society. He compares a city to the human body and men to single organs. If part of the body aches, the whole can’t work well. If a part of it aches, the whole of it aches in a universal and simultaneous feeling of pain and sympathy with the wounded part. The same happens to society: if one of the group suffers, the entire community suffers with it and for it. There is a very close analogy between such a case and the condition of the best-governed state. Hence, whatever economy may be, it is, first of all, a collection of people, interacting with each other in the business of utilizing scarce resources. Without any doubt, Augustine’s understanding of human nature represents an enrichment and transformation of the latter, incorporating the insights of Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, and early Christianity.

In the third chapter of the book, Athol Fitzgibbon sheds light on mainstream economics’ misunderstanding of Adam Smith’s conception about human nature. Certainly Smith, like other Enlightenment thinkers, shared in the project to replace a primarily religious and spiritual view of society with one more attuned to liberty, wealth, and science. But Smith’s economics were not exclusively concerned with self-interest and there is no scientific proof of the invisible hand, which is ultimately a matter of faith and belief. Virtue is the purpose of life and the main condition for social existence. Smith agrees with Cicero’s *De Officiis* that a particular class of commercial behavior responds to self-love: the butcher and the baker do not provide the dinner because they are benevolent. But Smith doesn’t extrapolate from butchers and bakers to the whole of life.

Smith’s moral theory is a system of wealth and virtue: he is persuaded that the wealth of nations would be best and most quickly developed by a mixture of vice and virtue: superior virtue (benevolence, justice) is mainly relevant to public life, and inferior virtue (self-interest, self-love) to commercial life. He advises the reader not to fall into the same error as eminent Greeks, who observed the higher virtues but neglected justice, or ancient Romans, who observed justice but suppressed the higher virtues. Both of these great societies had collapsed because of the absence of social commitment and cohesion. Darwin, too, recognizes the great importance Smith gives to *sympathy* as the social cement that binds the members of society together. In chapter III of *The Origin of Species* the scientist makes clear the importance of self-sacrifice for the good of the community in many species.

Leaving Smith for Malthus, Fitzgibbon explains to us that the main impediment to both economic growth and the growth of mind is human *indolence*. Laziness, torpor, idleness, sloth, or whatever we wish to call it, discourages the growth of demand: the laboring classes, because of their “indolence and improvidence” don’t take measures to ensure their food supply in unfavourable seasons. The workmen would not have to

spend so much time and effort producing food, and would have more time available to pursue luxuries. These assets are incompatible with scarce resources of an overpopulated world. Malthus agrees with Hume in arguing that the extreme fertility of countries is not an adequate stimulus to the rapid increase of wealth and population. But he adds that contraception, or the deferment of marriage, isn't the answer to the struggle for existence; quite the contrary, contraception would increase indolence and reduce the stimulus to industry because it removes the desire of saving to better their condition and provide for a family. Humanity would require another virtue: the virtue of *moral restraint*.

Marshall has little time for the abstract and bloodless economic man of Bentham and Mill. In his *Principles* he remarks that there are two sides to human nature: the egoistic and the altruistic. Economists must look for more realistic models and study man as he really is. Human motivation is based on a variety of factors, many of them not measurable. The businessman is not only a machine occupied solely in acquiring and consuming wealth, but first of all is an actual person, a man who delights in doing his work well for its own sake, or in sacrificing himself for the good of his family, hope of reward, honor, and striving for recognition or, simply, for the thrill of the chase (Marshall 1920, p. 27). According to Marshall, utility in economics refers to satisfactions, not to Benthamite notions of pleasure. Giving his personal conception of human nature, Marshall directly cites Darwin's argument for the natural selection, at the group level, of altruistic propensities: "Thus the struggle for existence causes in long run those races to survive in which the individual is most willing to sacrifice himself for the benefit of those around him" (Marshall 1920, p. 243). This passage clarifies Darwin's conviction about the survival value of cooperation. Marshall was aware of the collective side of human as well as other life.

With regard to human beings, geographer Peter Kropotkin introduces the notion of *mutual aid* as man's natural propensity for sympathy, which compels humans as well as other species to care for their fellows, whether immediate relatives or not. The geographer's approach to economics is well summarized by Rob Knowles, who underlines a very pregnant passage that explains the relevance of human solidarity: it is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid, the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; it is the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own (Kropotkin 1902).

In chapter 8 Erin McLaughlin-Jenkins tries to explain Thomas A. Jackson's conception of Darwin, Marx, and human existence. She sheds some light on the theoretical confusion surrounding evolution, economics, social development, and his commitment to working-class emancipation. Darwin's theories suggest to the intellectual and socialist lecturer a profound and revolutionary re-thinking of natural world; indeed, Jackson refuses the Spencerian conception of the struggle for life as a process of equilibration where the species throughout geologic times have been perpetually disturbed by the alteration of surrounding circumstances (Spencer 1898). For Jackson there is no equilibrium, only perpetual conflict. Nature and society do not regulate instability; instability regulates nature and society. Consequently, temporary disruptions remain a vital part of the mechanism that fosters growth within a constantly adjusting equilibration of forces. The seeds of future conflicts are contained in the present synthesis and a new crisis point is inevitable.

Finally, Jason Potts proposes a curious but well chosen similitude by asserting that the human mind is not a blank slate upon which anything and everything we want can be written. On the contrary, we all run the same operating system and come equipped with many of the same programs. *Homo aeconomicus* doesn't actually have a mind: it is merely a program, and like many others it is on duty for humans in the struggle for their evolution in a complex and hostile environment. That is why—for Potts—the solution for survival since early times was to be nomadic. Thanks to nomadic behaviour, mankind has been levered into ever-new domains of language and ideas, an abstract space where knowledge itself is the resource that must be constantly tracked and settled. So it is due to the nomadic instinct if humans have been released from their own heredity and set free to provide the mainspring for a vibrant economy.

Promoting a Marshallian approach to economics as the study of mankind in the ordinary business of life, John Laurent has demonstrated that cooperation and competition don't clash. After a more introspective analysis of the Darwinian theory, we can assert that not only can evolution and cooperation match together but, more exactly, we assist in an "evolution of cooperation" between men. Robert Ardrey stated the collective fitness argument thus: "If competition takes place not only between individuals but between groups, then the group with greater endowments of loyalty, cooperation, self-sacrifice and altruism concerning social partners will be selection's survivor" (Ardrey 1977).

We are not Robinson Crusoes and we don't live on deserted islands. Our world is a crowded world, turning on its axis. But at the same time, it is a part of a complex system composed of many and diverse realities and, we all know, no Little Prince lives happily alone.

Viviana de Giovinazzo
University of Milano-Bicocca

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