

## **Social Science and Religion: Epistemology, Metaphysics and Considerations of the Public Good**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper addresses the relationship between religion and science in terms of the link between *social science* and *religion defined broadly as a commitment to a set of values*. It takes as a point of departure Myrdal's contention that "there is an inevitable *a priori* element in all scientific work". Varying *a priori* definitions of such key concepts as rationality, freedom, equality and of the nature of humankind, are embedded in all social science theories, and commonly serve to underpin disagreements between contending schools of thought. Hence the quip that the only prerequisite for the study of comparative economic systems is the study of comparative religion.

Metaphysics and epistemology are therefore of uncommon importance, but their consideration is nonetheless commonly excluded from the training of social scientists. The social sciences are increasingly dominated by the view that the 'big picture' epistemological and metaphysical debates have been resolved and that the way forward now is through empirical testing of specific hypotheses. Yet, as Sen puts it, the understanding of the public good implicit in much of the social sciences is very questionable, and "an incorrect theory can kill". Continuing controversies e.g. of the type between Myrdal and Bauer, Sen and the Washington Consensus, Galbraith and Krugman on US political economy, the need for free markets versus selective government intervention should make clear however that the role of economic philosophy and the need for grounding in it is irremovable. Especially in that sense, there is a need to be more willingly attentive to the link between religion (defined broadly in terms of metaphysics or faith in particular value systems) and social science. The roots of the controversy sparked by Pope Benedict XVI's controversial 2006 Regensburg address are examined within the same framework. Important links are adumbrated between metaphysics and what evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker calls the new sciences of the mind and of human nature.

### **Introduction**

Recently there has been much publicised debate over the 'God is dead' issue, featuring Richard Dawkins (2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Sam Harris (2007) and others, but at least in the social sciences this is *not* the nub of the 'science versus religion' issue. While overt discussion of theistic religion does have its relevance to various aspects of social science (see Thomas Friedman, 2005), a more deep-seated methodological relevance can be found in a different conception of 'faith' positions in the form of implicit *a prioris* or metaphysical positions inescapably embedded in contending social science perspectives. It is dispute over these *a prioris* that underpins disagreements between contending schools of social science thought, and it is dispute over these *a priori* or metaphysical positions that represents the core of the relationship between religion and social science.

In economics and other social sciences there are implicit metaphysical assumptions about value relativism, historicism and the nature of man ranged alongside the more readily recognised explicit assumptions about pure competition, constant returns to scale and such like. The argument advanced in this paper is that these *implicit* assumptions are more important than the explicit assumptions, despite being commonly withheld from critical attention in the teaching of economics and other social sciences. Their importance is recognised, however, by a minority of economists including Myrdal (1968), Schumacher (1974), Sen (1977; 1987; 2000), Etzioni (1988), Cropsey (1955; 1960), and Nevile (1998) (Duhs, 2005; see also Lawson, 2003).

Despite what might therefore be argued to be the fundamental importance of religion in this implicit metaphysical sense, courses in philosophy and economic philosophy nonetheless tend to be marginalised or scorned, rather than celebrated for their central importance in explicating the roots of, and ultimate implications of, contending social science positions.



Putatively unambiguous words such as ‘man’, ‘freedom’, ‘rationality’ and ‘equality’ are used by different writers to mean different things. Social science is about human society, and as such is inescapably informed by some concept of what it is to be human, and thus by some conception of human ontology and teleology. For such reason Myrdal (1968: 26) concluded that there is an ‘inevitable a priori’ in all social science work, just as Cropsey (1955) concluded that ‘every logic presupposes a metaphysic’. These implicit *a priori* or metaphysical faith positions constitute a religion or ideological element that needs to be recognised and highlighted if the implications of social science are to be fully understood. In short, there is an inevitability about ongoing debate in the social sciences between proponents of different metaphysical views – and the practical social theories erected on them – and this is the issue on which debate turns in social science. Science has certainly not killed religion in this sense, and indeed cannot do so. The choice is not ‘religion *or* social science’, but how to recognise *which* religion or metaphysic is most properly installed at the root of social scientific understanding of the questions of our time.

Two broad areas of illustration are chosen in this paper. In the first case, illustration is drawn from the economics literature, including from the Myrdal-Bauer dispute and subsequent Washington Consensus–Sen dispute within development economics, and from the economics-as–imperialist-science literature. It will be argued that there is much hidden metaphysics in the supposedly practical or pragmatic development economics literature. Moreover, in the case of the claim that economics is an imperialistic social science – indeed, *the* imperialistic social science - it will be argued that the reverse is true, since it is economics which has necessarily been colonised by one or another (implicit) political philosophy (Duhs 1982, 2005; Nevile 1998). In short – in keeping with the idea that an ideology is something we think in, not of - it is the implicit assumptions which are of greater moment than the explicit assumptions around which debate in economics and cognate disciplines actually tends to revolve.

The second illustrative area draws from the philosophy literature, and specifically focuses on Straussian political philosophy in two senses in which it has recently been brought to the fore. In Straussian terms, ‘the crisis of our times’ derives not so much from the celebrated debates over theistic religion, but from historicism and the treatment of the notion of ‘natural right’ within the social sciences. On the historicist premise, all human thought is constrained by its historical time and place, and there can be no permanently applicable standard of right or wrong which transcends time and place. On this premise, there is therefore no standard of right ‘in nature’, which is accessible to human reason. The Straussian rejection of this premise has recently seen them demonised in the United States, at just the time when unexpectedly – new sources of (scientific) support for their position are being uncovered in evolutionary biology and the ‘new sciences’ of the mind and of human nature (Pinker 2002). There is a beguiling paradox to explore in the fact that while Dawkins enjoins us to expect *more* of science and reason regarding religion, those - including Straussians - who do expect more of reason in the social sciences are commonly dismissed as fanatics (who violate the modern religion of positivism and value neutrality, by expecting *too much* of reason).

### **Illustrations From Within Economics:**

In the development economics literature of the 1970s there was a methodological disagreement between Myrdal and Bauer. On a practical level they disagreed about foreign aid, economic planning and government intervention in various activities. On a more deep seated level, however, the underpinnings of this disagreement were to be found in differences



between them in terms of their *a priori* commitments (Duhs 1982). What Myrdal meant by ‘man’, ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘rationality’ simply did not coincide with what Bauer meant by the same words. In Myrdal’s case, there was a willingness to go beyond acceptance of culturally relative values, to override (in the name of ‘development’) extant cultural practices such as widow burning, and to question the ‘scientific’ pretensions of positivistic method. Myrdal was insistent that *chance* should not be confused with *choice*, and that institutionalised value systems (including religious customs) often merely reflected historical chance, rather than any meaningful choice on the part of the individuals who now live within those systems.

In short, there was at least a crypto-teleological element in Myrdal’s understanding of human development. There was no such teleological element in Bauer’s view, however, and from the Bauer-Chicago School standpoint Myrdal presented himself as a non-scientist, or anti-scientist, who refused to accept that facts are facts, and that some people indeed prefer “Buddhism to Bendixes, and the inner vision to television”. Most emphatically for Bauer and Chicago, there is no transcendent standard which vindicates rejection of consumer sovereignty. On Bauer’s teaching, there is therefore no ‘natural right’ (in the classical sense), or generic conception of human development, and no suggestion that a value can be derived from a fact. Accordingly, Myrdal is dismissed as an intruder who wants to convert the world into a sort of super-Sweden by arrogantly and erroneously violating the positivist requirement of value neutrality, and by ranking some values as better than others. Myrdal’s endorsement of ‘tough states’ was therefore viewed by Bauer as something to be dreaded, and not as a necessary step towards ‘development’.

In contradistinction to Bauer’s approach, however, Myrdal’s message was that a value neutral social science is a *logical* impossibility. He insisted (1968:26; Duhs 1982) that there is an ‘inevitable *a priori*’, since ‘there cannot be a view, except from a viewpoint’, and he accordingly saw the Bauer-Chicago approach as less ‘scientific’ and less value-neutral than it claimed to be. What Bauer venerated as ‘fact’ – such as an individual’s commitment to a particular religion – seemed to Myrdal to be an unacceptable confusion of chance with choice, and therefore a sandy foundation for any claim to scientific status. For him, economics was a ‘soft science’, and he found cause to lament that the distance between economics and ethics grew wider as the scientific pretensions of positivist economics grew stronger.

In the event, it was the Bauer-Chicago School view which came out on top in this debate, and shaped the development literature in the 1980s. Within development economics the pendulum swung in favour of a non-interventionist counter-revolution. Troublesome metaphysical questions do not just go away forever, however, and much of the Myrdal-Bauer debate was reprised in one way or another in the 1990s, as Sen’s critique of welfare economics made ground, along with its translation into development economics.

Sen is renowned for his ‘capabilities approach’ to development, and for arguing that it is not national income growth which should be maximised, but the extent to which human beings are able to maximise the development of their various capabilities. For this purpose some minimum standards of health and education are prerequisites. In short, Sen broke with neoclassical orthodoxy by focussing on some ‘objective’ standard - of human capability rather than on a standard of subjective utility. Like Myrdal, he saw freedom as constrained by social circumstances, and again like Myrdal he saw the need to engage both state and market as complementary instruments in the promotion of human development. Both Sen and



Myrdal effectively seek to liberate people from various ‘unfreedoms’, although they differ as to just which ‘unfreedoms’ are critical. Both see consumer sovereignty and utilitarianism as limited doctrines, because deprivation serves to distort the ability to apprehend life’s possibilities. Sen is emphatic that the phrase ‘rational behaviour’ is central to economics, but objects that in economics the word ‘rational’ has itself come to be defined in two ways, both inadequate. ‘Rational’ behaviour has come to mean either deductive consistency or self-interest maximisation, and Sen refuses to believe that human rationality is so limited as to permit no meaning beyond that. Accordingly, he explicitly appeals to Aristotle as one of the roots of his position, alongside Adam Smith. In short, Sen, like Myrdal, strives to discern the correct meaning of such words as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘rational’ and ‘human’, especially in the context of development economics.

Quite evidently, much in Sen recalls Myrdal. Paradoxically, however, Sen ignores Myrdal in *Development as Freedom* (2000) and ends up commending Bauer (See Bauer 2000). Despite the kinship with Myrdal’s concerns regarding the constraints of social circumstance, and the scope for confusing chance with choice, what ultimately drives Sen is the still greater kinship he feels for a concept of individual freedom, as endorsed by Bauer. In short, once certain initial ‘unfreedoms’ have been removed, Sen seeks to facilitate individual freedom and “our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value” (Sen 2000: 285). Indeed he celebrates freedom as both the chief means and chief end of development, and in this he would doubtless disappoint Aristotle - for whom freedom remained but a means to a greater end. Whereas Myrdal is prepared to call for the removal of certain development-obstructing cultural practices (which he sees as ‘unfreedoms’), Sen abstains from such confrontation, and confines himself to the more palatable task of *adding* infrastructure investments where education and health are presently missing. The teleological element in Myrdal is stronger than in Sen, and despite Sen’s protests about the limited and inadequate meanings imputed to ‘rationality’ in economics, he ultimately does not see human reason as being capable of defining a common human telos, as Myrdal is inclined to do. This leaves him less willing than Myrdal to endorse some kind of teleological position, and unwilling to follow Myrdal in endorsing the use of ‘strong states’ to confront specific development-restricting cultural practices which stand in the way of development and modernisation (Duhs 2008). For Sen, the chief desideratum remains commitment to individual freedom (Sen 2000:289) rather than to the consummation of any human capability (e.g. as embedded in human reason) or purpose to which such freedom can be put. The point to note is that it is conflicting interpretation of such teleological issues that keep Sen and Myrdal apart, in specifying both the policy means and policy goals of development (Duhs 2008). They diverge as to which interventions *enhance* personal liberty, and which *restrict* it, and they accordingly diverge as to whether “more freedom” or a “strong state” is what is required in the search for meaningful development. Given that Sen is insistent that “a misconceived theory can kill” (2000: 209), the consequences of this disjuncture are clearly significant. Plainly enough, practical policy advice reflects metaphysical commitment.

In a more general context, Sen (1977; 1987) issues a challenge to orthodox economics in offering his critique of welfare economics. Here too the crucial importance of *a priori* commitments becomes evident. In fact, Sen asserts that all the propositions underlying the general consensus on traditional welfare economics are eminently contestable. He describes Pareto optimality as “an extremely limited way of assessing social achievement” (1987:35), which may indeed come “hot from Hell” (1987:32), and which remains entirely compatible with leaving some people in extreme misery while others roll in decadence and luxury. It does no more than capture the efficiency implications of utility accounting, yet “to identify



advantage with utility is far from obvious” (1987:38). Indeed, he notes that if some interpretation of advantage other than utility is accepted, Pareto optimality (defined as it is in terms of individual utilities) would cease to be even a necessary condition, let alone a sufficient condition, for overall social optimality (1987:35-39; also 1979a, 1979b). For Sen, welfarism - in which social welfare is a function of personal utility levels alone - is therefore potentially disastrous, and it is apparent that a utilitarian / Paretian approach can yield results at odds with our basic intuitions. And he accepts that an ethical framework must be rejected if it is inconsistent with those intuitions. Overall, by virtue of the way economics confines the definitions of ‘rationality’ to either internal consistency or self-interest maximisation (Sen 1987:15) – both of which seem remarkably unpersuasive to Sen - he voices his concern that the ‘science’ of economics is quite capable of populating the world with a citizenry of ‘rational fools’ (Sen 1977).

There is again a parallel, this time not with Myrdal, but with Cropsey’s little known, but incisive, critique of welfare economics (Cropsey 1955; Duhs 1994). Much in Sen – with one major difference – can also be found in Cropsey, who also delivers a savage attack on sui generis utilitarian welfare economics. Ultimately, however, Cropsey and Sen do not share the same conception of the nature of man, and inevitably therefore disagree as to what constitutes the good for man. For Cropsey man is a species being - as also for John Paul II (1993) and Catholic social thought - and the differences between individual men are relatively minor, while for Sen man remains essentially individualistic, and the differences between individuals need to be celebrated above and beyond any common elements which inhere in all men. In short, Sen’s deference to Aristotle - or to Nussbaum’s interpretation of Aristotle (Duhs 2008) - leads him to his capabilities approach, but not to Cropsey’s generic conception of man, and its consequent implications for the consummation of (generic) human capability and the Good Life. Although Sen himself accepts that the demands of a narrowly conceived understanding of rationality have made “many different types of relevant considerations inadmissible in economic evaluation or behavioural prediction” (1987: 71), Cropsey’s implied critique of Sen is that he (Sen) is guilty of his own charge, in that he has too narrowly conceived the limits of rationality regarding the choice of human ends. Sen’s basic intuitions take him to a stinging critique of welfare economics and orthodox development policy, but then lead him not to the Aristotelian position to which he putatively defers but back again to utilitarianism and sui generis individualism (after the removal of offending ‘unfreedoms’).

The emphatic message Cropsey seeks to put is that “Whatever else welfare economics is, it is an implicit covert teaching of one particular, contentious conception of man and of teleology, and thus of the determinants of man's welfare...For him, what is being taught implicitly in welfare economics is what is central to an understanding of man and society – i.e. a view of man as an atomistic being for whom human reason is but the handmaiden of his passions. Cropsey objects that the implicit teaching of such sui generis welfarism is a value relativism which is itself unavoidably a precursor of nihilism.” (Duhs 2005). Cropsey's deference to Aristotle is more fundamental than Sen’s and therefore incompatible with Sen's view (2000) of development as freedom and freedom as development. Even after 2000 years, debate about values and ethics in economics still turns on the question of whether at least in principle there may be some *absolute* or generic values in keeping with the notion of a *species* conception of man, or whether all values are necessarily individual-relative (see also Charles Taylor, 1995).

In the last decade, Austrian School Catholics, who dub themselves economic ‘personalists’, have recently sought to provide their own distinctive response to these issues in their *Journal of Markets and Morality*. They too seek to remove what they see as the skewed conception of



the nature of man in modern social science, which they see as overly rationalistic and utilitarian, but to do so without undermining respect for the economic market place (Gronbacher 1998). They seek not unfettered markets, but morally constrained markets i.e. not state intervention, but the constraints of a moral code promoted through voluntary associations, including family and church. From Catholic beginnings, they accept that an understanding of humanity requires an understanding of community or of the *generic* nature of mankind, as against uncritical acceptance of *sui generis* individualism, but for Austrian School reasons they seek to remain simultaneously committed to market principles, and therefore to consumer sovereignty. Tensions inevitably arise between these two commitments, and those tensions are implicit in Pope John Paul II's 1993 Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (sections 31-33; 74), in which Pope John Paul attacks the Chicago or Austrian-style or even Sen-style understanding of freedom:

Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost...there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature.

In short, Pope John Paul II affirms the existence of universal human values. Accordingly, he does not accept that human freedom should be able to 'create values', for that would be to allow it to enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom. These words show too strong a commitment to a teleological position to be readily consistent with an Austrian School stance towards the free market, and not all Austrian School Catholics will be able to interpret Pope John Paul's words to be consistent with Gronbacher's initial statement of the 'economic personalist' position.

For such reasons it may be concluded that economics and social science involve more than analytical exposition. Speaking more or less on behalf of Chicago School economists Milton Friedman (cited in Nevile 1998: 173) acknowledges that "As Liberals, we take freedom of the individual ... as our ultimate goal". The Chicago definition of individual freedom is certainly not the uncontested chief desideratum for Myrdal, Cropsey, Sen, Schumacher, Austrian School economic personalists or the Pope, however. Accordingly, it is important to recognise that Friedman's a-teleological goal and definition of freedom are *not* the goal acceptable to, and implicit in, the economic theories adopted by all other economists. (See also the University of Chicago faculty petition (2008) protesting the rationale for, and funding of, the proposed Milton Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago.) J.W. Nevile is one economist to object that a rhetorical trick commonly used by economic rationalists is to present their policy recommendations as if they are no more than the logical consequences of orthodox economics, despite the fact that that is far from the case. Nevile is emphatic instead (1998:170) that the policy prescriptions of economic rationalists in fact depend more on the values they hold than on the theorems of economics, and that the underpinning of their value system lies in the social philosophy called libertarianism. Chicago is naturally antipathetic to government intervention – that is, to the claim that government knows "better" - since there is no "better" to know (Duhs 2005).

In short, the basis of the Chicago position, as of others, inevitably is an initial axiom which is itself an undemonstrable article of faith. Chicago venerates individual liberty (defined



Chicago-style in terms of 'freedom from' restraints, rather than 'freedom to' achieve or do certain things). It therefore venerates consumer sovereignty and its consequent value relativism. In Posner's hands (1979) this runs as far as legitimising a market for such 'services' as torture, but neither Sen nor institutionalists more generally would rush to accept Posner's view that such a market can be acceptable in principle. Aside from the practical fact that most people would lack the wealth to be able to afford the price that would presumably be demanded, Chicago School critics would also object on the less pragmatic ground that there is simply something wrong with a value system that accepts torture as merely one more good or service to be traded in the market place. For Chicago's critics the putative value neutrality of Chicago economic 'science' is not only a logical impossibility but also an implicit teaching or ideological indoctrination of wholly unsatisfactory value premises.

### **Straussian Philosophy As Religion**

One critique of modern social science to become a focal point of debate in recent years is that provided by Leo Strauss. In essence, Strauss's claim is that the Ancient Greeks had a better understanding of human nature and the necessities for its fulfilment in 'the Good life' than does modern philosophy and social science. His argument is that the primary dilemma of modern thought derives from the rejection of natural right – that is, from the notion that there is no standard of right and wrong independent of positive right. As Strauss see it, this rejection inexorably leads to disastrous consequences (Strauss 1954:3), including nihilism (1954:5). For Strauss, there is a self-evident requirement of the need to speak at times of 'unjust laws' – in order to speak in condemnation of the great tyrannies of the twentieth century, for example. He therefore opposes the contemporary rejection of natural right, and the contemporary teaching that all human thought is constrained by its particular historical time and place, such that it must be presumed that there is no single demonstrably superior principle of right or goodness (1954: 36).

Whereas 'generous liberals' viewed this rejection of natural right with relief, since for them "Only unlimited tolerance is in accordance with reason" (Strauss 1954:5), Strauss rejects the teaching that human reason is so limited as to be obliged to accept that nothing but 'blind choice' is available to discriminate between any one set of principles and another. Moreover, he noted that to assert the historicist thesis was itself to doubt it, since historicism inconsistently exempts itself from its own strictures. Accordingly, he believed in the possibility of absolute or generic values. Put simply, he was intolerant of unlimited tolerance, and many within social science were intolerant of him as a result.

Strauss's argument is that Western social science has been transformed by loss of its earlier belief in natural right i.e. by loss of its faith that human reason could find a way to offer rational judgement on conflicting ideals. This rejection of natural right has reduced human reason to the status of mere servant or handmaiden of the passions. Such a social science may make us clever in terms of the selection of *means* towards any chosen objectives, but it admits to being unable to discriminate between just and unjust, legitimate and illegitimate objectives, and to thus being unable to choose between the choice-worthiness of objectives themselves. Strauss objects that such a social science is nothing but instrumental (1954:4), and is available to be the handmaiden of any powers that be.

Plainly enough, Straussian philosophy has parallels to traditional religious teachings. Indeed, Pangle (2006:132) notes that in 2003 the Archbishop of Canterbury "declared himself 'very interested in conservative political theory of a classical kind,' as exemplified by Leo Strauss".



There are parallels too in various Papal statements, as in Pope Benedict's recent appeal (Vatican Information Service, 10/5/07) to the doctrine of natural moral law as evidence that Christian ethical teaching has its basis in human nature itself. In Straussian style, the Pope objected that the conception which dominates today is that of positive law, which is rooted in ethical relativism and which may be depicted as a search for power, rather than for good. Pope Benedict encourages universal recognition of 'the inalienable value of natural moral law', since civilisation is otherwise at risk of being undermined by ethical relativism (and by the indiscriminating tolerance which some in fact take to be the very foundation of democracy and mutual respect), just as Strauss sees historicism and value relativism as the greatest of the threats to contemporary society.

In Straussian terms, insufficient faith in reason leaves us adrift in value-relativism and nihilism, and because modernity teaches that value judgements have no cognitive status or truth value (Zuckert 2006:72), it may be concluded that "what mathematically dominated political science misses, or is unable to see, is more important than what such science, properly and modestly employed, can illuminate" (Pangle 2006: 93). In contradistinction to Sam Harris's (2007) conclusion that "religion is the most divisive and dangerous ideology that we have ever produced", (and Sen's fear that it is 'welfarism' that is potentially disastrous for human well being), Strauss's conclusion is that it is historicism, and the relativism derived from it, that is the most dangerous 'religion' we have devised.

For anti-Straussians it follows too that Straussians trust human reason 'too far'. Such a complaint is the antithesis of the Dawkins' claim that in relation to matters of religion and transcendence we have trusted reason 'too little'. Today, we suffer from both claims simultaneously, and both in the name of science.

### **From Aristotle To Darwin And Back?**

Classical natural right teaching understood that by the use of reason man could uncover certain standards of right and wrong that could be deemed 'right' in nature, not merely right in law. In short, classical natural right teaching was that legal right, as legislated in a particular jurisdiction, was neither the only standard of right nor the highest standard of right. It averred instead that without such an appeal to natural right, there can be no comment on an 'unjust law', and yet commonsense says that such judgement cannot be avoided.

By defining the nature of man in terms of reason and speech, Ancient Greek philosophers saw man as a species-being, defined more by the faculties all men held in common than by the individual differences between them. Armed with this generic understanding of man, they raised 'what is' questions about what is the nature of justice, and what is the nature of the Good Life. For them, generic answers were possible, and by use of reason – not religion they affirmed an understanding of a natural teleology or hierarchy of goals for man as man. They addressed the question of historicism and held that it is possible to use reason to identify abstract ideals, and to discern ways to consummate human potential. For them, the chief desideratum was the cultivation of the common faculties of reason and speech, in pursuit of human virtue. Their conception of the Good Life was therefore teleological, or one possessed of an understanding of a common end or goal for all men as men, regardless of present cultural-relative starting points. They affirmed the capacity to use reason to rank human values as better or worse, and saw such a ranking as an appeal to a transcendent standard no more than is a ranking of all human values as equal. (See Broyles 1978; Lenzner & Kristol



2003.) Either way, there is an act of ranking, and thus an appeal to a transcendent standard (if not a religious one).

With the advent of the age of modernity, the acceptability of this classical teaching passed away. Machiavelli taught that those who look to the stars are prone to falling into potholes. Being concerned with political ambition rather than with philosophical ideals, he saw value instead in a real-politik based on human fallibility and passion, rather than in human potential for reasoned virtue. Thomas Hobbes added a ‘social physics’, whereby it seemed apparent to him that desired human actions could be elicited by arranging for a Leviathan State to rule over society, so that individuals would be more frightened of the power of that state than they were of each other. Through the influence of Locke and Smith – and more recently Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of economics – institutions were devised to allow one passion to be played off against another, as the human passions came to be regarded as the defining feature of man, in place of human reason. Economics became the new religion - and the core of modern political ‘science’ - in place of virtue or a common teleology. Sui generis individualism came to be the accepted view of human nature. One’s welfare came to be whatever one took it to be.

Today, we now stand on the cusp of a new scientific age of evolutionary biology, however, possessed of what Steven Pinker (2002) calls the ‘new sciences’ of the mind and of human nature. Darwin rules. Unexpectedly, Pinker’s treatment of this new science of human nature may be read as entirely consistent with Straussian political philosophy, if unintentionally so. Oddly, it may be Darwin who takes us back to Aristotle, or at least to a position pregnant with that possibility.

In *The Blank Slate* Pinker uses evolutionary psychology to argue that the dogma that a (generic) human nature does not exist is ‘a corrupting influence’ (2002: ix), that ‘the new sciences of human nature... expose the psychological unity of our species beneath the superficial differences of physical appearance and parochial culture’ (2002: xi), and to argue that the refusal to acknowledge human nature ‘distorts our science and scholarship’ (2002: ix). This is of course exactly what political philosophers have long argued. In short, he sees human nature as generic, and as distinguished by the possession of the faculty of human reason (and speech), which in the course of human evolution has found ways to keep the passions in their proper places. Intentionally or not, this is Straussian philosophy re-written as evolutionary psychology. Pinker’s hope is that these new sciences of human nature will lead to realistic ‘biologically informed humanism’.

For Pinker “we have expanded [the moral sense’s] circle of application over the course of history through reason” (2002: 188). Accordingly, he sees nothing to fear from the loss of religion, since moral values and human dignity can be retained – and indeed put on an even firmer foundation by resting them on the new science of the mind (or human reason), which is itself universalist, rather than divisive, as is religion. It follows from his understanding of human nature, and of the role that reason has evolved to play, that even abstract entities such as moral values may not be merely conventional or culturally relative. It also follows that while man may be imperfectible, being possessed of various passions as well as reason, it is reason that has the upper hand (over the passions), having evolved to permit progress by constraining those passions to their proper places. Accordingly, Pinker accepts that “new ideas from the sciences of human nature do not undermine humane values” (2002: 193), but in fact imply an acceptance of generic or absolute values. Indeed, he accepts that since natural selection can be seen to have neither foresight nor compassion, and can “be described



as a process for maximising short-sighted selfishness” (2002: 163), there is need to apply human reason to moral questions and thus to matters of philosophy and teleology. In so doing he protests against the relativism which precludes criticism of (inhuman?) cultural practices in some societies (e.g. where female foetuses are selectively aborted, or where widows are expected to fall on their husbands funeral pyres) simply “because they are practices of other cultures” (2002: 172). In effect, he finds his own words for replicating Strauss’s endorsement of a standard of natural right, and sees the prospect of using reason to transcend cultural-relativism and historicism in a recognition of the search for teleological meaning. He argues that the new sciences of mind, brain, genes and evolution will enhance the values we hold precious (2002: xii), rather than cause them to wilt on the vine.

This Pinker account of the ‘new sciences’ of the mind and of human nature seems to argue something close to precisely what is argued by Straussian philosophy, a branch of political philosophy which is not always well received, and which has in fact been demonised recently, in some quarters. More specifically, Straussian philosophy is deemed by its critics to be elitist or unacceptably intolerant, because of its affirmation that a generic human nature defined by the faculty of reason implies the possibility of natural right (as in ‘right in nature’, not merely right under culturally-relative legislative law), and thus the prospect of certain absolute values. Pinker’s conception that abstract entities such as moral values may be no more imaginary than the concept of numbers implies the same - and may explain his own comment (2002: p) that those who endorse the idea of human nature are sometimes subject to personal smears (as Straussian philosophers certainly have been).

There is therefore a putative compatibility between Pinker’s evolutionary psychology and classical political philosophy (see also Post 2008, and Schloss 2004). Pinker does not teach that human reason is so limited as to leave teleological questions outside the reach of man’s understanding. Evolutionary psychologists can evidently accept that at some point human reason evolved far enough to contemplate abstract teleological and moral questions, independently of immediate adaptive-responses. His *Blank Slate* Chapter 11 starts with an attack on the need for religion as a means of ensuring or sanctifying moral behaviour, but arguably ends with a defence of Straussian philosophy and the centrality of metaphysics in apprehension of life, ontology and teleology. His analysis is compatible with the conclusion that the upshot of his attack on religion is that philosophy is more important, and is in no way debarred or limited by the new sciences of the mind.

This conclusion seems implicit too in Elizabeth Spelke’s comment - in the context of the Pinker / Spelke debate (2005) relating to gender differences and Lawrence Summers - that

We agree that the mind is not a blank slate; in fact one of the deepest things that Steve and I agree on is that there is such a thing as human nature, and it is a fascinating and exhilarating experience to study it. And finally, I think we agree that the role of scientists in society is rather modest. Scientists find things out. The much more difficult questions of how to use that information, live our lives, and structure our societies are not questions that science can answer. Those are questions that everybody must consider.

Whatever the accomplishments of evolutionary psychology, Spelke and Pinker concede that it does not displace political philosophy or the need to apply human reason to the metaphysical questions which remain basic to life, but beyond the realm of science (see also Schloss 2004:1; also Kirk 2007: 214, 220-221). In effect, Pinker and Spelke accept that if faith in the soul gives religion, it is faith in reason that gives something of superior



importance to science in the form of philosophy or metaphysics. In Pinker's words (personal correspondence, 11/6/08) "there is an indispensable place for secular philosophy in the understanding and wise management of our affairs" and the new sciences of human nature may inform, but will not replace, political philosophy. The role for reasoned thoughtfulness about human values remains. As E.F. Schumacher (1974:83) put it elsewhere, "We are suffering from a metaphysical disease, and the cure must therefore be metaphysical". Science itself cannot solve the basic questions about human teleology, the Good Life or how human lives should be lived.

No suggestion should be left that Pinker has declared himself to be a Straussian philosopher. All that can be said is that he simply does not reject the asserted parallels (without claiming to be particularly informed about Straussian philosophy). It may be that other conceptions of philosophy are also compatible with the Pinker view of the new sciences of the mind, but there is at least an interesting question to raise as to whether we have now come full circle. Do the new sciences of the mind now re-affirm a generic understanding of human nature and of moral values, whereas earlier it was 'science' which undercut those beliefs and left us with *sui generis* individualism, together with historicism (postmodernism) and its inclination to value-relativism and nihilism? There is nice irony in the question as to whether the new science of human nature effectively takes us back from postmodern nihilism to the ancient Greeks and classical political philosophy, and their affirmation of natural right and value absolutes. Aristotle, it seems, has new friends.

That is certainly not a prospect that will be welcomed in all quarters, however. In fact, voices of both left and right are now embracing evolutionary psychology (Pinker 2002: 303), as in the work of former Marxists Bowles and Gintis, who are now Darwinian and as in Arnhart's claim that Conservatives need Charles Darwin. Science, in the form of evolutionary biology, now makes life hard for utopian leftist views that human nature can be changed at will, but it also makes it hard for the view on the right that morality rests on God's endowing us with a soul (2002: 299). It is apparent that Pinker's finding is one which is *permissive* of a Straussian position, rather than one which compels it. His stated concern (2002: Chapter 16) is that political ideologies should not be based on theories of human nature that are 300 years out of date, but he accepts (2002:299) that "the field of political positions is wide open. The Tragic Vision, after all, has not been vindicated in anything like its most lugubrious form. For all its selfishness, the human mind is equipped with a moral sense, whose circle of application has expanded steadily".

We may conclude that both Strauss and evolutionary psychology attempt to take their bearings from nature. They both attempt to isolate what is most basic or original in human nature (reason and speech as the common senses, on the one hand; or hardwiring of certain behaviours into the human brain on the other hand). They both recognise certain attributes in the human *species*, *per se*. They both attempt to establish what is common to all humankind, and what is merely culturally specific and relative to particular societies. They both attempt to determine whether what is held in common by all men is more or less important than what distinguishes them from each other. Beyond that, even more compatibility is implied given the congruence between Strauss's cautious defence of liberal democracy (Pangle 2006: 74-83) and Pinker's acceptance that "None of this means that the American Constitution was a guarantee of a happy and moral society" (2002: 298) e.g. it did not stand in the way of the genocide of native peoples or of slavery or the disenfranchisement of women, but the relative success of constitutional democracy does imply that it is in conformity with the theory of human nature. All in all, Pinker's insistence (2002:305) that there is no excuse for theories of



human nature being out of date by 300 years is pretty much equivalent to saying it is time we caught up to the Ancient Greeks.

### **Contemporary Witch-Burnings:**

While evolutionary biology and the ‘new sciences’ of the mind and of human nature have been silently affirming support for the Straussian teaching on human nature, and generic teleology, other political forces have simultaneously been painting a very different picture in which Leo Strauss has been represented as the Godfather of the ‘Neocons’ who putatively reign over foreign policy in Bush’s Washington. On occasion, media presentations have castigated Strauss as at least one primary cause of the Iraq war, and of American imperialism more generally (Curtis, BBC 2004). As the Zuckerts (2006:1) say, in appraisal of these extravagant media attacks, “A spectre is haunting America, and that spectre is, strange to say, Leo Strauss.”

For a man who spent his time reading ancient books, who did not have a foreign policy and who did not advocate invasion of any country, this is a strange, not to say bewildering, position to occupy in the public mind. In advancing his arguments against historicism or postmodernism, he necessarily confronted the views of those with different ‘religious’ or metaphysical (or methodological) sensibilities, however, and in so doing earned the dismissal of some. One contemporary critic goes so far as to paint him as an acolyte of Nietzsche and Heidegger (rather than of the Socratic Greeks), even though the Zuckerts, amongst others, consider him to have devoted his life’s work to a defence of liberal democracy, and to opposition to just these figures.

Figuratively, Strauss was burned as a contemporary witch by a US media which saw him as being of the wrong religion, and as having spawned unacceptable policies in consequence. He was intolerant of unlimited tolerance, and thereby offended the notion of the democracy of the intellect. In teaching that American social science had abandoned natural right for relativism and historicism, he taught the possibility of ‘right’ values, and so – according to those who demonised him – encouraged the conservative view that it was ‘right’ to invade Iraq. The Zuckerts (2006:60) protest that Strauss was much misrepresented in this media blitz, and that Strauss’s goal was less polemical and more concerned to defend philosophy from the historicist claim that philosophy is dead (just as various theologians object to the modernist contention that religion is dead). He was not the Godfather of the ‘neocons’ in Washington, even if his name was sometimes mentioned there, but a defender of classical philosophy and its claim that reason can distinguish between human values. Ironically given that he was castigated as the Godfather of ‘Neocon’ certainties – the one thing Strauss was dogmatic about was the impossibility of being dogmatic, and lacking Socratic doubt (Zuckert 2006:154). Thomas Pangle (2006:45-47) similarly objects that Strauss was grotesquely misinterpreted by contemporary critics who managed to see a Straussian synthesis of Nietzsche and Plato, and who – in an inversion of Strauss’s actual teaching about Plato claimed that he and his followers were seeking to become the power behind the US throne via some set of ‘noble lies’. In proselytising their demonisation of Strauss, Pangle notes (2006:2) that such sensationalist critics were remarkably unable to come up with genuine quotations from Strauss’s many publications.

What might be regarded as a second contemporary witch-burning occurred when Pope Benedict delivered his Regensburg address in 2006, and incurred the wrath of much of the Moslem world. His speech was taken to be an attack on Islam, when it was in fact an attack



on Western social science, and something of a backhanded complement to Islam for having a more holistic view of life than he discerned in the compartmentalised specialisations of the western social sciences. Pope Benedict criticised social science as the promoter of relativism, in which human reason is presented as partaking only of the choice of means, and not the choice of human ends. He argued that the reality is that a new a-theistic religion increasingly dominates the social sciences, and that there is a danger that philosophy may degenerate into positivism. In so doing, however, he indicated an acceptance that to not act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature. This implies rejecting as reasonable the use of violence to achieve conversions, which in turn implies criticism of any (other) religion claiming allegiance per medium of unreasoning faith alone.

Pope Benedict was figuratively burned as a witch by Islamic groups who failed to appreciate that his real intent was to criticise the limitations of the Western apprehension of the relationship between faith and reason, and who mis-conceived his respect for the greater holism and the appreciation of transcendence within Islamic teaching. The case he put is strikingly similar to the case put by Strauss, for which Strauss too has been demonised as the nemesis of all things democratic and good. Evidently there are dangers in promoting a natural rights doctrine, whether it has its roots in religion or in secular philosophy.

### **Conclusions:**

Four main conclusions are drawn. First, formal theistic religion is *not* what informs the social sciences or gives them their particular character. Yet they do have a particular character, and one with religious – if not theistic – dimensions. This is made most obvious by the basic notion of consumer sovereignty, which stands at the core of economics (or 'economic science'?), which at its root is a teaching of value relativism. And that is *not* what is taught by formal theistic religion.

Judging by the recent outpouring of essays proclaiming the need to employ human reason to displace superstition (religion), the relation between science and religion might be supposed to be the primary dilemma of modern thought, but significant philosophical questions remain essentially untouched by that debate (when interpreted narrowly), and within the social sciences these philosophical questions might be regarded as more important. The critical turning points within contemporary social science on which matters of religious significance hinge are then seen to be (a) the issue of value relativism and its limits and (b) the related issues of the understanding of the (generic) nature of humankind, and (c) the ontological and teleological questions that derive from that.

A second conclusion is that metaphysics is inescapable within the social sciences. Disagreement on this level is what underpins disagreement between schools of economic thought. Economic philosophy should therefore be an important and integral part of social science teaching. It isn't.

“Putatively simple and unambiguous words such as ‘man’, ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘rationality’ are in fact ever present bones of contention. It is the conflicting *a priori* definitions of such terms that underpin dissension [between orthodox neoclassical, institutionalist and radical perspectives on economics]” (Duhs 2006:107), and which constitute the well-springs of dispute about many practical economic policies. This is apparent in debates within development economics, for example, and in disputes about the economics of law, in which, for Posner, economics becomes a new definition of



jurisprudence. In effect, Posner's *a priori* lead him to an understanding of law and economics, and of jurisprudence, in which a citizen has the right to do anything at all (including torture others), so long as he can pay for it (Posner 1979; Duhs 2005). In Posner's world, the budget constraint is the only constraint. Significant philosophical assumptions have been silently, but inescapably, imported into such economics.

Accordingly, we may conclude that there is an inevitable *a priori* in social science, in the form of implicit metaphysical propositions about relativism, positivism and historicism, and that these *a priori* propositions are not themselves amenable to the sort of scientific evidence for which Dawkins calls, so as to sift out science from superstition. Facts may kick, but so does (religious) predisposition, or the interpretative power of philosophic *a priori* faith positions. To regard all values as of equal value is itself no more scientific than the affirmation of its opposite – and what some see as the essence of what is right within 'economic science' therefore remains for others what is wrong within economics and social science. The putatively value-neutral scientific method at the root of the claim that economics is a science, and indeed an imperialistic social science, remains a short cut to nihilism and social retrogression, for Kristol, Myrdal, Samuels, Cropsey, Sen, Etzioni and some others, (if not for Friedman, Becker, Posner and Chicago generally).

Thirdly, as far as Strauss is concerned the 'spiritual situation' or 'the crisis of our times' (Pangle 2006:8) derives from historicism. That is, it derives from the view that all evaluation is constrained by history and is therefore constrained to be culturally relative, such that "we gravely doubt the very possibility that any principles, any purposes, any way of life can be shown by reason to be simply true: that is truly right, truly good, for all humanity as such." This 'primary problem' does not focus on religion, so much as on reason, and its perceived limits. To lose faith that reason can discover universal and valid human norms in nature and human nature, is – in Strauss's view - to lose faith in our culture, and as such is a precursor to seeing it descend into spiritual disintegration and nihilism. Within the technological realm modern science has today given us unprecedented dominance over nature, but within the realm of the social sciences this is combined with "a queasiness regarding any kind of moral judgment, or 'relativism'." (Jenny Clay Strauss, 2003). Within the natural sciences faith in reason is boundless, but within the social sciences faith in reason has arguably contracted (Pangle 2006:9). Bearing in mind the contemporary Darwin-based Dawkins-style attacks on religion, we stand today simultaneously accused of showing too little faith in reason (regarding religion and superstition), and too much faith in reason (regarding attacks on the notion of the equality of all values). While Dawkins enjoins us to expect more of reason (or science) regarding religion, those who do expect more of reason in the realm of the social sciences (Straussians) are commonly dismissed as dangerous fanatics, who violate the modern religion of value-neutral positivism.

Fourthly, Darwinism is plainly entrenched as one of the dominant ideas of the nineteenth century (Schumacher 1974: 71-74), but its implications within social science nonetheless now present something of a two edged sword. It is variously seen as having paved the way for a new evolutionary economics complete with a new understanding of ontology (Hodgson 2003; Potts 2002; Dopfer & Potts 2004; Cosmides & Tooby 1994) *or* as having re-established (scientific) faith in a generic human nature, with attendant absolute or generic values (Pinker 2002). It is feared by some as having denuded social science of any conception of common human ends or teleology, by focusing on evolutionary beginnings, not ends (O'Brien 1992), but prospectively adopted as a new ally by those who have taught that there is a dangerous nihilistic message in the modern social science teaching of *sui generis* individualism and



value relativism. Despite Veblen's insistence that "the Darwinian rejection of teleology became the necessary basis of a scientific and 'post-Darwinian' approach to economics and social science" (Hodgson 2003), the 'new sciences' of the mind and of human nature provide unexpected potential support for Straussian philosophy and for the teaching of classical natural right. These interpretations are quite opposite to each other, and underscore the importance of metaphysics in understanding the relationship between religion and social science.

To an extent, we have therefore come full circle. Science killed religion (or so we are sometimes told); yet 'new science' now restores the possibility of faith in generic *a priori* positions. Insofar as that is true - but true without abolishing doubt and confining political possibilities to one specific philosophical outcome - we are left knocking on the door of the Ancient Greeks. 2500 years of science has taken us forward, only to arrive back at the start of political philosophy.

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