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## CONTROVERSY

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# In Defense of Herbert Spencer

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MAX HOCUTT

In 1978, Liberty Fund published nineteenth-century intellectual giant Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Ethics* in two volumes, with an introduction by Tibor R. Machan. Spencer's magnificent tome is full of wisdom and will be read with profit for generations. Machan's brief introduction is more questionable. Calling it "Herbert Spencer: A Century Later," Machan begins with some biographical details. Then, instead of proceeding to inform us about Spencer's views and his reasons for holding them, he immediately starts to criticize them. In the course of doing so, he objects to Spencer's rejection of the doctrine of free will, his advocacy of altruism, his endorsement of utilitarianism, and his evolutionary ethics. Machan's objections, however, are wrong or misplaced in all four cases.

Machan was much younger in 1978 and has subsequently written a great deal for publication. Perhaps in his later writings he has renounced some of his criticisms of Spencer, but whether he has done so does not matter here. What Machan published then remains in print now and should not stand unchallenged. Respect for fairness and regard for historical accuracy require a due appreciation of why Spencer held the views that Machan deems wrong-headed. Furthermore, although the issues Machan raises are ancient, they are still very much alive; and the mistakes he makes have been made previously and will be made again, especially if they go uncorrected. Therefore, showing precisely where Machan went wrong will not be an exercise in raking dead coals.

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## Free Will versus Freedom

Machan's first complaint is that Spencer accepted a "determinism of the sort that excludes the very possibility of genuine human choices" (Machan 1978, 13). In Machan's opinion, Spencer thereby created "a distorted idea of human freedom" that renders meaningless "the ideal of political and economic liberty" to which Spencer also subscribed (17). Except to say that you cannot make free choices if you cannot make choices, Machan does not develop this criticism; he merely asserts it, as if its truth were self-evident. For him, free will is an axiom and essential to liberty, so Spencer is wrong to deny it.

The truth is more complicated. According to the philosophical doctrine that Spencer rejected when he accepted the "law of universal causation," men have free will not merely in the sense that they *make choices*, as Machan so casually puts it, but also in the more pregnant sense that *nothing causes them to make these choices, including in particular their own desires*. In other words, free-will choices are made *ab initio*, without causal antecedents. As Roderick Chisholm, who accepted this idea, used to explain it, what philosophers call freedom of will is the power of a "prime mover unmoved" (1989, 12), a godlike ability to make choices that have no explanations because they have no prior determinants.<sup>1</sup>

This obscure idea was inspired by the ancient Greek poet and philosopher Plato, who *defined* free choice as the action of a Will guided not by base bodily Desire, but by Reason, a more noble faculty of mind. According to Plato, a man who does something because he wants to do it is a slave to his passions—a metaphor that Plato appears to have taken quite literally, to the eternal detriment of the topic. In a colossal non sequitur, Plato concluded that freedom belongs only to the man who does something for no other reason than that he knows it to be right. In other words, freedom is transcendence of desire for the sake of duty. The Stoics, St. Augustine, and Immanuel Kant—the most influential ancient, medieval, and modern expositors of the doctrine of free will—all followed Plato in holding that being free means doing not what one desires, but what God commands.

Spencer, a scientific man without known religious commitment, wanted to understand why people make the choices they make. In his carefully considered view, the metaphysical idea of a transcendent will was not scientific, but mystical—in other words, unintelligible—and the political idea of freedom as obedience was not sensible, but oxymoronic. Therefore, he rejected both ideas. Spencer, however, would have been astonished to be told that he had thereby denied the reality of the choices that he wanted to explain. He would also have regarded as absurd the proposition that his embrace of scientific determinism undermined the personal freedom he wanted to foster.

Furthermore, he would have been entirely right in these reactions. As the be-

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1. Chisholm (1989) also describes this ability as "agent causation."

havioral psychologist B. F. Skinner used to urge, to define freedom as choice-without-cause is to represent it as a *miracle*—something that, in the nature of the case, cannot be comprehended. In simple language, it is to proclaim that we can never understand why anybody chooses to do one thing rather than another. Spencer knew that if anything is essential to a scientific mind, it is the presumption that something can be understood by reference to its causes, which we may hope to discover by empirical means. Belief in godlike powers to act in ways that are wholly independent of the natural order is therefore not science; it is mysticism.

It is no answer to say that because human beings are goal-seeking animals, explanations of their behavior have to be teleological rather than mechanistic. The premise is true, but the conclusion posits a false dichotomy. Purposive behavior is not an exception to the law of universal causation; it is a special case of it. As Skinner also showed, “operant [that is, voluntary] behavior” is distinguished from “respondent [that is, reflex] behavior” by being subject to the law of effect—the principle that a form of conduct is conditioned by its consequences. In other words, you are more likely to choose to do again what had the desired result in the past. Knowing this fact enables us to understand why people choose to do what they expect to be pleasurable and to avoid what they expect to be painful. Can anyone really believe that anything is explained by positing a power of choice not covered by this law?

There are, of course, good reasons to doubt the truth of the minute determinism that prevailed in the nineteenth century when Spencer wrote. Since the advent of quantum physics, the development of methods of statistical analysis, and the formulation of sophisticated theories of probability, acceptance of irresolvable indeterminacy, or chance, has become an ineradicable feature of respectable science. This fact has, however, no implications whatsoever for the present issue. It is certainly not a reason to believe in a transcendent will. That sometimes “the atoms swerve,” as Epicurus held, does not mean that men are ever “prime movers unmoved.” Indeterminacy is not a proof of miracles.

Fortunately, belief in miracles is not essential to personal freedom, which is neither metaphysical nor theological, but social. As Thomas Hobbes made amply clear in the seventeenth century and David Hume reiterated with even greater clarity in the eighteenth, what is needed for liberty is not absence of causation *by circumstances*, but absence of restraint and coercion *by other persons*. Consider a common example. Imagine that I give a bandit my money because he is holding a gun to my head. I then have acted under coercion, and what I do is not done of my own free will.<sup>2</sup> Now imagine, by way of comparison, that I eat my breakfast because I am hungry. I do so not as a result of coercion, but of my own free will, without any diminution of personal liberty—a completely different situation.

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2. Because it is not a reflex, it is done *voluntarily*; there is an act of volition. Nevertheless, the thing is not done *willingly*, of one's own free will. That kind of action occurs only when one positively desires the result of one's action.

The two situations are admittedly alike in one respect: In each case a choice is made, and in each case there is a cause for the choice. There is, however, loss of liberty because there is coercion only in the first case, when there is a gun to my head. In the second case, where I eat because I am hungry, I do what I do of my own free will because I act without coercion even though I do so in satisfaction of my desire for food. As Simone de Beauvoir famously remarked in commentary on free-will apostle Jean Paul Sartre, being free does not require that you cease to wish for things. It requires only that you not be compelled by threats to do what somebody else wishes.

Spencer understood this distinction perfectly, and he stated it clearly in another work: “When [a man] is under the impersonal coercion of Nature, we say that he is free; and when he is under the personal coercion of someone above him, we call him, according to the degree of his dependence, a slave, a serf or a vassal” (1981, 493). Although Spencer in this passage used the term *coercion* as a synonym for *causation*, he was not misled by this usage. In contrast, Machan blurs the concept of liberty when he blurs the distinction between “coercion by Nature” and “coercion by persons.”

The irony is that the real threat to liberty is not Spencer’s scientific determinism, but Plato’s obfuscating assertion of metaphysical transcendence. As is abundantly clear in the treatise that Plato’s medieval translators misnamed *The Republic*, Plato had no use for real liberty. His chief complaint against democracy, which he opposed at every turn, was that it promoted “unbridled” personal freedom. Disliking the messy results, he wanted a polity in which common folk would do not what they wanted to do, but what their betters—people such as Plato—believed they should do. This aristocracy, as Plato called it, was to be ruled neither by the public at large nor by leaders they chose, but by a coterie of self-anointed philosopher kings.

Ruling on the basis of “reason” rather than “passion,” these philosophers would unchain their subjects from the “slavery” of doing what they wanted so they could benefit from the “freedom” of obeying their superiors instead. Thus did Plato propose to put the concept of free will in the service of authoritarian rule. St. Augustine, the most influential writer of early Christianity, followed Plato in this preference for authority, except that he wanted his authorities to be priests and pontiffs—again, people such as himself (see Hocutt 2003).<sup>3</sup> When Spencer declined to believe in the reality of a “free” will, he was not undermining liberty; he was rejecting one of the principal ideas of its enemies.

Among these enemies, as Machan surely knows, was Immanuel Kant, who is often mistaken for a friend. Following Augustine, the Lutheran Kant understood free will to mean doing one’s God-given duty, not satisfying one’s personal desires. That this idea entails the very opposite of personal freedom might, however, be guessed from Kant’s enthusiasm for the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who dreamed of a political order in which there would be “no loss of freedom” in obeying the au-

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3. Of course, Augustine had another reason for his belief in free will: he wanted a theologically satisfactory explanation for why men must suffer for their sins, or transgressions against God’s will.

thorities of a government that, having total control over persons and property, would make it a policy to enact not the wishes of the citizenry, but “the general will,” which only the rulers would be privileged to know. Seeing through this double talk, the astute Bertrand Russell (1945) once called Rousseau the founder of totalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> In a recent book, Stephen Hicks (2004) shows how Rousseau’s ideas led through Kant and Hegel to Nazism and communism.<sup>5</sup>

Free will (absence of causation) is one thing; liberty (absence of coercion) is another.<sup>6</sup> It is a mistake—a dangerous mistake—to conflate one with the other.

### Egoism versus Selfishness

Machan’s second objection is that Spencer lapsed from libertarian faith in egoism when in his later years he averred that self-sacrificial altruism could be not only a virtue, but even a moral obligation. To Machan—a disciple of Ayn Rand, who notoriously touted “the virtue of selfishness” and urged the inviolable sanctity of the purely self-regarding individual—Spencer’s endorsement of altruism seems to be a lapse into the worst sort of political and moral heresy and a giant step in the direction of socialist dictatorship. Unfortunately, in his haste to reject this hated heresy, Machan ignores Spencer’s careful reasoning on the matter. He merely notes that Spencer ended up reaching a conclusion that does not comport with Machan’s concept of individualism—a shortcut through a great text, to say the least.

Like Rand, who excoriated self-sacrifice as contrary to nature, Machan regards Spencer’s embrace of altruism as an unforgivable sin. As we shall see shortly, however, it is Machan who has committed the error—by confusing *personal* goals, or goals belonging to the agent, with *selfish* goals, or goals aimed at the agent’s benefit. This confusion makes Spencer’s endorsement of other-regarding conduct appear to have constituted an abandonment of egoist, or individualist, belief in pursuing one’s own ends.

It did not. Spencer remained throughout a thoroughgoing egoist in recognizing that a goal must be internalized if it is to motivate a rational individual’s conduct. If the goal is to move someone, it must become his. To say so is to utter a truism, but this truism ought not to be confused with the different, if similar-sounding, proposition that the only allowable goal is the agent’s own welfare. That conclusion identifies the goal’s possessor with its beneficiary. Like Rand, Machan is presuming that they are one and the same person.

This presumption is false. An agent’s goal may be as other regarding as you please without in any way diminishing the rationality of his conduct. If I value my

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4. See the chapter on Rousseau.

5. For a review, see Hocutt 2006.

6. For a clear-headed, spirited, and up-to-date discussion of these issues, see Dennett 1984.

grandchildren's education—or yours or a complete stranger's—more than I value having an expensive car, then it is rational for me to act accordingly. Never mind that my conduct will be unselfish, aimed at benefiting others. Never mind, even, that it will involve sacrifice of something that would benefit me. So long as it serves my purposes, it will be rational. Rational egoism is not synonymous with selfishness. Of course, the two are sometimes *defined* in such a way as to be synonyms, as are the words *altruism* and *unselfishness*, but such stipulations only beg questions; they do not settle them. Besides, in strict parlance, the Latin terms denote doctrines, whereas the English words refer to behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Why, then, have so many smart people, including Machan, come to believe in the identity of reason and selfishness? Part of the answer may be a failure to clarify the tricky relation between hedonism and egoism, or pleasure and reason. Hedonism is the thesis that anticipation of pleasure and avoidance of pain are the sole motives for rational conduct. Whose pleasure? Whose pain? The egoist says, "That of the agent." If he is right, no rational person voluntarily chooses to do what he expects to cause him more pain than pleasure or to yield him less pleasure than the alternative course of action. We take actions because they promise to make us happier. In the useful jargon of Skinnerian behaviorists, these actions are reinforcing. That is the paramount fact about human psychology.

Superficial thinkers have concluded that if my goal is my own pleasure or happiness, then my conduct must be not altruistic, but self-regarding. By means of this line of reasoning, they have made all conduct seem selfish *by definition*. But the fallacy in this line of thought—that to be motivated by pleasure is to have it as one's goal—was exposed in detail in the eighteenth century in Bishop Joseph Butler's brilliant *Sermons on Self-Love*. As Butler made clear, one does not achieve happiness by aiming at it; it comes about only as a by-product of what one does aim at.

Furthermore, declaring behavior selfish because it is motivated by a preference for doing what pleases is like declaring that a cat is a dog because it has four legs: such reasoning mistakes the incidental for the essential fact. As Adam Smith's wise friend David Hume pointed out, the paradigm of an unselfish man is one who gets pleasure out of doing what benefits others. The selfish man, in contrast, gets pleasure only out of what benefits himself.

Careless use of the treacherous term *self-interest* also fosters conflation of rationality and selfishness. Both Rand and Machan insist that self-interest is the only rational basis for behavior. Although this claim is indubitably true if taken in one way, it is plainly false if taken in another. What is meant by *self-interests*? *Personal* interests or *selfish* interests? Egoism is the thesis that it is rational to do what promises to

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7. For further defense of egoism as I have defined it here, see Hocutt 2000, 63–89. It will be said that my definition is idiosyncratic or unorthodox, but *egoism* is an ambiguous term of art that, within limits, may be defined as seems best. By contrast, *selfishness* is a term of ordinary language that we are not free to use or abuse as we please.

advance, irrational to do what promises to defeat, one's personal interests—meaning the interests that one personally has. It follows that doing what advances other people's interests is rational only if their interests happen to coincide with, or come under, one's own. That proposition is the essential truth of rational egoism.<sup>8</sup>

From this truth, one cannot deduce that behaving rationally means being unerringly selfish. Furthermore, that monstrous claim is false. It would be true if people had nothing but selfish interests, but most of us care about the welfare of at least something or somebody besides ourselves. We love our families, our friends, our neighbors, and our country—as well as our pets, our sports, our hobbies, our social clubs, our lands, and our creations. Therefore, *their* interests are among *our* interests. Few people, if any, have exclusively selfish interests, and some people may even be wildly altruistic. Regard for others may be one's consuming passion. If so, it is rational to behave accordingly, as Spencer knew. If we may take Machan at his word, he does not know; neither, apparently, did Rand.

That Spencer was on firmer ground can be shown by considering the standard objection to egoism. Spencer's "progressive"-minded contemporary Henry Sidgwick first stated this objection more than a century ago in his influential *Methods of Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> Since then, scores of critics have repeated it. These critics say that the egoist occupies the incoherent position of declaring behavior that is patently immoral to be morally obligatory. In their view, morality implies regard for others by definition; so, to advocate disregard of others is to maintain that one's only moral duty is to behave immorally, which is self-refuting.

Instead of denying this canard, Rand and Machan embrace it and try to neutralize it by inverting the meaning of the word *moral*, declaring in effect, "Yes, by our definition, selfish, and only selfish, behavior is moral." But this brazen Humpty-Dumptyism cannot alter the fact that selfish disregard of others is indubitably *immoral* in the workaday sense of the word. More than one philosopher has pointed out that the main point and purpose of morality, as of law and etiquette, is to encourage people to act in consideration of the welfare, interests, and wishes of others.<sup>10</sup> Arbitrary redefinition of the word *moral* can obscure that fact, but it can no more alter it than defining a dog as a five-legged animal can give a dog an extra leg (to paraphrase Abe Lincoln).

There is a better answer to the critics: just issue a reminder that egoism is an account not of *morality*, but of *rationality*, and that it equates the latter with the pursuit not of *selfish* ends, but of *personal* ends, which may be either selfish or un-

8. For illuminating discussion of the proposition, see Gauthier 1985.

9. A reissue of Sidgwick's seventh edition was published by the University of Chicago in 1962 and reprinted by Hackett Publishing Company of Indianapolis in 1981. A brief summary of Sidgwick's discussion of the "ignobility" of egoistic hedonism appears on page 199.

10. The point is developed in Baier 1964.



selfish. Whether the resulting behavior is moral or immoral raises an entirely separate question, which the egoist as such does not consider. Of course, saying that it is rational for X to do Y means that X ought to do Y, but the *ought* here is the ought of reason, not that of morality. There is no solecism in declaring, “If the bandit wants to rob banks, he ought to carry a gun; but for him to rob banks would be immoral.”

In summary, behaving rationally does not mean doing only what promises to advance one’s *selfish* interests. It means doing what promises to advance one’s *personal* interests, which may be selfish or unselfish. Therefore, one can be both rational and unselfish; one can even be both rational and self-sacrificing. St. Francis and Mother Teresa were extraordinary people, but they were not lunatics.

### Utilitarianism versus Egoism

Machan’s third mistake is a compound of his first two with an added ingredient, confusion about utilitarianism. Spencer described himself as a utilitarian, but he called his doctrine *rational utilitarianism* to distinguish it from Bentham and Mill’s *empirical utilitarianism*.<sup>11</sup> Despite having mentioned this fact, Machan offers nothing—not even a sentence—by way of explaining it. Instead, he proceeds without pause to condemn Spencer’s utilitarianism along with Bentham’s on the grounds that utilitarians of all stripes advocate altruism, which Machan, following Rand, regards as the depth of wickedness.

I confess that this attitude leaves me nonplussed. Can any person really think that he or she would prefer a world of psychopaths indifferent to the welfare of others? Machan virtually says so, but the saying is hard to credit. Annoying as meddling do-gooders are, even they are preferable to people intent on doing harm to others or acting in blithe disregard of others’ wishes and well-being. As to Rand, one hopes that she never literally meant her declaration of “the virtue of selfishness.” I prefer to think that her provocative slogan was a calculated indulgence in rhetorical excess or, less excusably, a product of careless disregard for the precise meanings of words. Taken as it stands, without qualification and explanation, it is too paradoxical to merit serious discussion.<sup>12</sup>

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11. If the word had been available at the time, Spencer might have better called his doctrine *consequentialism*, leaving the label *utilitarianism* to Bentham and Mill. Their view is definitionally tied to the idea of pleasure. Spencer, however, rarely talked of pleasure; his interest was in policies that could be expected to achieve commendable results—a wise choice. *Pleasure* is so ill-defined and evanescent a notion that one does best to avoid it and, in speaking of behavior, to refer to preferences and reinforcement.

12. For serious discussion of what Rand *might* have meant, involving qualifications and explanations aplenty, see “A Dialogue on Ayn Rand’s Ethics” (2006). Besides Machan, participants include Frank Bubb, Erick Mack, Douglas Rasmussen, Robert Bass, Chris Cathcart, and Robert Campbell. Especially interesting is Campbell’s thesis that Rand had August Comte’s enforced collectivism in mind when she condemned *altruism*, using a term Comte invented. If Campbell is right, Rand’s view was both more reasonable and more consistent with Spencer’s than it appears to be. Unfortunately, as the endless disputes over Rand’s precise meaning amply confirm, her oracular style makes it impossible to be sure what she thought she was

Be that as it may, the altruism Spencer praises was of a kind that, he believed, an ethical individual would be motivated to practice willingly, without compulsion by others. In Spencer's ideal world—the one to be achieved after desirable moral and political evolution—the truly ethical person will be unselfish and even generous *because he wants to be*, and that fact makes all the difference.<sup>13</sup> From beginning to end, however, Spencer opposed the kind of “altruism” that is forced on citizens by governments bent on redistributing wealth from those who have earned it or saved it to those who have not. He considered this practice a violation of the fundamental principle of natural justice.<sup>14</sup> He therefore viewed robbing some to give to others as a criminal shakedown.<sup>15</sup>

Spencer understood, however, that ruling out externally enforced altruism need not eliminate voluntary charity, which he strongly favored. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie's tremendous philanthropic efforts were inspired by Spencer's thoughts on this matter. Having made one of the biggest fortunes ever attained, Carnegie proceeded to try to give it *all* away. He wanted to die broke, having helped his fellow men. Despite Spencer's true views and their actual consequences, as illustrated by Carnegie's mammoth generosity, socialists have used tendentious misreadings of the phrase “survival of the fittest,” which Spencer invented, to accuse him of promoting “dog eat dog” competition through laissez-faire capitalism, which he rightly believed would do more to promote the welfare of the poor than any alternative economic system.

As for rational egoism, Spencer saw that it leaves room for love, friendship, fellow feeling, patriotism, a humane desire for the welfare of strangers, concern for the survival of mankind, a passion for the preservation of nature, and so on. Like Bentham, who also advocated altruism, Spencer realized that a world in which we care for something or somebody besides ourselves is better for all of us than the alternative would be; and a world in which we help to make other people happy will be one in which we ourselves are more likely to be happy, too. In short, he saw that regard for others has tangible and obvious benefits.

That said, it must be acknowledged that Machan is right about one thing: Spencer did not endorse Bentham's altruistic hedonism, according to which the

saying. Her lack of philosophical training and discipline are all too evident here, along with her rhetorical genius. All we can say, then, is: if Rand did mean *enforced* altruism rather than altruism sans phrase, she should have said so. She should not have caused endless confusion by condemning the general case when she meant only a specific case.

13. Whether this kind of social evolution is *inevitable* as well as *desirable* is another question, though Spencer does not seem to have clearly and consistently distinguished the two.

14. Compelling evidence for Spencer's hypothesis is the well-confirmed fact that once food or a mate comes into an animal's possession, the animal will resist attempts to take it away. In the case of humans, uncontested possession soon gives rise to feelings of right, and violations of these strongly felt rights are viewed as a kind of natural injustice.

15. He also thought it injurious to those who receive the loot, anticipating by a century and a half the main thesis of Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984).

pleasures of others are to be reckoned equal to one's own, whether one desires them equally or not. Again, though, Machan neglects to explain this important point or to say how it matters, but the answer is easy to come by. As Spencer says in the first volume of *The Principles of Ethics*, he disagreed with the hedonist's belief that one should aim at maximizing *pleasure*. Instead, he said, one should aim at doing *justice* in the expectation that the result will maximize pleasure, or happiness, more effectively.

Happiness, as Bishop Butler had argued, comes as an epiphenomenon of success in achieving more substantial goals; it cannot be aimed at directly. Why not? Because, in the language of the scholastics, happiness is not a *substance* but an *accident*. That is to say, it is not a thing, but an incident of things or activities. So one can no more aim at happiness than one can aim at a nonexisting target; one can aim only at what has happiness as a by-product. Likewise for pleasure. One does not enjoy the pleasure of eating ice cream; one enjoys (that is, finds pleasurable the act of) eating ice cream. *Pleasure*, despite its frequent nominalization, is not substantival, but adjectival and adverbial. Thus, all forms of hedonism, whether egoistic or altruistic, rest on a category mistake—in this case, the error of assigning to one grammatical category what properly belongs to another.

This point may seem trivial, but it gave Spencer a ready answer to a standard criticism of Bentham—namely, that according to utilitarianism, punishing an innocent man would be right if it set a beneficial example. Spencer holds that such unjust practices would soon have an effect contrary to the one intended: they would defeat their purpose by producing more misery than happiness, and they would corrupt those who engaged in them. Spencer accordingly preferred what has come to be called rule utilitarianism rather than act utilitarianism: make rules on the basis of utility, then act on the basis of the rules. If the rules don't work, don't flout them; change them. It was good advice.<sup>16</sup>

## Evolutionary versus a Priori Ethics

Finally, let us consider Machan's objection to Spencer's evolutionary ethics. Spencer recognized that some highly general forms of conduct—for example, reciprocity, the care of children, and loyalty to one's group—are rooted in human nature, which is much the same everywhere. He thought, however, that the specific content of a society's rules—whether to allow polygamy, for example—should and normally would be adapted to circumstances. He accordingly embraced a kind of moral relativism and declared that the rules needed in advanced societies in favorable circumstances might make little sense among ruder people under more primitive conditions. The truth of this observation seems especially obvious when (1) the morality of

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16. I believe Bentham eventually came to the same view. For evidence, see Hocutt 2005b.

sharing in community possessions and the patriarchal rule that were standard in the family groups that composed the first human societies is compared with (2) the morality of private-property rights and impersonal law required in the complex civilizations in which most people now live.<sup>17</sup>

Spencer believed that doctrinaire politics and a priori moral theory are largely useless, if not positively harmful. Although he readily acknowledged the reality of a biologically based human nature, he saw that it is not fixed forever, but is subject to evolution under the press of social and environmental change. Furthermore, he realized that if a society's institutions are to work, they must be adapted to the situation, usually by a process of trial and error over a long period, perhaps generations.<sup>18</sup> In short, he saw that evolution, both biological and social, is always in progress.

In *The Principles of Ethics*, Spencer went to great lengths to justify this thesis, writing chapter after chapter on the reasons for variations in social customs. The whole purpose of this elaborate and learned exercise was to show how a society's situation gives rise to its practices and causes them to be modified or abandoned. In taking this line, Spencer initiated salutary developments in the newly emerging sciences of sociology and anthropology. William Graham Sumner, nineteenth-century America's leading social scientist and the author of an influential volume entitled *Folkways*, was an unqualified admirer.

Spencer wisely never went the way of the disciples of influential twentieth-century anthropologist Franz Boas, the teacher of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, who maintained that because one society's morality is as good as that of another when judged by its own standards, criticism of a society's practices by outsiders is meaningless. This view entails denying the possibility of improving local practices by applying standards that are applicable everywhere. It is currently the basis of the orthodoxy its proponents call *multiculturalism* and its opponents call *political correctness*.

Although this doctrine is dogma in some parts of the contemporary university—especially in some of the humanities and social sciences—it is ultimately untenable (Hocutt 2004, 2005a). What people make, they make well or ill. So if moralities are made, they can, like laws, be made well or poorly. Grant, then, that condemning a society's morality as immoral or its law as illegal makes no sense if there is no higher Morality or Law to use as a standard. Ruling out that sort of self-nullifying assessment does not rule out evaluation of a society's morality or law as productive or destructive of benefit. A society in which people are prosperous and happy is doing something right; one in which they are poor and miserable needs to change.

Like many another adherent to the doctrine of natural rights, Machan regards this kind of commonsense consequentialism as morally unspeakable. Taking as axi-

17. For a more developed statement of this observation, see Hocutt 2006, 452–54.

18. Here Spencer touched themes that Adam Smith had anticipated and F. A. Hayek later developed. See Hayek 1973–79 and Otteson 2002.

omatic the proposition that humans everywhere have certain abstract rights that are inalienable because conferred by God or Nature, he is prepared to ignore the particulars of a group's situation to focus exclusively on what he regards as the individual's metaphysically free choice. That Spencer took a different view, preferring moral principles adapted to the facts on the ground rather than a priori presumption, leads Machan to complain that Spencer abandoned moral principles and belief in human nature altogether.

This objection is common, but it begs a large question and ignores an important fact. The begged question is whether an eternally fixed set of standards for conduct has been drawn up in heaven and written in the book of nature, so that people can ascertain it a priori. That such standards exist has never been proved, merely declared. So belief in them may be ignored in a discussion that does not depend on unreasoning faith. The fact overlooked is that we have no need for such uncritical faith when a better justification is available. As more than one person has pointed out, people usually flourish where certain rights—the right to the fruits of one's own labor, for example—are valued and protected. That fact constitutes a very good reason to regard these rights as essential, making fifth wheels of a priori moral principles and political faiths.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, denying the reality of *eternally fixed* moral principles should not be confused with denying the need for principles. Spencer did the former, not the latter. On the contrary, his long-standing preoccupation with moral and political questions grew out of his deep and abiding conviction that having the right principles is important. He simply happened to doubt whether practices good here and now will necessarily be good there and then, when circumstances and people may have changed. If Machan disagrees with this view, he ought to say why, not simply dismiss the idea on the grounds that it contradicts his own view.

## Conclusion

Near the end of his essay, Machan says, "It seems to me that no one need humble himself before another to such an extent that the latter's theoretical problems are ignored in the process of paying him homage" (1978, 18). That is true, but it is also true that an author being introduced to new readers is entitled to have his views presented accurately and sympathetically before being attacked. The two volumes to which Machan has prefaced his criticisms encompass more than 1,100 pages of closely reasoned, profusely illustrated, and intelligent thought on the fruits of a lifetime of learning. Those pages deserve better treatment than summary dismissal of their main tenets. Herbert Spencer may not always have given the right answers to the questions he asked, but he asked good questions, and we still have much to learn from the

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19. For extensions of this line of thought, see Epstein 1995.

answers he gave. The Marxist left dismisses these answers on the sole grounds that they disagree with preconceived dogma. Libertarians ought not to imitate this group.

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