

## Discussion

### Reply to Arnhart

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Larry Arnhart responds to my review and criticisms of *Darwinian Natural Right* with a restatement and helpful elaborations of his position. Specifically, Arnhart: (1) begins with Strauss on the problem of modern natural science; (2) elaborates the opposition between reductionism and emergence, defending the truth of the latter as a requirement of natural kinds and ends; (3) supplements the argument of *Darwinian Natural Right* by recourse to the work of Leon Kass, a contemporary thinker on whose value we both agree; (4) concludes with the example of incest aversion as illustrative of Darwinian natural right. I regard these as the salient points, although brief mention is also made by Arnhart of E. O. Wilson and Allan Bloom.<sup>1</sup> My argument in "Darwinian Natural Right?" is based on a list of six philosophical problems (pp. 133–34) and an appendix of eleven quotations from Strauss on science (pp. 151–56). I refer back to these in the following.

I would like to make as clear as possible our points of disagreement, but this intention is hampered by unavoidable ambiguities in the meaning of the terms "Darwin" and "Darwinism." What is the relation between Darwin's own thought and the vast body of science and philosophy now called Darwinism? Is Kass a proponent of Darwinism? Is Darwin? Are notions of the *ends* of natural living kinds to be found in Darwin himself or in later Darwinism, or not? If not, are natural ends beyond universal reproductive fitness compatible with Darwin or with Darwinism, or are they, on the contrary, incompatible with Darwin or Darwinism? We have a confusing set of alternatives. Clarification is a task for Darwin specialists, as Arnhart makes clear when he states that "Darwin is caught in this contradiction—both affirming and denying that the human difference is only a difference in degree not in kind" (p. 265). According to Arnhart, Darwin did not adequately appreciate the significance of emergence for the degree-kind distinction. Thus, on this crucial point—whether there exists a human specific difference—Darwin himself was of two minds.

We can, however, consider a very useful question. Consider the two great principles of random variation and natural selection for reproductive fitness, hallmarks of both Darwin and Darwinism. Are these principles understood by a given thinker to be *comprehensive* of the biological realm, or only *partial*? By 'comprehensive' I mean that no other principles—such as the Good, the noble

or beautiful, the Intellect, the divine—are ultimately needed to account for living beings including ourselves. By ‘partial’ I mean that the two Darwinian principles are not false, but must share the stage with other principles, because the Darwinian principles only cover a part or an aspect of the living realm. If someone, like Hans Jonas, or Leon Kass, or the Pope, or (descending) myself, understands the two Darwinian principles as partial, then there is plenty of room in their thought for accounts that are compatible with those principles and that speak approvingly of Darwin(ism) while going beyond it. But if someone else understands the two Darwinian principles as comprehensive, then, of course they, too, will speak approvingly of Darwin(ism), but will militate against any talk of going beyond it. This was the point of my use of Hans Jonas on the elevation of common means into specific ends, “one of the paradoxes of life” (“Darwinian Natural Right?” p. 141). We do not answer this crucial question—are the Darwinian principles comprehensive or partial?—by affirming the truth of evolutionary emergence over against reductionism. The refutation of reductionism by emergence is salutary, but it is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition of the possibility of a Socratic (Platonic, Aristotelian) understanding of the human natural kind and its problematic situation in a whole that is “elusive . . . mysterious” (Strauss, quotation 6). This is because an emergentist (thus antireductionist) theory can be *either* species-neutral or species-specific.

Let me explain how I understand the distinctions between reductionism, emergentism, and species-neutrality. There is no significant difference between Arnhart and me on the first distinction, reductionism versus emergentism. It is the second distinction, emergentism in relation to species-neutrality, that is at issue.

A system admits reductionist explanation if its behavior can be derived from, or reduced to, the properties possessed by its parts when the parts are isolated from one another. This is always a tempting approach to complex wholes, for what could be more convenient than taking a thing apart, studying its parts each by itself, and then trying to sum up or aggregate the properties of the parts in order to deduce the properties of the whole? The essential assumption here is that the parts of the whole are not modified in any fundamental way by their coming together or being together in the constitution of the whole. So the parts are prior to the whole, both ontologically and in our knowledge. (See Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a20–24, for the opposite possibility, namely, that the whole is prior to the parts.) Classical mechanics is the preeminent example of reductionist science, in which the essential assumption is embedded in the parallelogram rule for composition of forces, Corollaries I and II of Newton’s *Principia*. But what if, in spite of the success of reductionism for many important systems, e.g., machines, the solar system, we find that there are other systems that cannot be adequately or fully explained in terms of simpler parts? Suppose, for example, that the things we call “alive” possess survival instinct, a principle of activity residing in the whole organism as such, and suppose that it remains impossi-

ble to derive survival instinct by summing up (in however sophisticated a fashion) the properties of the isolated parts, say, molecules, in spite of all that we know about molecules. We then grant that, somehow, this holistic property, survival instinct, *emerged* during the origin of life in the remote past. We have an *emergent property*, meaning a property of the whole that cannot be adequately explained in terms of simpler antecedent parts. The idea of emergent properties has become increasingly accepted within the new sciences of complexity over the past few decades, not to mention the older tradition of emergent evolution that Arnhart nicely describes. But there is more to the story.

Imagine now a research program in biology in which we seek to understand all the specific characteristics of the many kinds of organisms as expressions of that one common principle, survival instinct, according to different local environments, under conditions of random heritable variation, predation, and competition for food. On this account, the differences that presently specify the kinds of organisms began as, and remain, means to one common end: survival in the universal struggle for existence. For example, the human species evolved a unique brain, unlike that of any other species. According to our research program, we originally acquired, and presently possess, our distinctive brains for the sake of surviving and reproducing in our local environment, just as a garden slug has its distinctive equipment for the sake of surviving and reproducing in its local environment. This is a *species-neutral*, emergentist (nonreductionist) theory. The alternative, emergentist and *species-specific* account, which falls outside the imagined research program, would be Aristotelian: we survive and reproduce for the sake of using our distinctive brains well in thought, speech, and action (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a19, 1139b5–6, 1178a5–8).<sup>2</sup>

As I understand it, Darwin(ism) is species-neutral in the sense just described. Therefore, if one regards Darwin(ism) as comprehensive, one cannot combine it with Aristotle. They disagree about the end or *telos* in relation to origins and means. As to why we cannot dispense with this dichotomy (Darwinism, comprehensive of the living and species-neutral, versus Aristotle, comprehensive of the living and species-specific) by simply saying, without deeper reflection, that the human brain-mind is *both* survival tool *and* truth seeker, see problem 5 of “Darwinian Natural Right?” the value of truth for life (pp. 144–45).

As far as I can see, Arnhart does not declare himself on the crucial question of the comprehensiveness or partiality of Darwinian science. Rather, he says, approvingly, that “Darwinian theory does away with any cosmic teleology,” and says, disapprovingly, that Hassing “thinks natural right requires a cosmic teleology so that the order of the whole universe supports human goodness” (pp. 268 and 269). But either way—rejection with certainty or demonstration with certainty of comprehensive teleology—mystery (and *aporiai*) would be dispelled. This indicates to me that Arnhart does not yet understand the difference between wisdom possessed and love of a wisdom that is needed but not possessed. And so it seems that he does not yet understand, or in his pursuit of science has

perhaps forgotten, the meaning of philosophy, so crucial for Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Strauss. This is problem 4 of “Darwinian Natural Right?” the status (and meaning) of philosophy (pp. 142–45), and the subject of the concluding paragraph of the present reply. We are thus brought to the doorstep of the fundamental issues on which Arnhart’s account of Aristotle, Darwin, and Strauss impinges. Let us look once again at Strauss on the problem of modern natural science in relation to classical natural right.<sup>3</sup>

According to Arnhart, there are two fundamental premises of classical natural right: (1) “the uniqueness of human beings as set apart from the rest of animal nature”; (2) “the cosmic teleology that sustains human purposefulness” (p. 263). Taking his bearings by the Introduction to *Natural Right and History*, Arnhart then says that “Strauss thought Aristotle had the clearest view of this dependence of natural right on natural teleology” (p. 263), such that the refutation of Aristotle’s teleological physics of the heavens by classical mechanics infected his teleology of the other parts of the cosmos. Unfortunately, I believe this is a misreading of Strauss’s real position, but a misreading facilitated by Strauss himself. The eleven quotations appended to “Darwinian Natural Right?” are intended as a corrective to the impression one gets by looking solely at the Introduction to *Natural Right and History*. In light of those statements, I believe that Strauss’s understanding of the problem of modern natural science is not based on the status of premise 2 (Aristotle’s cosmic teleology), but rather on species-neutrality as the predominant characteristic of modern natural science. *Species neutrality denies premise 1, which is indeed the key premise of classical natural right.*<sup>4</sup> This in turn poses our disputed question: is Darwin(ism) species neutral or not? I believe it is, as explained above. Arnhart believes that the refutation of universal reductionism by the far more plausible accounts of emergence in several classes of natural phenomena suffices to solve the problem by securing the human specific difference, while avoiding the extreme dualism (from Hobbes through Kant) that separates man from nature altogether, thereby making of man and society a radically malleable artifact. Arnhart does “not understand Hasting’s claim that Darwinian theory must deny ‘species difference’ and affirm ‘species neutrality’” (p. 265). In the first place, it is Strauss’s claim: see quotation 7.

I have tried to explain the distinctions between reductionism, emergentism, and species-neutrality. It should thus be clear that Darwinian theory is not species-neutral with respect to *means*; different species have acquired very different equipment—look at the human brain—with which to survive and project their genes. But *that* (the last six words of the preceding sentence) is the problem: for Darwinian theory, the one, universal, common, thus species-neutral *end* is survival and/or reproductive fitness. Emergent naturalism, although antireductionist, is perfectly compatible with the species-neutrality of this end, as explained above, and as Arnhart’s own account of incest aversion (discussed momentarily) shows.

Am I mistaken here? Do Darwin or Darwinism offer grounds for qualifying this conception of the end of living things, grounds for saying that random variation and selection for reproductive fitness are the adequate principles of *origin*, but not of *ends*, or at least not of the human end? This is problem 1 of “Darwinian Natural Right?” on the causal relation between generative process and end product (pp. 138–42). Can Darwin(ism) grant that its two great principles must share the stage with other principles, that it is partial and not comprehensive? If so, then I am wrong, and happily so, for we would then have a grand synthesis, and a more natural science, of the biologically rooted, but distinctively human, in which there is room for conjectural, provisional, problematic, but unavoidable attempts to make sense of a mysterious whole and of our unstable, potentially tyrannical place in it, which is accordingly always in need of moderating awareness to keep us from unlimited willful self-assertion (and this is problem 2 of “Darwinian Natural Right?” the Baconian-Cartesian problem [pp. 145–51]; see *Politics* 1324a25–25a5 for the ancient version).<sup>5</sup> But Arnhart’s account of incest is not encouraging.

In keeping with the polemical (and worthy) intention that in part motivates his work, Arnhart opposes “the claim of Hobbesian philosophers [Freud was a Hobbesian] . . . that the abhorrence of incest is not natural at all, but a purely learned response based only on custom” (p. 271). Against a radical ethical conventionalism that denies to morality any natural support, Arnhart presents the valuable contributions of Edward Westermarck and of recent sociobiology (pp. 271–75). The result is “a good Darwinian explanation of incest avoidance that confirms the Socratic insight into the incest taboo as an expression of natural right.” For “Plato [had left] it unclear . . . why this sacred taboo arises in the first place” (p. 270). In the Darwinian approach, we look to the common, species-neutral origins (not the final forms) of things. Now obviously,

inbreeding tends to produce physical and mental deficiencies in the offspring [of all animal species] that lower their fitness in the Darwinian [universal, not specifically human] struggle for existence. [And therefore] as a result . . . natural selection has favored the mental disposition to feel an aversion to sexual mating with those with whom one has been intimately associated from early childhood. . . . this natural aversion to incest has inclined [most] human beings to feel moral disapproval for incest, and this moral emotion has been expressed culturally [thus in human societies] as an incest taboo. (P. 272)

Incest aversion is a neuropsychological and chemical deposit placed within us by the hand of natural selection. This is not a trivial discovery. It is well worth knowing, especially against the all-too-familiar background of radical relativism. But it doesn’t go far enough. Why? Because we humans have condoms, and are trained in their use.

As Arnhart resoundingly says on page 266 of *Darwinian Natural Right*,

“[h]uman beings, unlike any other animals, cannot live unless they believe they know *why* they live.” Thus we, unlike any other animals, have myths, religious beliefs, philosophy, and science. Do we now know, through Darwinian science, the *sufficient* reason why we live with the incest taboo? In Plato’s *Laws*, the common opinion about incest is reported to be that it is “hateful to the gods, and the most shameful of shameful things” (838b10–c1; quoted by Arnhart, p. 270). But, according to the Darwinian scientific account, the real cause of incest aversion has nothing to do with the gods or the shameful, the noble or the base. It has to do only with the production of biological offspring unfit for further reproduction “in the Darwinian struggle for existence” common to all organisms. If this is the real problem, and the sole problem, with incest, why not just prevent the conception or birth of any offspring resulting from incestuous intercourse? Use a condom. Get an abortion. Won’t this solve the problem? Don’t we, unlike any other animals, have the power to override or interfere with the hand of natural selection? (Some even claim that we can now, through genetic science, begin the process of unnatural selection, or self-evolution; see “Darwinian Natural Right?,” pp. 145–47.) Doesn’t this fact alone suffice to show that, whether we like it or not, we are “in-between” beings, set apart from the rest of animal nature? The biological rootedness of our humanity and our kinship with the other animals must indeed be recognized and researched, but it must not be forgotten that we are not members of our species in the same way that they are members of theirs. Let us conclude the discussion of incest with a look at where the Darwinian account, of and by itself, leaves us.

Although the incest taboo is a cultural universal, it is the case that “a few human beings will not develop the aversion to incest that is normal for most people.” Now precisely because the taboo is universal, “these deviant individuals will provoke a deep disgust from others” (p. 273). But, as long as they use contraception or abortion, is there really anything wrong with their enjoyment of the sort of sex they happen to prefer? As long as they assume the responsibility to practice evolution-safe incest and don’t produce offspring, is there any reason to condemn them, to display our disgust publicly, to discriminate against them? The incest taboo should be reformed. Aversion to incest is now simply a majority preference, for the Darwinian reasons indicated. Similarly, attraction to incest is a minority preference. Each is but a part of one’s sexual orientation, and subject to determination according to free (unconstrained) choice by individuals. As long as we make sure to have our incest without babies, it’s a lifestyle choice. Thus, although it’s not for me, because my old aversion lingers on, I have no right to condemn it in others. Isn’t this where the Darwinian account, of and by itself, leaves us? Therefore, I agree with Leon Kass that, “we are suspicious of those who think that they can rationalize away our horror, say, by trying to explain the enormity of incest with arguments only about the genetic risks of inbreeding.”<sup>6</sup>

Arnhart, of course, did not intend to rationalize away our horror; he thought

he was grounding it normatively in nature. But rationalizing away is what the Darwinian scientific account does by virtue of the peculiar and typically modern (post-seventeenth-century) type of causality that it places behind the human capacities and operations. For since the Darwinian account is species-neutral, it must conclude that the real (as opposed to merely apparent) causes of my desires and aversions are common to other animal species, and not specifically human. What is distinctively human is my conscious apprehension of the objects that *appear* to me to be the causes of my emotions and my choices, e.g., the per se shameful depravity of incest regardless of dysgenic consequences. But those objects are revealed by Darwinian science to be projections or side effects of causes that I do not consciously apprehend and that aim per se simply at the reproductive fitness that is a goal common to all organisms, an end which, unlike the noble and the base, elicits neither praise nor blame, and has little relation to human virtue and vice (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a10, 1115b12, 1151b19, 1177a1414–17). Thus enlightened, I see that the apparent depravity of incest is only the *per accidens* cause of my aversion. This is problem 3 of “Darwinian Natural Right?” the problem of hidden-hand causation, even in the things closest to us, our own passions and purposes (pp. 135–36). Next I comment (too briefly) on the work of Leon Kass, and then conclude on the question of cosmic teleology.

It seems to me wrong to call Kass a Darwinian, since I do not believe he would agree that the Darwinian principles are comprehensive. Kass sees both the common biological and the specifically human, and gives each its due (see especially *The Ethics of Human Cloning*, pp. 24–31). In viewing the biological roots of our humanity in light of the distinctively human, he corrects Darwin and goes beyond him. In his conclusion of *The Hungry Soul*, Kass speaks of our orientation to “the beautiful, the good, the true, and the holy” (*The Hungry Soul*, p. 231). In Kass’s excellent philosophical writings, references to mystery are not uncommon. Kass can accept Darwinian science as part of the truth. The crucial question is, could Darwinian science accept Kass?

I conclude by returning to the subject of cosmic or comprehensive teleology, or more correctly, ultimate principles. I have conveyed to Arnhart the impression that I think “natural right requires a cosmic teleology so that the order of the whole universe supports human goodness” (p. 269). This was not my intention. Consider: could such a requirement ever be met by human reason? (See Strauss, quotation 5.) Did Aristotle think that he had met this requirement? To answer this question, we must read *Parts of Animals*, 644b22–645a27, among the most beautiful passages in the Aristotelian corpus. There we learn that different classes of phenomena or kinds of being are known with different degrees of certainty. Specifically, we can have greater certainty about the biological than about the astronomical, although the astronomical beings are greater in rank than living things. There is a tradeoff between the certainty of knowledge and the dignity of its object. It is true today that we live among plants and animals

and are connatural to the latter, and thus can know them with high certainty, whereas the stars (on whose spectacular processes we now know the origin of life depended) are too big to get into a laboratory, not to mention the whole universe itself. Cosmology, whether philosophical or physical, is always conjectural and uncertain, and I believe Aristotle understood his own to be so as well. (See also *Topics*, 104b1–18, on the certainty of arguments for the eternity of the universe.) My point in “Darwinian Natural Right?” was twofold: (1) The questions about the ultimate principles of the universe—what might they be?—and their possible relations to conceptions of the human good—is open-ended domination, now through genetic science, our work?—must be kept open for study. (2) Plato’s Idea of the Good, the noble or beautiful, Aristotle’s Intellect exemplify necessary attempts to make theoretical life and its moderating influence on *praxis* defensible against the claims of domination in one form or another. (Regarding natural teleology, remember that the *Republic* is a post-second-sailing work.) This premodern intention requires an account of the whole—unavoidably conjectural and less than certain—in which man is not the highest being.

In his response, Arnhart quotes the passage from “Darwinian Natural Right?” (p. 147) in which I cite the following line from “The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” in Rousseau’s *Emile*: “the good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked one orders the whole in relation to himself.” My point, again, is simply that a premodern understanding of this general type (there is much latitude) is part of defending the notion that we have ends prior to choice whereby to limit our transcendent powers of domination (see also *The Hungry Soul*, p. 78). Tellingly, Arnhart ignores my concern about domination and my reference to Descartes on the infinity of human will, and wonders instead if I am perhaps employing esoteric writing by using Rousseau, a very modern thinker. No—no esotericism is needed or intended here; I picked Rousseau’s formulation because it is concise and beautiful.

Finally, I have a problem in my own trans-Darwinian account. If the whole is mysterious (Strauss, quotation 6), or even incomplete, how exactly are we to order ourselves in relation to the whole?

I conclude with another quotation from Strauss, who quotes Thomas Aquinas, who paraphrases *Parts of Animals*, 644b32–645a1:

Philosophy is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth. . . . Genuine knowledge of a fundamental question, thorough understanding of it, is better than blindness to it, or indifference to it, be that indifference or blindness accompanied by knowledge of the answers to a vast number of peripheral or ephemeral questions or not. *Minimum quod potest haberi de cognitione rerum altissimarum, desiderabilius est quam certissima cognitio quae habetur de minimis rebus.* (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 5)<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Larry Arnhart, "Defending Darwinian Natural Right," *Interpretation*, 27, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 263–77, in response to Richard F. Hassing, "Darwinian Natural Right?" *Interpretation*, 27, no. 2 (Winter 1999–2000): 129–60. For my comments on E. O. Wilson's *Consilience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), see *Academic Questions*, 12, no. 1 (Winter 1998–99): 6–8.

2. The material in the preceding two paragraphs is discussed in detail in Richard F. Hassing, ed., *Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), pp. 211–56.

3. Note that in *Natural Right and History* Strauss distinguishes three types of classic natural right teachings (pp. 146 ff.); I am glossing over differences in order to simplify.

4. I discuss Strauss on natural science in my Introduction to *Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs*, pp. 10–22.

Arnhart continues to focus solely on Strauss's Introduction (see also *Natural Right*, p. 166), concluding to the dualism that, in Arnhart's words, "rejects the comprehensive naturalism of the premodern exponents of natural right such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas" (p. 263). But Strauss spent far more time with Plato and Socrates than with Aristotle, and "Socrates was so far from being committed to a specific cosmology that his knowledge was knowledge of ignorance . . . knowledge of the elusive character of the truth, of the whole. Socrates, then, viewed man in the light of the mysterious character of the whole" (Strauss, quotation 6). The account of the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic* is perfectly compatible with Strauss's statement. I believe that the Idea of the Good is conjectural, uncertain, problematic, but necessary for the self-consistency of philosophic life. See the concluding paragraph of this reply.

5. Leon Kass poses the problem with greater equanimity in *The Hungry Soul* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 78: "Can we successfully guide our *indeterminate* openness (in the realm of action) by some of the discoveries of our *receptive* openness (in the realm of awareness)?" See also *Hungry Soul*, p. 196. The awful fact of Nazism (see Arnhart on Heidegger, p. 277) shows that we have a problem that no other species has.

6. Leon R. Kass and James Q. Wilson, *The Ethics of Human Cloning* (Washington, DC: The American Enterprise Institute Press, 1998), pp. 18–19.

7. *What is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), p. 11.