

Reply to Xavier L. Simon's Comment



JAMES A. MONTANYE

I share Xavier Simon's evident belief that the interstate to hell (and other bad places) is paved with misbegotten altruism. Among my purposes in writing about the intersection of Darwinian evolution, religion, and government was to show that this road also is marked at a critical junction by behavioral predispositions that bias judgments and decisions against the principles of classical liberalism.

Simon's comments raise several points that warrant clarification.

Evolution is not an infallible process. Charles Darwin considered this fact in *The Origin of Species* (New York: Penguin, [1859] 1985). He concluded that "[n]atural selection will not produce absolute perfection, nor do we always meet, as far as we can judge, with this high standard under nature" (p. 229). With regard to the behavioral predispositions that are "slowly acquired through natural selection, we need not marvel at some instincts being apparently not perfect and liable to mistakes" (p. 447). I characterize these mistakes as "flaws." Darwin went on to note that *sexual* selection is even "less rigid in its action than ordinary selection" (p. 193), so it is intrinsically more prone to mistake. These observations and insights lie at the core of modern scientific thinking about evolution.

Nature does not *learn* by trial and error. Evolution simply fits organisms into local environments. The process is not rational, directional, or normatively judgmental. Rather, it is harshly binary: survival or not, reproduction or not. Mutations that are disadvantageous on balance are extinguished within a few generations. Conversely, mutations that

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are advantageous on balance survive and spread. Some advantageous mutations, such as those that engender a predisposition toward cooperation, shelter collateral mistakes that persist indefinitely when the force of selection pressure is too blunt to eliminate them surgically.

Evolution's success at explaining physical and behavioral adaptations has attracted considerable interest outside of biology. Scholars describe changing conditions in many fields (including economics) by combining the trappings of Darwinism with ideas about rationality and learning. Darwinian evolution, however, does not—indeed, it cannot—transmit *acquired characteristics* to future generations. Synthetic theories frequently end up describing Lamarckian-style mechanisms that are antithetical to Darwinism.

Colloquially, evolution is synonymous with the idea of development and change. It is in this sense that I described societies as “evolving differently.” Biological evolution progresses only through individuals, never through groups, so the notion of social evolution has no literal scientific meaning. Describing societies as “*developing differently*” might have avoided some confusion.

The great religions deserve credit for having identified and articulated (but certainly not “provided”) the rational virtues with which individuals manage life's routine opportunities and annoyances. Cooperation, trust, and reciprocity underlie all Western religious teaching. The intrinsic rationality of these virtues is demonstrated by Robert Axelrod in *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Virtuous tendencies spell the difference (at the margin) between survival and death, between reproduction and celibacy. They become encoded with the human genotype and disperse through the population over time. The disparate social systems that develop around virtuous genetic predispositions adjust naturally to fit the changing environments in which they operate. The nature and pace of these adjustments may not be to everyone's liking. Outsiders to a system often appear to be the least contented.

Feedback is an indispensable mechanism for maintaining social systems in equilibrium. An indefinitely large number of alternative equilibria is possible within any system. The one that is manifest at any moment is determined not only by cybernetics, but also by the myriad social choices that affect the local environment. Getting these choices more nearly “right” on the first attempt is unambiguously preferable to relying entirely on trial and error. The cost of discovering and converging on the preferred equilibrium is reducible by controlling for the biases within reason that adversely affect human decision making.

The prospect of divine rewards and punishments undoubtedly contributes to the production of virtuous behavior. Unfortunately, incentive systems of this sort do not necessarily convey the reasons *why* certain behaviors are desirable. This lacuna breeds ignorance, uncertainty, misapprehension, and self-interest. Such adverse conditions necessitate the artful device of “conviction” in business and political decision making. Teaching directly the *why* of virtuous behavior would help to increase its incidence.

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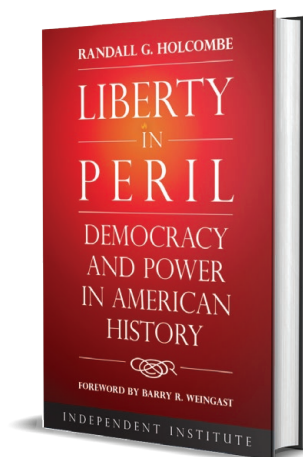
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