

# ANSWERING THE BIOETHICISTS' OBJECTION: HABERMAS AND ARENDT ON EVOLUTION

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*Bioethicists criticize Jürgen Habermas's argument against "liberal eugenics" for many reasons. This essay examines one particular critique, according to which Habermas misunderstands the implications of human evolution. In adopting Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality," Habermas seems to fear that genetically modified children will lose the contingency of their births, which would impair their capacity for political action; but according to evolutionary theory, bioethicists argue, this fear is unfounded. I explore this objection by entertaining the hypothesis that Habermas's argument assumes Arendt's interpretation of Darwinian evolution in addition to her conception of natality, and then I answer it by contrasting the conceptions of evolution held by Habermas, by Arendt, and by Habermas's critics.*

*Les bioéthiciens critiquent l'argument de Jürgen Habermas contre « l'eugénisme libéral » pour de nombreuses raisons. Cet essai examine une critique en particulier, selon laquelle Habermas comprend mal les implications de l'évolution humaine : en adoptant le concept de la « natalité » de Hannah Arendt, Habermas semble craindre que les enfants soumis à une modification génétique ne perdent la contingence propre à leur naissance, une perte qui diminuerait leur capacité pour l'action politique, mais selon la théorie de l'évolution, les bioéthiciens soutiennent que cette peur est sans fondement. J'explore cette objection à Habermas en considérant l'hypothèse que, en plus du concept de la natalité, Habermas suppose aussi l'interprétation arendtienne de l'évolution biologique de Darwin, et j'y répond en confrontant cette conception de l'évolution avec la conception propre à Habermas et avec celle des bioéthiciens qui lui ont répondu.*

When bioethicists read Jürgen Habermas's *The Future of Human Nature*, they find much to criticize. Taking aim at the "liberal eugenics" that would be involved should parents intervene prenatally in the genome of their unborn child with a view to producing certain developmental outcomes, Habermas seeks to show that such interventions are "liberal" in name only. In fact they threaten fundamental ethical and political commitments to autonomy and equality, and thus they are "foreign to the reciprocal and symmetrical relations of mutual recognition proper to a moral and legal community of free and equal persons."<sup>1</sup> In particular, when parental intentions are "genetically fixed" in advance and a child finds herself "at odds" with them but unable to take a "revisionary" stand in the medium of communicative reasons (FHN, 51, 62), then, Habermas says, the child has lost the capacity to recognize herself as autonomous, or as the author of her own life (*ibid.*, 63). As a result, the parents' "one-sided acts of genetic manipulation" create an "irreversible" kind of social dependence between one generation and another; it is a specific, rather literal, type of "paternalism" with regard to the qualities or "essence" of the future person, for which there can be "no well-founded assumption of consent," and which puts the lie to the idea that such eugenics could ever be "liberal" (*ibid.*, 63–65). Thus, Habermas contends, "the conditions of nature-like growth...alone allow us to conceive of ourselves as the authors of our own lives and as equal members of the moral community" (*ibid.*, 42).

Among other things, bioethicists have taken issue with what looks like an appeal here to an unchanging and morally decisive conception of human nature,<sup>2</sup> and with Habermas's apparent commitment to some version of genetic determinism, according to which selected traits in children correspond directly with and are caused by the properties of their genomes.<sup>3</sup> While Habermas denies that his argu-

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, (tr.) H. Beister and W. Rehg, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 65, cf. 49. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FHN.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Fenton, "Liberal Eugenics and Human Nature: Against Habermas," *The Hastings Center Report*, vol. 36, no. 6 (2006): 35–42; Nicolae Morar, "An Empirically Informed Critique of Habermas' Argument from Human Nature," *Science and Engineering Ethics*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2015): 95–113.

<sup>3</sup> David T. Wasserman, "My Fair Baby: What's Wrong with Parents Genetically Enhancing Their Children?" in *Genetic Prospects: Issues on Biotechnology, Ethics, and Public Policy*, (ed.) V. V. Gehring (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 106; Inmaculada De Melo-Martín, "Designing People: A Post-Human Future?," in

ment presupposes genetic determinism, whose premises he recognizes as “erroneous” (FHN, 124 n. 54), Allen Buchanan, one of the liberal eugenicists to whom Habermas originally responded, has accused him of conflating “designing a genome” with “designing a person” and characterized the argument of *FHN* as involving a “numbing *non sequitur*.”<sup>4</sup>

Having construed the book as a contribution to liberal moral philosophy and an argument “against liberal eugenics,” critics have responded with arguments “against Habermas” (to quote the subtitle of an article by Elizabeth Fenton). One point of convergence for many of his critics is the idea that Habermas must have an erroneous understanding of the implications of biological evolution.<sup>5</sup> Had he understood evolution properly, the argument goes, he would not worry that biotechnological interventions threaten the contingency or “naturalness” of a person’s birth—what Hannah Arendt called their “natality.” This article seeks to define and explore this particular line of criticism by entertaining the hypothesis that, in addition to Arendt’s conception of natality, Habermas’s argument assumes her interpretation of Darwinian evolution. Although this hypothesis could justify what I will call the “evolutionary objection” to *FHN*, I will ultimately defend Habermas from such criticism. This is not to say that the argument of his book is without reproach, or that I share his views about the potential consequences of preimplantation genetic interventions for the “ethical self-understanding” of human beings or the conditions of communicative action. It is, however, to say that this objection, in its current forms, suffers from abstracting Habermas’s argument here from the rest of his work. Restoring it reveals that Habermas’s own understanding of evolution around the time of writing *FHN* is quite sophisticated, although it differs both from Arendt’s and from the conception of evolution that Habermas’s critics appear to be working with. A good deal of this article consists in triangulating these three points of view, which mutually illuminate one another in such a way that each becomes clearer in the process.

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*Philosophy and Design*, (ed.) P. E. Vermaas, P. Kroes, A. Light, and S. A. Moore (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 198–99; Morar, “An Empirically Informed Critique,” 106–109.

<sup>4</sup> Allen, Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity: The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Fenton, “Liberal Eugenics and Human Nature”; Morar, “An Empirically Informed Critique”; Timothy Murphy, “In Defense of Prenatal Genetic Interventions,” *Bioethics*, vol. 28, no. 7 (2014): 335–42. Murphy’s article is hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DPGI.

## Contingency and the Evolutionary Objection to Habermas

Habermas associates the “conditions of nature-like growth,” which are supposedly necessary for the experience of being the author of one’s own actions, with the theme of contingency (FHN, 25, 72). He does so, in part, by conceptualizing being born “naturally” (that is, not having been subject to prenatal genetic interventions) in terms of Arendtian “natality”:

We experience our own freedom with reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal.... Birth as well, being a natural fact, meets the conceptual requirement of constituting a beginning we cannot control. Philosophy has but rarely addressed this matter. One of the exceptions is Hannah Arendt, who in the context of her theory of action introduces the concept of “natality.” (*Ibid.*, 58)

For Arendt, natality—the human condition of having been born—underwrites the capacity for communicative, political action and is characterized in terms of novelty and unexpectedness.<sup>6</sup> As Habermas puts it, natality means that “every single birth [is] invested with the hope for something entirely other to come and break the chain of eternal recurrence.... In acting, human beings feel free to begin something new because birth itself, as a divide between nature and culture, marks a new beginning” (FHN, 58–59). Habermas’s bioethicist readers—both critics and supporters—have drawn out the implication that if *only* a so-called natural birth provides the right conditions for the experience of freedom or autonomy, then only such births involve natality or are, properly speaking, *contingent*.<sup>7</sup> In the case of a child whose genome has been designed or “programmed” in advance, the requisite genetic contingency has been “taken away.”<sup>8</sup> But is this implication necessarily given? In what

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177–78.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard G. Prusak, “Rethinking ‘Liberal Eugenics’: Reflections and Questions on Habermas on Bioethics,” *The Hastings Center Report*, vol. 35, no. 6 (2005): 31–42, here 35, 37; Catherine Mills, *Futures of Reproduction: Bioethics and Biopolitics*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 86, 91; Jonathan Pugh, “Autonomy, Natality and Freedom: A Liberal Re-examination of Habermas in the Enhancement Debate,” *Bioethics*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2015): 145–52.

<sup>8</sup> Pugh, “Autonomy, Natality and Freedom,” 149.

sense would “artificial” (as opposed to natural) births not be contingent?

The most thorough consideration to date of Habermas’s references to contingency is Timothy Murphy’s. He construes Habermas as saying that “only human beings who are *contingently* who they are—biogenetically speaking—can stand in a relationship of equality—and thus morality—to one another” (DPGI, 335). If a human being’s origin or birth is non-contingent (for example, programmed or subject to her parents’ intentions expressed in genetic interventions), then she cannot be the sociopolitical equal of her parents, or perhaps, of any person who was born “naturally.” Murphy thinks this is the most significant of all Habermas’s objections to prenatal genetic interventions and he aims to demonstrate that, on Habermas’s view, “*any* prenatal intervention is objectionable”—not just speculative kinds of enhancement, but even relatively uncontroversial and currently widespread procedures: “embryo selection, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, oocyte mitochondrial transfer, [etc.]” (*ibid.*, 337). Habermas must conclude that the “current practice of fertility medicine already involves significant corrosion of our ethical self-understanding” since all these procedures amount to interfering with contingency (*ibid.*).

Murphy’s focus on contingency as the keystone of Habermas’s argument prompts him to bring it into conversation with evolutionary theory. In this, he joins a chorus of readers of *FHN* who suggest that the weaknesses in Habermas’s argument are the result of an implicit (mis)understanding of biological evolution. For example, on Fenton’s reading, Habermas’s argument is merely a more baroque version of the “human nature objection” common to many opponents of liberal eugenics: genetic technology threatens something natural, even sacred, in virtue of which human beings possess dignity. The main problem with Habermas’s position is, therefore, that he “views human nature as something definable and fixed.”<sup>9</sup> But, if evolution is true, then Habermas’s position is simply false, and it begs the question: “The development of genetic technologies that radically alter what we may consider fundamental characteristics of a human life challenges this assumption.”<sup>10</sup> Habermas has reached his conclusions, Fenton continues, by failing to place the human condition in its correct evolutionary context and also failing to grasp the role of technology in that context: “As genetic technology progresses, so too

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<sup>9</sup> Fenton, “Liberal Eugenics and Human Nature,” 38–39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

does humanity—it changes, the species evolves.”<sup>11</sup> There may indeed be some “shared characteristics” among human beings at a given juncture in evolutionary history, but nothing normative follows from them. This is not just because we have to be careful about the naturalistic fallacy, which assumes that the results of a natural process are good (or exert normative force) just insofar as they are natural, but also because “whatever [those characteristics] are, they are open to change and improvement: to deny this is to deny humanity its most cherished freedom—the freedom to evolve.”<sup>12</sup> Nicolae Morar’s conclusions are similar to Fenton’s but more polemical and insistent about being “empirically informed” to the extent that he cites prominent biologists and philosophers of biology to show the falsity of Habermas’s “kind essentialism” and “genetic determinism.”<sup>13</sup> It is also worth quoting Buchanan’s generalization about the opponents of liberal eugenics: “[T]he risks and the benefits of enhancement look quite different, depending upon whether one’s view of human beings is informed by an accurate understanding of evolutionary biology”—which observation, to be fair, he stops just short of applying to Habermas.<sup>14</sup>

I suspect that many critics have been inspired to pursue their criticisms in evolutionary terms because of the Darwinian connotations of the word “contingency.” This is explicit in Murphy, who comments, “On secular accounts, we understand ourselves as the outcome of biological chance and evolutionary history, yet we do not interpret the genetic contingency of our origins as normative regarding our future” (DPGI, 337). In other words, just because nature is contingent and evolution non-teleological, we need not conclude that our *ethical* lives have to be so too. Viewed through an evolutionary lens, contingency obviously is not determinative of our “ethical self-understanding,” but in his endorsement of Arendtian natality Habermas assumes that it is: if births have their contingency “taken away,” then this must produce unfortunate consequences for our ethical and political self-understanding. Therefore, Murphy reasons, Habermas could only have arrived at this conclusion by failing to grasp something crucial about evolution. Echoing Buchanan, he generalizes, “[B]ioconservatives arguing on behalf of the status quo all too commonly ignore the obvious: Our descendants will not remain the kinds of beings we are even if we swear off PGIs [prenatal

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Morar, “An Empirically Informed Critique,” 104–109.

<sup>14</sup> Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity*, 8.

genetic interventions] altogether, since evolutionary forces will continue to effect change" (DPGI, 338). Murphy reasons that the conclusions of *FHN* would only be true if *evolution* were false. Since this is not the case, Habermas ought to have understood it better ("seen the obvious"), because then he would have realized that, as Fenton says, the current state of human biology has no normative weight. Reducing to absurdity the implication that *this* human nature at *this* arbitrary evolutionary moment is better than any other, Murphy remarks, "[O]ne could imagine Neanderthal bioconservatives arguing that no change is permissible in their descendants" (DPGI, 337).

Murphy's term "bioconservative" and his amusing illustration both seem to be derived from Nick Bostrom's influential essay "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity,"<sup>15</sup> in which Bostrom also replies directly to Habermas's worries about genetic modifications undermining autonomy and equality:

A transhumanist could reply that it would be a mistake for an individual to believe that she has no choice over her own life just because some (or all) of her genes were selected by her parents. She would, in fact, have as much choice as if her genetic constitution had been selected by chance.<sup>16</sup>

Murphy develops Bostrom's critical rejoinder further. Had Habermas appreciated the implications of human evolution, he would have realized that it is not possible to distinguish clearly between non-intentional and intentional sources of evolutionary contingency: "[H]uman genetics are influenced by migration, war, segregation, love, marriage, prison, and death sentences.... Human choices [therefore] at the social level affect traits in descendants, if only indirectly" (DPGI, 338). And there is no escaping the fact that "everyone lies genetically downstream from social choices" (*ibid.*, 342). As a result, nobody's genome meets the standard of "contingency" Habermas seems to demand, if that requires its never having been affected by any intentional influences, including these "indirect" ones. So why does he claim that a person would be able to see her "natural" birth as contingent, but not the "programmer's intention, reaching through

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<sup>15</sup> Nick Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," *Bioethics*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2005): 202–14, here 205.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 211–12; for the grandfather of the argument, see Nicholas Agar, "Designing Babies: Morally Permissible Ways to Modify the Human Genome," *Bioethics*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1995): 1–15.

the genome" (FHN, 60)? Habermas might respond to this question in two ways: he might argue that there is a difference between the way we feel about intentions that have affected our genes "indirectly" and those that do so directly; or he might counter with what I think is a stronger argument, that we *do* in fact feel differently about the intentional events that have affected our genetic inheritance and the unintentional ones. Consider how different it is to reflect on the knowledge that one's genome was affected by the "migrations, wars, and segregations" associated with the legacy of colonial genocides, on the one hand, and the knowledge that hominid bipedalism arose as a result of environmental changes in prehistoric east Africa, on the other.

Habermas, however, does not address this kind of question in *FHN*. In fact, he never evinces a command of evolutionary theory in that text—primarily because he says next to nothing about it apart from a couple of references to "Darwinism" as an ideology (criticizing the renewal of the "explosive alliance of Darwinism and free trade" [FHN, 21]) or as a factor deflating ideologies ("the dissipation of our geocentric and our anthropocentric worldviews by Copernicus and by Darwin, respectively" [*ibid.*, 54; cf. 106]). But Habermas does refer to Arendt at a crucial moment in order to support what is perhaps his most important contention; and Arendt, in addition to describing the political significance of biological birth in *The Human Condition*, examined the significance of Darwinian evolution in a supplement to the revised edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published the same year (1958). It may, therefore, be reasonable to assume that Arendt's conception of evolution informs *FHN*, just as her conception of natality does. This is a vital piece of background information for understanding Habermas's book.

## Arendt on Evolution

Arendt's conception of evolution appears to be dramatically opposed to many of those with the most credibility and cachet today, especially among philosophers. In the chapter "Ideology and Terror" from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt moves from a consideration of the history and sociology of totalitarianism to an inquiry into its "nature" or "essence."<sup>17</sup> She hypothesizes that, although totalitarian-

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> enl. ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 460–61. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OT. See also Raymond Aron, "The Essence of Totalitarianism According to Hannah



ism appears lawless, and certainly “defies...all positive laws,” nevertheless it appeals to higher “sources of authority” on the basis of which positive laws are ultimately justified. Totalitarianism “claims to obey strictly and unequivocally [the] laws of Nature and History,” and it is willing to “sacrifice everyone’s vital interests” to executing those laws and to expediting their supposed results (OT, 461–62). One way in which the conception of capital-N Nature involved here differs from other, non-totalitarian sources of legitimacy, like Christian divine right and natural law, is that the latter traditions thought of “Nature or Divinity as the source of authority...as permanent and eternal,” whereas totalitarianism interprets Nature and History as movements or processes with inevitable outcomes (*ibid.*, 463).

What Arendt calls the “law of Nature” and the “law of History” map onto the sources of legitimation for the only two forms of totalitarianism realized during her lifetime, Nazism and Stalinism. She identifies the sources of belief in such laws in the work of Darwin and Marx, respectively:

Underlying the Nazis’ belief in race laws as the expression of the law of nature in man, is Darwin’s idea of man as the product of a natural development which does not necessarily stop with the present species of human beings, just as under the Bolsheviks’ belief in class-struggle as the expression of the law of history lies Marx’s notion of society as the product of a gigantic historical movement. (OT, 463)

This remark has been taken to imply that Arendt implicates Darwin personally in moral responsibility for Nazi atrocities—either fairly or unfairly.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, despite the distinction between Darwin and Marx as mainsprings of Nazism and Stalinism, Arendt insists that their fundamental insight was the same:

If one considers...the basic philosophies of both men, it turns out that ultimately the movement of history and the movement of nature are one and the same. Darwin’s introduction of the concept of development into nature, his insistence that, at least in the field

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Arendt,” (tr.) M. LePain and D. Mahoney, *Partisan Review*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1993): 366–76.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Tony Barta, “On Pain of Extinction: Laws of Nature and History in Darwin, Marx, and Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History*, (ed.) R. H. King and D. Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 89–105; Robert J. Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 193, 196.

of biology, natural movement is not circular but unilinear, moving in an infinitely progressing direction, means in fact that nature is, as it were, being swept into history, that natural life is considered to be historical. The "natural" law of the survival of the fittest is just as much a historical law and could be used as such by racism as Marx's law of the survival of the most progressive class. (*Ibid.*, 463)

*In nuce*, Arendt thinks that the danger essential to totalitarianism is that it creates the conditions in which human agents—state functionaries, for instance—seek to realize the anticipated results of these natural-*cum*-historical laws or clear the way for the laws themselves to do their work: the aim of totalitarian "terror" is "to make it possible for the force of nature or history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action" (*ibid.*, 465); chillingly, "terror executes on the spot the death sentences which Nature is supposed to have pronounced on races or individuals who are 'unfit to live' or History on 'dying classes'" (*ibid.*, 466).

I will bracket Arendt's reading of Marx (to which, to a certain extent, the interpretation of Darwin is an appendix) and focus on her description of Darwinian evolution, in which many readers of Darwin and theorists of evolution would not recognize him or it for at least three reasons. First, Arendt seems to assume that Darwinism implies that evolution has a "direction," and indeed, one that can be known in advance. But, according to Michael Ghiselin, Darwin's fundamental challenge to directed evolution is more reflective of his "basic philosophy" than any commitment to a foreseeable future state.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the famous argument in *The Origin of Species* about "organs of extreme perfection" directed against William Paley and the natural theologians who treated the organic eye as evidence of God's design,<sup>20</sup> Darwin's 1862 book about the fertilization of orchids analyzes the language of natural "purposes." It shows how, among orchids, organic structures can later be adapted to do something distinct from the function for which they were originally formed. It may therefore be said that there are "diverse purposes" in nature, not just one per organism (or organic part). Indeed, Darwin says, nature is constantly *re-purposing* its resources like a man

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<sup>19</sup> Michael T. Ghiselin, *The Triumph of the Darwinian Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 159.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, (ed.) J. Carroll (Peterborough: Broadview, 2003), 211–14.

making a new machine with “old wheels, springs, and pulleys.”<sup>21</sup> In *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, Darwin adds that “in regard to the use to which the fragments may be put, their shape may be strictly said to be accidental.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the famous letter in which Darwin doubts that God could have intended parasitic wasps to lay their eggs in living caterpillars puts it this way: though there may be general background constraints in nature (such as the laws of physics), “the details, whether good or bad, [are] left to the working out of what we may call chance.”<sup>23</sup> These writings clearly suggest that, for Darwin, the “field of biology” is not concerned with movement in a “progressing direction,” as Arendt claims, but stakes out, in contradistinction to physics, this chance-dominated, accidental, non-teleological (not to mention amoral) realm.

A second reason to think that Arendt’s characterization of Darwinian evolution would perplex a later Darwinian involves the concept of a natural “law.” Certainly, Darwin does call natural selection and the “struggle for life” laws of nature, as Arendt points out—for example, in the climactic final paragraph of *The Origin of Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms.... There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity,

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Various Contrivances by which British and Foreign Orchids are Fertilised by Insects, and on the Good Effects of Intercrossing* (London: John Murray, 1862), quoted in Ghiselin, *Triumph*, 154.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1868), quoted in Ghiselin, *Triumph*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989), 290.

from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>24</sup>

Philosophers of biology hasten to note, however, that these are not "laws" in the same way that the laws of physics are; the latter possess a kind of nomological necessity that the former lack.<sup>25</sup> Darwin's implied parallel between his discoveries and Newton's "fixed law of gravity" is therefore misleading. Although generalized inductively from observable phenomena, the laws of Newtonian physics have huge deductive power: on the basis of knowing some properties of a (celestial) system, like the masses and velocities of bodies, one can deduce future system-states. But Darwinian statements do not make such deductions possible. Even if you know that such-and-such an organism is an orchid and you understand the processes of natural selection, you still cannot say anything definite about what that orchid's descendants will be like in (say) one hundred generations. On the one hand, the "purposes" to which the orchid's organic parts will be put are subject to "chance" and "accident." On the other, one of the presuppositions of natural selection is that there is no guarantee this particular organism will even *have* descendants in one hundred generations. So in what sense are such discoveries "laws"? Victorian philosophers and scientists had already worried that the evolution of species called into question the possibility of general laws in biology, and the view that Darwinism proscribes their very existence has never gone away since.<sup>26</sup>

In the accounts of evolution that have become influential among academic philosophers since Arendt, the reason why biology contains no deductive, Newton-style laws is that it is so *historical*, so inextricably bound up with history. Biology is not a "nomothetic," law-making kind of science, but a historical one.<sup>27</sup> If Darwin had a

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<sup>24</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 398.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Elliot Sober, "Metaphysical and Epistemological Issues in Modern Darwinian Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, (ed.) J. Hodge and G. Radick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 268–69.

<sup>26</sup> See David L. Hull, "Darwin's Science and Victorian Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, 181–85; J. J. C. Smart, "Can Biology Be an Exact Science?" *Synthese*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1959): 359–68; John Beatty, "The Evolutionary Contingency Thesis," in *Concepts, Theories, and Rationality in the Biological Sciences*, (ed.) G. Wolters and J. G. Lennox with P. McLaughlin (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Sober, "Metaphysical and Epistemological Issues," 268.

battle-cry, it might have been “biology is history,”<sup>28</sup> but this is to say almost the opposite of Arendt’s statement that with Darwin “nature is...being swept into history” (OT, 463). A third major reason that Arendt’s Darwin might seem strange to a contemporary reader is that “history” means something quite different in these two claims.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt speaks of history as the sort of thing governed by laws directed toward particular end-states. The horror of totalitarian ideologies is that they conceive of history and nature as movements sweeping everyone along whether they like it or not. Such a conception of history seems to be nomothetic or perhaps even residually Newtonian, in the sense that it presupposes the possibility of deducing outcomes from current conditions. In other words, the conception of history that Arendt describes in “Ideology and Terror” is like Carl Hempel’s, who argued for the possibility of producing “general laws in scientific historical research.”<sup>29</sup> Such research would ideally produce predictions as well as explanations and would be deductive, deterministic, and modelled on Newtonian mechanics.<sup>30</sup> It is, of course, questionable whether Hempel’s “covering law” model of explanation is a good fit with the discipline of history—because, for example, no sufficiently universal and true law has ever been advanced by a historian and historians usually offer causal explanations that do not rest on covering laws.<sup>31</sup> It is also not a good fit with history’s “ally, evolutionary theory.”<sup>32</sup>

When, in contrast, an evolutionary theorist claims that “biology is history,” they probably mean to evoke what Stephen Jay Gould identified as the “essence of history”: “Its name is contingency.”<sup>33</sup> A historical explanation, Gould says, “does not rest on direct deductions from laws of nature, but on an unpredictable sequence of antecedent states, where any major change in any step of the sequence would have altered the final result.”<sup>34</sup> For example, the “chance” repurposing of organic parts among the orchids that Darwin described might have produced flowers completely different to

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<sup>28</sup> Robert J. Richards, “The Structure of Narrative Explanation in History and Biology,” in *History and Evolution*, (ed.) M. H. Nitecki and D. V. Nitecki (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Carl G. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1942): 35–48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Donagan, “Historical Explanation: The Popper-Hempel Theory Reconsidered,” *History and Theory*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1964): 3–26.

<sup>32</sup> Richards, “The Structure of Narrative Explanation,” 21.

<sup>33</sup> Gould, *Wonderful Life*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

those we know today. Far from being progressive or “unilinear,” an evolutionary tree will be divergent, more of a bush with an unpredictable shape.<sup>35</sup> Since, say, 1970, it has become increasingly widespread to focus on the aspects of Darwin’s work and evolutionary theory that emphasize the contingency of evolutionary history and the unpredictability or openness of the future that it implies, rather than on those emphasizing law-like, progressive, or directional development. There seems to be a general (though not universal) consensus that Darwinian evolution means historical indeterminacy, not the “historical determinism” that Arendt saw in it. This is true of the positions advanced by Ghiselin, Gould, and Richards, the “non-progressive and nondirectional” update of Marxist biology offered by Richard Lewontin,<sup>36</sup> and so-called developmental systems theory in evolutionary biology,<sup>37</sup> which laid some of the groundwork for the “expanded evolutionary synthesis” that emphasizes the roles played by developmental and ecological factors in inheritance alongside Darwinian selection.<sup>38</sup>

I have a strong suspicion that this is the sense in which Habermas’s critics invoke “contingency” when they accuse him of taking a dim view of evolution. Morar’s philosophical and scientific authorities tellingly include some of the interpreters I have mentioned, like Sober and Lewontin. Murphy is hardly less explicit. He thinks that if Habermas is committed to the view that “genetically programmed” persons have lost the contingency that makes them capable of autonomy and selfhood, then Habermas is not giving contingency enough credit because it “remains an inalterable feature of human life before, during, and after the fusion of sperm and ovum.” Contingency is not primarily in the past—as if it were restricted to the conditions of our birth—but the future: “[T]he selection of a trait in children prior to birth cannot undo the contingent prospects ahead” (DPGI, 341). And moral agency, according to Murphy, has more to do with that contingent future than a contingent conception. As Darwin

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> John Beatty, “Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper: Darwinism, Historical Determinism, and Totalitarianism,” in *Thinking about Evolution: Historical, Philosophical, and Political Perspectives*, (ed.) R. Singh, C. Krimbas, D. Paul, and J. Beatty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Susan Oyama, et al. “Introduction: What is Developmental Systems Theory?” in *Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution*, (ed.) S. Oyama, P. E. Griffiths, and R. D. Gray (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> Kevin N. Laland, et al. “The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis: Its Structure, Assumptions, and Predictions,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 282 (2015): 1–14.

already knew, “the meaning of a trait” can change over time—both evolutionary time and a person’s lifetime—as each organic system has the potential to be repurposed repeatedly. Of course, this applies to prenatally “selected” traits as well. If, for example, parents “sex select” their child to be male or female, they cannot “suspend the ways in which the child’s sex will unfold as a matter of contingent events” (DPGI, 341). The “meaning” of the associated sex-traits depends on the ways in which they are given functions over historical time, which are ultimately accidental. From this point of view, Fenton’s version of the evolutionary objection to *FHN* actually seems like the exception. It does not appeal to the contingent, open future as revealed by evolutionary science, but to a presumptive direction to evolution, namely progress, on whose side the liberal eugenicists find themselves, and against which Habermas takes a stand: “As genetic technology progresses, so too does humanity.”<sup>39</sup>

Of course, as Murphy knows, Habermas’s argument does appeal to contingency, but not the right kind: Habermas cares about the “contingency or naturalness” of birth (*FHN*, 25), later linked to the Arendtian notion of natality as the “new beginning” involved with the appearance of each unique person. According to Arendt’s description of evolution in “Ideology and Terror,” however, not only is biological evolution associated with determinism rather than contingency, it is even a *threat* to the contingency inherent in natality. “Terror,” Arendt says, “as the obedient servant of natural and historical movement has to eliminate from the process not only freedom in any specific sense, but the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make a new beginning” (OT, 466). The capacity to make a new beginning, the unpredictability or spontaneity of natality, is the ultimate target of extermination by the totalitarian logic that seeks only to facilitate historical movements—like Darwinian “survival of the fittest.” In this text, Arendt seems to oppose the “unilinear” movement of biological evolution to the contingency involved in each person’s birth. If it were true that Habermas accepted Arendt’s account of evolution (and I will argue below that he does not), just as he accepts Arendt’s account of natality, then the evolutionary criticisms of Habermas’s bioethicist readers would no doubt follow. It would be no surprise that Habermas refuses to countenance what Arendt also refuses to countenance: the idea that evolution entails an open, indeterminate future.

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<sup>39</sup> Fenton, “Liberal Eugenics and Human Nature,” 42.

To be fair, it is possible—if not likely—that Arendt's brief but crucial discussion of Darwin does not necessarily commit her to the view that evolutionary theory involves assuming a deterministic "law of nature" or biological "progress" in one direction, but only to the view that the totalitarian *ideology* that picks up Darwinian ideas (that is, Nazi racism) presents biology in such a light. Perhaps she even thinks that it does so falsely. According to John Beatty, for Arendt, "Totalitarian ideologies...claim to be based on laws of history but are not; there are no historical laws but only claims that parade as such."<sup>40</sup> This is why totalitarian functionaries (from party ideologues to thugs) have to try so hard to bring about the supposedly natural and inevitable results of the "survival of the fittest": "Predictions based on those claims come true only to the extent their subjects can be compelled to cooperate."<sup>41</sup> If they were *real* laws of nature, predictions based on them would come true as a matter of nomological necessity. This interpretation would align Arendt's view with Karl Popper's criticism of evolutionary theory, according to which it only feigns law-likeness and actually lacks the status of a properly falsifiable science.<sup>42</sup>

Arendt's writing largely supports Beatty's claim. Arendt speaks of ideologies as radically deductive, "isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise" (OT, 468). For example, "racism" in the case of the Nazis claims to deduce future events and historical necessities from the supposed explanatory principle of racial superiority. To all appearances it is only the ideological, and false, conception of history—*pace* Hempel—that involves deductive "covering laws." In contrast, the true historian for Arendt differs from the scientist in that the latter studies "ever-recurring happenings" while the subject matter of the former lies in the realm of "newness" and of "events which always occur only once."<sup>43</sup> History is concerned primarily with political action, and the political is the domain in which unexpected "new beginnings" are possible, the realm of events that presuppose natality and contingency. Arendt also says that when the historian is faced with a mass of particular, contingent facts, he weaves them into a narrative in which the historical events "lose

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<sup>40</sup> Beatty, "Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper," 69.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, (ed.) J. Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace), 318.



their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning.”<sup>44</sup> This would seem to be a point of convergence between Arendt and the Darwinians, who also emphasize the narrative, rather than predictive, style of explanation in evolutionary science.<sup>45</sup> In *The Human Condition* Arendt may even be taken to imply that biological evolution is characterized by the same kind of contingency as the realm of human affairs. In the context of motivating the concept of natality, she explains that a human being’s capacity for action means that “he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.”<sup>46</sup> This capacity for improbability “corresponds to the fact of birth,” but it also finds precedents in other examples of “new beginnings”:

The character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. Thus, the origin of life from inorganic matter is an infinite improbability of inorganic processes, as is the coming into being of the earth viewed from the standpoint of processes in the universe, *or the evolution of human out of animal life*. The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws.<sup>47</sup>

Whether the statistical unlikelyhood Arendt is describing applies only to human evolution or to the origin of any species, it is plausible that she means to say that evolutionary change also has the unpredictable, contingent character she associates with natality and political action. On balance, however, the evidence is mixed. Such hints of a contingency common to biology and history are at odds with Arendt’s general way of distinguishing between history and science, and some of her other descriptions of nature imply that it is less spontaneous and novel in the absence of techno-political intervention.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, (ed.) P. Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), 572.

<sup>45</sup> Gould, *Wonderful Life*, 277; Richards, “The Structure of Narrative Explanation,” 22.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis; cf. Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, (ed.) J. Kohn (New York: Penguin, 2006), 168.

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, (ed.) P. Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), 292–94.

## Evolution and Progress

Before turning back to Habermas, it is worth making one final point about Arendt. Although her characterization of Darwin looks to be at odds with those of other prominent readers of his work, there is at least one major exception: Michael Ruse, with whose views Arendt's are convergent. In fact, understanding the opposition between Ruse's views and those of Ghiselin, Gould, and others described above, will help to clarify how exactly Habermas diverges from his teacher Arendt on the topic of evolution.

Ruse has argued, in a self-consciously controversial book, that, despite the prestige of evolution in non-academic secular culture, evolutionary theory has failed to achieve the status of a professional, "mature" science—in contrast to molecular biology, for example. The reason why is that one particular cultural value has dominated the field to its detriment and relaxed the influence of the "epistemic values" (like predictive accuracy, internal coherence, etc.) proper to mature science—namely, the "idea of, and the hopes for, human-driven improvement, or *progress*."<sup>49</sup> Ruse finds evidence for the commitment to such an idea at almost every point in the modern tradition of evolutionary science—for example, in the views of early evolutionists and social radicals like the Chevalier de Lamarck, who both advanced the famous theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and shared the reformist fervour of the *philosophes* and the French Revolution. For Ruse, it is no surprise that people talk about "cultural" or "social evolution," which involves the spread of acquired ideas and practices, as being "Lamarckian"; Lamarck already thought of his evolutionary theory as support for a progressive social ideology (MM, 55). Ruse finds versions of a similar link between biology and cultural values even in interviews with late 20<sup>th</sup> century scientists.

Arendt would sympathize with Ruse. She thinks that ever since Darwin evolutionary science has been inextricable from visions of progress: she refers to "Darwin's introduction of the concept of development into nature, and his insistence that...natural movement is not circular but unilinear, moving in an infinitely progressing direction" (OT, 463). After all, Darwin himself says that "as natural

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Ruse, *From Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 15; emphasis in the original. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as MM. Ruse is here drawing on W. Warren Wagar, *Good Tidings: The Belief in Progress from Darwin to Marcuse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.”<sup>50</sup> It is even possible that Darwin intended *The Origin of Species* to say that the ultimate purpose of this progress was the production of moral beings like us.<sup>51</sup> Still, the issue of Darwin’s own views about progress has been the source of debate, with Gould arguing that they contain an “unresolved inconsistency”: “Darwin, the intellectual radical, knew what his own theory entailed and implied [namely, that the essence of natural history is contingency]: but Darwin, the social conservative, could not undermine the defining principle of a culture”—namely, progress.<sup>52</sup> On this view, very much the contrary of Ruse’s, evolutionary theory defies cultural values rather than reflecting them.

Ruse recognizes that most people with an interest in evolution would probably accept that, although evolutionism was originally linked with a progressionist ideology, Darwin’s theory brought about a “parting of the ways.” This split was subsequently amplified by the synthesis of natural selection with genetics, which explains variation by genetic mutations that are random relative to population-level outcomes (MM, 17). However, Ruse’s book purports to show that this comfortable story is “just plain wrong.” Progress was only belatedly expelled from evolutionary theory in the mid-twentieth century, for the very pragmatic reason that its practitioners at universities coveted a higher status among scientists. Moreover, the development was uneven across disciplines; paleontology, for example, was still deeply rooted in progressionist thinking well into the 1990s (*ibid.*, 530–31).

Arendt’s claims about Darwin’s views and the ideologues that take them up seem therefore vindicated by Ruse’s thesis. Nevertheless, Ruse stops short of attributing Nazi crimes to this conception of progress as the “law of Nature.” He does, however, suggest that popular science, saturated by cultural values, is a step on the road toward full-on “pseudo-science...driven exclusively by cultural values,” of which Nazi race hygiene is the prime example (*ibid.*, 12–13).

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<sup>50</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 398.

<sup>51</sup> Robert J. Richards, “Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection and its Moral Purpose,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Origin of Species*, (ed.) M. Ruse and R. J. Richards (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 141.

A paleontologist like Gould would seem like the embodied falsification of Ruse's claim that evolutionists believe in progress. Of course, Ruse is well aware of Gould's "withering...contempt" for progress as a cultural value projected onto nature and of Gould's emphasis on the contingency of life's history. But Ruse accuses Gould himself of doing the projection of values. In particular, according to Ruse, it is Gould's *social* progressivism (linked to his Marxist leanings) that paradoxically explains why he is against progress in nature (MM, 500–502). In an interview with Ruse, Gould notes his ambivalence: the notion of biological progress has been used to justify racism and determinism, but "[o]n the other hand...when you get away from Darwinism—which...is not inherently progressivist—and you move into human culture, which has a Lamarckian mode of inheritance, then you do have a justification for a more linear sort of Progress" (*ibid.*). On Ruse's interpretation, Gould sees "biological progressionism," that is, the failure to recognize the contingency of natural history, as a "major barrier to cultural Progress" (*ibid.*, 502).

## Habermas's Conception of Evolution

It is now evident that Habermas's bioethicist critics advance positions that can be illuminated in terms of the prevalent ideologies of evolutionism: Habermas fails to appreciate evolutionary contingency (according to Murphy and Morar) and even stands in the way of social progress (according to Fenton). Habermas's supposed underestimation of evolutionary (future-oriented) contingency and his wariness about better living through technology would make sense if he accepted something akin to Arendt's conception of evolution—or the one she describes in "Ideology and Terror," even if she does not endorse it herself—according to which evolutionism is terrifyingly overcommitted to the belief in a "progressing direction" to biological movement. It would equally make sense if Habermas, like Ruse, suspected evolutionary theory of being scientifically compromised by its commitment to such a cultural value. And there may be a presumption in favour of this association of Habermas's position with those of Arendt and Ruse because of the heavy reliance of *FHN* on Arendtian natality—the spontaneity and novelty which is, in effect, antithetical to evolutionary determinism.

Against these considerations, however, there are good reasons to think that Habermas does not accept Arendt's conception of evolution. In fact, if Arendt's conception is like Ruse's, then Habermas's is more like Gould's. Habermas's conception of evolution denies natural progress in the name of social progress; and, more significantly

for the argument of *FHN*, it involves a strong differentiation between the spheres of social action and natural history, which Gould marks by saying that the former has a “Lamarckian” and the latter a “Darwinian” dynamic.

In *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, a work that antedates *FHN* by twenty-five years, Habermas aims to provide a “reconstruction of historical materialism” (the book’s title in German) in a way that avoids the metaphysical and scientific shortcomings of Marx and Engels. In this context, and as a prelude to the theory of communicative action that he would publish years later, Habermas develops a theory of social evolution. Whereas for Marx such evolution was primarily a matter of productive forces—from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, for example—Habermas insists it is necessary to recognize that there has been progressive development “in the dimension of moral insight, practical knowledge, communicative action, and the consensual regulation of action conflicts.” Although this development “inherent in cultural traditions and institutional change” remains a “superstructural phenomenon,” ultimately dependent upon material and economic conditions, nevertheless newly evolved “normative structures” are able to feed back into productive relations in a way that makes possible the introduction of new productive forces. Thus they “play a more prominent role in the transition to new developmental levels than many Marxists have heretofore supposed.”<sup>53</sup>

Habermas’s strategy in making a case for such social evolution is to draw on the findings of cognitive developmental psychology, such as that of Jean Piaget, whose models are “better analyzed and better corroborated than their social-evolutionary counterparts.” More importantly, such theories of ontogenesis describe “different stages of moral consciousness” in the history of an individual, for which Habermas thinks he can discern “homologous structures of consciousness in the history of the species.”<sup>54</sup> For the purposes of this article, the details of the theory of homologous individual and social development are not as important as Habermas’s concluding reflections on it.

In reflecting on the implications of transposing a (psycho-) biological model over to social history, Habermas discusses the meaning of evolution. Of course, he says, any theory of development has “normative implications” and must specifically assume a “directional

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<sup>53</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, (tr.) T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 97–98.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

criterion" that makes positive and negative judgments possible.<sup>55</sup> It may *seem* as though the choice of criterion in the case of biological evolution is unproblematic, but that is not true. For one thing, it is necessary to avoid the naturalistic fallacy, the temptation to believe that the simple reproduction of organic life amounts to a positive value judgment. Only giving in to this temptation, Habermas claims, could make the attempt to produce an "evolutionary ethics" comprehensible. But also, he tellingly continues, only such a fallacious assumption could explain the belief of "many biologists" in progress in nature: they "regard the direction of evolution as something good, and not only distinguish but evaluate the species according to the place they hold in the evolutionary rank order."<sup>56</sup> In both cases, however, the belief is optional: an evolutionary biologist is not "forced to adopt as his own preference the observed tendency to self-maintenance inherent in organic life" any more than an ethicist is.<sup>57</sup>

When Habermas continues that the "situation is somewhat different in the case of the normative foundation of linguistic communication," this is an understatement. The situation is exactly the opposite: "adopting the observed tendency" of communicative rationality is *non-optional* for a speaking participant in intersubjective action. That is because "in engaging in discourse—or for that matter in any communicative action whatsoever—we have always (already) made, at least implicitly, certain presuppositions under which alone consensus is possible."<sup>58</sup> Here in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Habermas singles out the twin presuppositions that true propositions are preferable to false ones, and justifiable norms to unjustifiable ones, two of the principal bases for "validity claims" that he would theorize more expansively in *The Theory of Communicative Action* a few years later. In the latter *magnum opus*, Habermas famously argues that communicative action is rational because the consensus toward which it is oriented derives from the way that intersubjective recognition of the validity or acceptability of a claim (be it theoretical, practical, aesthetic, or expressive) is not achieved on the basis of traditional authority but more procedurally. It occurs by means of reason-giving and argumentation, which function as "a court of appeal" making it possible to continue to communicate with the goal of reaching agreement when ordinary routines do not suf-

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

fice, and without recourse to force or coercion.<sup>59</sup> In broad strokes, this is what should be understood by the “rationalization” of society, and such progress in rationality is what makes society and biology disanalogous. To abandon such “validity bases” or rational, communicative norms is impossible if one wants to remain a social actor, but Habermas had already written that the same is *not* true for the “normative” interpretation of evolution: one remains a living being (a biological actor, so to speak) even though one scrupulously avoids the naturalistic fallacy. Habermas concludes that therefore “it is senseless to want to ‘decide’ for or against reason, for or against the expansion of the potential of reasoned action,” and so the value of social or cultural progress—as opposed to biological progress—is not “arbitrary.”<sup>60</sup>

To be clear, Habermas says that while it *seems* as though the normative implications of biological evolution are *not* problematic while those of social evolution *are* problematic, exactly the inverse is true, which justifies the belief in social, but not biological, progress. Whatever else one makes of this conclusion, I want to draw out how Habermas is like Gould here—not only because each is some kind of critical Marxist, but because they both maintain that it is perfectly consistent to be *for* social progress (which Habermas measures in terms of more and more actions being governed by communicative reason) and *against* biological progress. Habermas also implies that there is a firm distinction between socio-cultural and natural movements; in Gould, the former can be directional, even “linear,” but the latter is contingent, unpredictable, and non-linear.

Habermas returns to some of the themes of *Communication and the Evolution of Society* in his later work on *Truth and Justification* in a way that may be thought to temper this normatively decisive distinction between natural and social evolution. In this contribution to epistemology, Habermas deals with what he calls the recent “detranscendentalization” of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. On his analysis, two divergent trends are equally untenable: the “naturalism” associated with Willard Van Orman Quine, among others, and what Habermas calls the “idealism” of Martin Heidegger’s history of Being.<sup>61</sup> Naturalism requires the “assimilation of our normative practices to observable events in the world” and

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<sup>59</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, (tr.) T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 17–18.

<sup>60</sup> Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 177.

<sup>61</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, (tr.) B. Fultner (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 22. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TJ.

therefore produces the demand to "translate" the knowledge and experience of speaking subjects into an idiom continuous with empirical science. Heidegger's response to detranscendentalization, in contrast, in which a world is revealed to *Dasein* in the light of Being, relieves subjects of the "justificatory burdens of rational speech and discursive thought," since they are supposed to have "privileged access to the truth" of "unconcealment" (TJ, 23–25). Habermas's *tertium quid* is a variant of anti-representationalist (that is, post-Rortian) pragmatism based on a "single metatheoretical assumption," which is related to the thesis of *Communication and the Evolution of Society*: "[L]earning processes, that are possible within the framework of sociocultural forms of life, are in a sense simply the continuation of prior 'evolutionary learning processes' that in turn gave rise to our forms of life" (*ibid.*, 27).

Such a thesis may sound like the claim that natural and social processes are *continuous*, but that is not how Habermas sees it. His pragmatism, despite denying the "mirror of nature" model of knowledge, "retains the transcendental framing of the issue" (*ibid.*, 17) and thus "preserves...the difference between the world and what is innerworldly" (*ibid.*, 27). Evolutionary learning processes are, for Habermas, the "transcendental conditions of possibility" of our sociocultural learning processes, in relation to which the latter are "emergent properties" (*ibid.*, 29). To capture what he means, Habermas introduces the notion of a "weak naturalism":

The "continuation of learning processes at a higher level" ...must be understood in the sense of a "weak" naturalism that makes no reductionistic claims. A "strongly" naturalistic explanatory strategy aims to *replace* the conceptual analysis of practices of the lifeworld with a scientific neurological or biogenetic explanation.... In contrast, weak naturalism contents itself with the basic background assumption that the biological endowment and cultural way of life of *Homo sapiens* have a "natural" origin and can in principle be explained in terms of evolutionary theory. (*Ibid.*, 27–28)

Moreover, because "weak naturalism" construes the (natural, evolutionary) conditions of the possibility of knowledge *transcendentally*, Habermas still thinks it is necessary to "distinguish sharply" the "hermeneutic approach of the rational reconstruction of the structures of the lifeworld, which we undertake from the perspective of participants," and which is the project of *Communication and the Evolution of Society* as well as *The Theory of Communicative Action*, from "the observation-based causal analysis of how these structures



naturally evolve,” presumably the purview of evolutionary science (*ibid.*, 28). Alternatives to his approach collapse this division of labour. There is, on the one hand, the “naturalistic fallacy” that Habermas had earlier described as being the precondition for any belief in evolutionary progress, and, on the other hand, a corresponding “idealistic fallacy,” which deduces an objective, metaphysical or ontological distinction between the experienced world and the world described by science from what is only a methodological one (*ibid.*).

So, far from being hostile to evolutionary theory, at the same time as he is considering the potential dangers of genetically modifying our offspring, Habermas treats it as the study of the transcendental conditions of communicative rationality. There is every reason to think that this view lies in the background of *FHN*, which refers to “weak naturalism” in the postscript (*FHN*, 93). There the implication is that Habermas’s opponents, the liberal eugenicists, assume a *strong* naturalism that aims to reduce the cultural to the biological. Placed in the context of Habermas’s other works, this amounts to the claim that actually it is *they* who commit a kind of naturalistic fallacy, and not, as at least one bioethicist critic has implied, Habermas himself.<sup>62</sup>

The least one can say is that Habermas has his own ideas about the significance of evolution for philosophy, which are not identical to those held either by his bioethicist critics or by Arendt. He is not simply taking Arendt’s views for granted—if he were, it would give his critics’ assessments weight, but as demonstrated above, this position is only tenable on the basis of a selective reading. The evolutionary criticism of *FHN* insinuates that Habermas denies evolutionary contingency (or that his argument there presupposes such a denial), but the whole of *Truth and Justification* is devoted, Habermas says, to understanding how the normativity of our lifeworld can be reconciled with the fact that sociocultural forms evolved naturally—which is to say, contingently (TJ, 2). Moreover, Habermas’s background commitment to evolution does not necessarily commit him to any determinism, such as the determinism Arendt feared: since “weak naturalism” denies that the lifeworld is “reducible to” biological evolution in Habermas, one can easily infer that the former is not “determined” by the latter. And, despite Habermas’s shift away from some of his earlier views in *Truth and Justification*,<sup>63</sup> it is likely that

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<sup>62</sup> Fenton, “Liberal Eugenics and Human Nature,” 40.

<sup>63</sup> Steven Hendley, “Habermas Between Metaphysical and Natural Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2006): 521–37.

he remains as wary as he ever was of the notion of progress in biology, which (like Gould) he denies and contrasts with progress in society.

As demonstrated above, many of the evolutionary criticisms of *FHN* seem to miss their mark: Habermas is not against social progress, he does not ignore or deny evolutionary contingency, and he scrupulously avoids committing the naturalistic fallacy. One criticism, however, remains apposite. Habermas does seem to want to maintain that "the effects of evolution in descendants are different from choices made for intentional reasons" (DPGI, 338). There is a morally significant distinction between the two; and in the case of foreseeable genetic interventions, ignoring this distinction threatens social progress, which Habermas, like Gould, treats as occurring in a "Lamarckian" space characterized by intentions and (moral) goals. Murphy denies this distinction as a matter of fact, but to deny it at that level would only work if Habermas were what he himself calls a "strong" naturalist who would "subordinate" the perspective of the lifeworld to that of the objective world studied by scientists (TJ, 28). Such a subordination is exactly what is at stake in *FHN*. The issue there is not that a "programmed person" will be factually less contingent and therefore incapable of communicative action. It is rather that she may not be able to understand herself as an autonomous actor and participant in intersubjective communities of equals (*FHN*, 63, 41–42, 66). That is because parental "intentions" (the "Lamarckian" currency of communicative action) basically no longer take a linguistic form (*FHN*, 72, 51) but a material one, "sedimented" in her "genetic factors" (*FHN*, 60). In other words, they are not addressed to the child in speech as a "second person" (*FHN*, 62). The fairest construal of this part of Habermas's argument, against the backdrop of the rest of his oeuvre, is that second-person address is one of the non-optional norms of communicative action. To abandon it is to cease engaging in communicative action altogether. And Habermas thinks that a society where interactions between people do not have this basis is less rational, less legitimate, and less progressive, despite what his opponents say.

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