Natural Domination: A Reply to Michael Levin

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Michael Levin's recent contribution to *Philosophy*, 'Natural Subordination, Aristotle On,'[1] attempts to explain and defend Aristotle's contention in Book I of the *Politics* that 'some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule ... some men are by nature free, others slaves ... for the latter slavery is both expedient and just.' Levin wishes to show that Aristotle's distinction between natural rulers and natural slaves is well-founded and the inferences therefrom defensible. Though his essay is not really addressed to Aristotle's theory of slavery or with natural submission to rulers, it is nevertheless appropriately titled, for its intention is to persuade the 'natural slaves' of the world that they ought to 'accept necessity' (p. 256) and to 'avert [their] yearning for alternatives that are unavailable anyway.'(p. 257).

It is worth looking at Levin's employment of descriptive and evaluative terms and his arguments in some detail to see whether his theory of the world has any verisimilitude. We are a long way, as a culture, from the revisionary proposals Levin suggests would improve all our lives if we could overcome our unempirical hence irrational commitment to 'vacuous' notions of equality. But there are many people who, while not willing to follow Levin into these deep waters, nevertheless believe, suspect, or fear that some of what he says must be right. Even those who are shocked or distressed by what he says may worry that this is merely their emotional reaction or that opposition is merely 'politically correct.' The purpose of this paper is to show that Levin does not establish what he sets out to do. His appeals to 'empirically grounded' criteria and his calls for further research notwithstanding, his argument proceeds largely *a priori* and can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Naturally dominant groups have more merit than naturally subordinate groups.
2. The greater merit of the naturally dominant makes them wiser and more effective rulers.
3. Rule by the wiser and more effective is preferable, on consequentialist grounds, to rule by the stupider and more inept.

[1] *Philosophy* 72 No. 280 (1997), 241–257.

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4. Rule by naturally dominant groups is not only natural but morally justified.

In order to show that 4 is not established, I shall first lay out Levin's account of what it is for *A*, an individual or a group, to dominate *B* naturally. I then go on to examine this account in Section II in light of some of what is actually known about merit, dominance, and hierarchical behaviour in humans, arguing that 1–3 are underdefended and in some respects indefensible propositions, and that 4 is not entailed by them jointly. In Section III, I sketch what I take to be a more accurate picture of what dominance is, how hierarchies are constituted, and how they influence human welfare, than that drawn for us by Levin. For there is every reason to think, as the economist Partha Dasgupta has recently emphasized, that well-intentioned, reasonable people disagree little about what a good life or a decent society is. By contrast, people disagree profoundly in their general theories of how the world works.

I

According to Levin, we can imagine the world as made up of many pairs of '*A*s' and '*B*s' linked by the relation of dominance and submission. In each such pair, the *A*s are intellectually and practically dominant and rule over the *B*s, though it is no part of Levin's doctrine that dominance is transitive, or that dominance relations give a linear ordering to a set of preidentified groups in the world. This teaching can be considered Aristotelian in that Levin believes that when the *A*s are dominant by convention or nonnaturally, their rule is likely to be for the worse, but when they are naturally dominant, their rule is for the best. It is 'practically a tautology,' he says, that everyone is better off when the naturally dominant rule. We need not strive to bring about this state of affairs, for it is nearly inevitable, but we should not do anything which might upset it, and he thinks that there may be some fitting and appropriate extensions of Aristotelian doctrine that we as a society might pursue. It might be appropriate for the *A*s in a society to restrict the franchise of the *B*s, to deny them a voice in how public funding is spent, and to punish a *B* more harshly for a particular crime than an *A*. (p. 257). Lest someone feel tempted to invoke the name of Jonathan Swift, Levin reminds us that the idea of natural dominance which supports these proposals 'cannot be disposed of by name-calling.' It is 'empirically well-defined.' From this statement we can conclude that Levin is not describing an imaginary world, very different from our own imperfect one, in which groups bearing no resemblance to the

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groups we can name and identify around us possess political power in proportion to their intrinsic merit. And this justifies me in what follows in appealing to history and to the social sciences for empirical evidence against his major claims.

A naturally dominates *B*, according to Levin, when '*A* and *B* display the dominance pattern under dominance conditions because of natural traits.' (p. 251.) *A* and *B* display this pattern if the following are true. First, *A* can defeat *B* in a fight, if *A* and *B* are individuals, and *As* can defeat an equal or greater number of *Bs* in a battle when *A* and *B* are groups. Second, *A*, left to its own devices, 'will achieve a deeper knowledge of nature, a more advanced material and medical technology, and more advanced communications systems' than *B*. *B*-groups 'cannot maintain an *A*-level technology if given one' although they can if supervised by *As*. Third, *Bs* tend, as individuals and groups, to disorder and violence when not ruled by *As*. In a mixed *AB* society, *As* 'preponderate in the most prestigious and responsible positions and the position of the average *A* is more responsible than that of the average *B*.' (p. 245).

Levin's examples of observed dominance actually have little to do with these criteria. Humans, he says, dominate animals, who 'fare better under human supervision in zoos, homes and on farms than in the wild,' (p. 251) and adults dominate children. Although Levin prefers to leave the task as an exercise for the reader, several other real world relationships can be understood to fit these models. For instance, men appear to dominate women in that they legislate for women and serve as arbiters and judges in the majority of cases involving women's interests almost everywhere in the world. The Spanish dominated parts of Central and South America in the 16th century, the Dutch, Southeast Asia in the 18th. The English drove out the French and assumed control of India in the 19th century, and Europeans dominated Africa for nearly 100 years after 1870 when the continent was apportioned amongst the colonial powers. Many other examples of historical and political domination can be adduced. In the U.S. where Levin lives and works, white people as a group dominate blacks. They do so by occupying positions of authority as policemen, magistrates, legislators, and voters which set the rules and the penalties for infringement and determine compliance.[2] Note that Levin is committed to the thesis that, whenever the actual domination of *Bs* by *A*s is natural, rather than accidental, it is just, and conversely. (Domination is presumably accidental whenever the *Bs* are either not a 'natural' group, or are the intellectual and technological inferiors of the *As*). So, it is logically possi-

[2] Though Levin implies (p. 242f.) that they do not dominate as much as they should.

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ble that all existing and past states of domination are in fact unjust. As Levin does not discuss this possibility, we can assume that he considers that many, if not all actual states of domination observed in the real world are in fact natural and therefore just.

He is not however, committed to the thesis that, when an *A*-group dominates a *B*-group, each *A*-individual is dominant over every *B*-individual.

It is consistent with his claims that selected individual Africans in the 19th century possessed more intellectual knowledge than selected individual Europeans, and, that today selected individual women possess more mastery over specific areas of technology than specific individual men. But what determines group-domination is according to Levin the 'actuarial' effect of the exertions of all members of the group, and the appropriateness of the dominant group's rule is not affected by the existence of dominance-reversal amongst selected paired individuals. Levin suggests that it may be fitting that individual *Bs*, though not of the dominant group, rule, and he notes the existence of institutions whose purpose it is to target members of the *B*-group for the purposes of making them rulers. But these institutions are costly when competent *Bs* are rare in a population, and, as theoretical ideals of equality do not provide any reason for maintaining them, it is a question of costs vs. benefits whether the resources expended on them can be justified. (p. 256)

Levin's assumption that national dominance is a kind of personal dominance 'writ large' is reminiscent of the historiography encountered in the final, fading days of the British Empire when the term 'merit' was taken to be the underlying trait of persons possessed of courage, steadfastness, bravery, compassion, justice, mercy and enlightenment, with a dash of adventurism thrown in.[3] As a modern, Levin has replaced the old moral attributes mainly with technological know-how and bureaucratic efficiency, but the notion that an innate and hidden merit is the underlying cause of visible displays of virtue-plus-force is the same. Hence, I shall refer in my discussion to what individuals possessing Levin's dominance-conferring traits have more of than others as 'merit,' while the argument will make it clear just how difficult it is to operate with this notion.

Having established to his satisfaction that situations of dominance can exist and leaving the reader to complete the thought that they do exist, Levin goes on to argue that it is good that things are this way; at one point he says that the expediency of this arrange-

[3] An example is H. Wood Jarvis, *Let the Great Story be Told! The Truth about British Expansion*, (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Co., 1946), x. 'It is not wealth or geographical position which decide the rise and fall of races,' says Jarvis, 'It is—as already said—a matter of personal character.'

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ment is 'virtually analytic' and that 'everyone is stipulated to be better off when the naturally dominant rule,' but the analytic or stipulative character of these pronouncements is never made clear. Less mysterious than his appeal to logic is his appeal to the facts. There are, he says, empirical measures of well-being. They include 'lower infant-mortality, fewer workdays lost to illness, greater life expectancy, a more predictable social environment, more personal security, and greater control over nature.' (p. 246). It is inconceivable on his view that by replacing the people who now run the world with people who are less intelligent, less inventive, less forceful, and not as well-organized, in short, less meritorious, human well-being would increase. Therefore the dominance of the certain groups is not only inevitable, but justified.

II

I turn now to the three main claims Levin advances in support of his conclusion.

1. Naturally dominant groups have more merit than naturally subordinate groups.

Levin supposes that groups and individuals have traits, which, on a stable and ongoing basis, make them naturally dominant or naturally subordinate, and he considers this to be an empirically established fact. In his scheme, certain traits in individuals have counterparts in groups. Thus an individual's strength, skill with weapons, and aggressiveness corresponds to the military prowess which makes an *A*-group dominant over a *B*-group. An individual's intelligence and ingenuity correspond to a group's ability to produce intellectual and practical knowledge and to apply it. An individual's ability to keep track of things and budget resources corresponds to a whole society's administrative abilities. An individual's forcefulness and determination correspond to an *A*-group's ability to intervene effectively in the lives of others. It is obvious that some nations have achieved very high levels of bureaucratic efficiency, and one would be flying in the face of the facts to insist that all nations manifest equal organizational ability. Some nations have, at the same time, contributed numerous intellectual productions to the world—theories, discoveries, inventions, and some have shown great military might. Nations can further be combined, or divided, in his scheme, into the ethnic groups composing them to form *A*- and *B*-groups.

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Now, there is little sense in describing either individuals or groups as possessing the attributes named *tout court*. The habit of doing so is known to social psychologists as the 'fundamental attribution error.'[4] The assignation of traits, even when these are determined through the administration of 'objective tests' presupposes a context of assessment. A colleague may be 'well-organized' to us if his desktop always appears to be tidy, but his sock drawer at home may be chaotic: to the cleaning-person, he is fundamentally a 'messy' individual. A nation may be well-organized in the sense that it can run a vast system of social-security benefits, but disorganized in its approach to urban planning or transportation. A person may be docile in committee meetings, but violent at home, and many people can repair automobile engines but cannot follow a simple recipe; they are not 'technically proficient' in every dimension in which this could be assessed. Few people are 'thrifty' 'conscientious' 'sincere' or 'generous' right across the board, in every conceivable context of evaluation, and there are few people of whom it can accurately be said that they are 'intelligent', 'well-organized', 'inventive', or 'aggressive' *tout court*, though we know what we mean well enough in given unscientific contexts of assessment to employ these terms. In so far as the corresponding properties of ethnic groups, genders, and nations are modelled on the traits of folk-psychology, they are imprecise. This is not to say that they are senseless: we all know what is meant if it is claimed that the intellectual productions of Ugandan physicists are superior to those of Norway's, or that Sri Lanka can maintain its technologies better than New Jersey. But the comparative judgments Levin needs to be able to make, e.g. judgments of the form, 'Japanese have more deep knowledge of nature than Americans' are not, as he implies they are, rigorously empirical.

Levin clearly considers the possession of the above-named traits at the individual and social levels to be something *good*. His reasoning appears to run as follows: Without forcefulness, intelligence and organizational abilities are not meritorious, for they cannot produce any effects. But mere forcefulness accompanied by stupidity and an inability to plan is obviously dangerous. When (and only when) a force-component is added to an intelligence-and-skill component, the results are good. However, as I will now proceed to show, the constellation of three traits is still not coextensive with our normal conception of value. The supposition that it is derives, as I will

[4] Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcoming of Social Judgement* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 120f.

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argue below, from some misunderstandings about the notions of social dominance, as these appear in the 'empirical' literature.

In the period between 1930 and 1960, the notion of 'dominance' received wide attention from social scientists and students of animal ethology.[5] Data were drawn from various species, from fish and birds to mammals. 'Dominance behaviour' in adult humans proved difficult to study, and data on humans were derived mainly from the observation of pre-school children and adolescents. A substantial body of well-understood specialized literature on pre-cultural or 'natural' dominance relations in adults never managed to emerge. What we currently possess under this heading are popular works. These generalize imaginatively from animal studies, which in turn were often interpreted anthropomorphically in the first place. Thus most people's 'empirical' grasp of dominance in human societies, and I fear this includes Levin's, consists of their antecedent folkloric theories routed through studies of non-human species and returned to them as 'science.'[6]

Since the 1970s, employment of the concept of dominance in the specialist literature has declined because of problems in getting any accepted definition, the suspicion that the aggression observed in caged animals was not typical of the species, and the impossibility of generating stable linear orderings or constellations. As one investigator puts it:

> Early researchers often attempted to assess primate dominance in terms of a simple type of social interaction (e.g., priority of access to food). Using simple indices of dominance proved inadequate because results often failed to generalize to other social interactions (e.g., priority of access to mates)... Therefore in more recent primate research, dominance has been conceptualized as a general description which summarizes stable social relationships evident in the various forms of naturally occurring conflict...[7]

Despite the decision to focus on aggression and winning as the central defining concept in dominance,

[5] *Social Hierarchy and Dominance*, Martin Schein, (ed.), (Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, 1975).

[6] This problem afflicts many of the papers in *Dominance Relations: An Ethological View of Human Conflict and Social Interaction*, Donald R. Omarck, F. F. Strayer and David G. Freeman (eds)., (Garland, 1980). Despite its promising title, this uneven collection actually devotes little discussion to adult humans.

[7] Rona Abramovitch and Fred Strayer, 'Pre-school social organization,' in *Aggression, Dominance and Individual Spacing*, Lester Kames, Patricia Pliner and Thomas Alloway, (eds.), (New York and London: Plenum, 1978), 107–128.

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> [t]he traditional idea that fights are won by dominant individuals has given way to a more detailed analysis of responses to initiated conflicts. For example, totally ignoring aggressive acts can be a sign of dominance as clearly as winning by using greater force.[8]

Since the mid-1970s there have been signs of a revival in endocrinological, primatological, anthropological, and archaeological approaches to the study of hierarchies. But dominance as a term in social psychology has not received much further clarification and elaboration.[9]

We all possess a mental picture of the 'alpha male.' This is mainly derived from looking at politicians and other such persons on television. As these 'dominant' persons, so influential in world affairs, and so eagerly watched by millions, have come to model their behaviour largely on that of other persons observed on television, we should be cautious of supposing that their demeanour, gestures and behaviour-patterns corresponds to anything found in 'nature.' 'Dominance' is a term of art employed variously to refer to behaviour involving aggression, the fear and respect of others, and decision-making. Dominant apes, for example, may harass or kill infants and intervene in other animals' relationships or activities. Dominant individuals may get 'their way' in getting to sit where they want to; they command personal space and can displace other individuals and take objects away from them. It is not always clear whether these attributes reliably cluster in 'alpha' individuals, or why one trait might imply another. For example, aggressive individuals in groups of nursery-school children, one of the few human groups which has been studied, are watched more by other children; they get more than their share of attention. This may be because they are expected to exercise practical leadership and are watched to see what the group ought to be doing next. But they may also be watched more closely because they present a threat and it is important to keep an eye on individuals known to be dangerous.

[8] Ibid., 109.

[9] A survey of post-1978 imprints under subject-heading 'Dominance' in the Cambridge University Library catalog turned up 13 books, most of which had to do with love, interpersonal relations, the emotions, co-operation, and similar subjects. (First on the list was *Equal Partners—Good Friends: Engaging Couples Through Therapy*, by Claire Lou Rabin, (London: Routledge, 1996.)) Only one entry out of 13 appeared to be devoted to ... well, real dominance. This was a monograph on patrilineality amongst the Bedouin by Gideon H. Kressel, (Wiesbaden, 1992). Though the periodical literature for 1978-1998 is perhaps richer, books synthesize the given state of knowledge. The contrast with the pre-1978 publication profile, substantiates Schein's remarks. (Cf. above, note 5.)

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The primate literature emphasizes the variety of social systems that are to be found in the 200 or so species studied. Some species closely related to man are strongly hierarchical, others are not.[10] Dominance is not lifelong, and, in some species, it is possessed only briefly—for a few days at a time—and tends to rotate through members of a group. In primates, as well as in other animals, dominance is not exclusively or overwhelmingly male, and rank in a troop may depend on the status of one's mother. Hormonal factors are known to influence dominance behaviour, and success in getting one's way may be a cause as well as an effect of hormonal production. But aggression, often said to be linked with male hormone-production, is not an exclusively male characteristic. Females may behave as aggressively as males, but, in strongly dimorphic species, they may lack the ability to inflict wounds on males. I mention these facts about gender because Levin lays strong emphasis on the observed absence of women in culturally significant hierarchical structures—a point I will return to later.

From the knowledge that an animal is dominant in its pack, we cannot infer that it is more intelligent, healthier, more resistant to disease, or more attractive to potential mates, or that its genes are 'better.' Nor can we infer from the presence of any 'good' traits that an animal is socially dominant. It is often assumed that dominance confers a selective advantage on the animal possessing it and that dominant animals must be better nourished, acquire more mates, and leave more offspring. But the evolutionary 'function' of dominance, if it has one, is unknown.[11] Relative dominance in a pack of animals cannot confer an individual selective advantage (else submissiveness would quickly be extinguished). Either dominance is not heritable, in which case it is not a fitness-producing trait, or dominant males do not produce more offspring than lower-ranking males. In any case, dominant status is not universally impressive or

[10] I summarize these results from recent papers in *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, Barbara Diane Miller, (ed.), (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Particularly relevant are Joan B. Silk, 'Primatological perspectives on gender hierarchies,' 212–235, and Patricia Chapple Wright, 'Variations in male-female dominance and offspring care in non-human primates,' 127–145. Older sources include A. Jolly, *The Evolution of Primate Behaviour* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), and Dolf Zillmann, *Hostility and Aggression* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

[11] See T. L. Clutton-Brock and Paul Harvey, 'Evolutionary rules and primate societies,' in *Readings in Sociobiology*, T. L. Clutton-Brock and Paul Harvey, (eds.) (San Francisco: Freeman, 1978), 300–303.

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attractive to females.[12] A certain *distribution* of individual traits within a group may be functional for the group, but some polymorphisms are neutral. Some people have exceptionally long, slender fingers and can use them to become famous pianists, but, as long-fingeredness does not spread through the population, *it* cannot be supposed to confer a special selective advantage. The most we can say in general is that dominance-behaviour does not diminish an individual's chances of surviving and reproducing and that there appear to be stable distributions of aggressive behaviour in social animals.

2. The greater merit of the naturally dominant makes them wiser and more effective rulers.

The reader might at this point set himself the task of ranking fifteen friends or colleagues according to their intelligence, technical skills, and tendency to dominate in social situations. How far do you get with this exercise? If you were able to complete it, do you now believe that your list reflects their real merit—the possession of truly desirable human qualities—as Levin's argument requires? Are you sure you would prefer to live in an environment managed by your three top people rather than in one managed by people elsewhere on your list?

Unlike the old moral virtues attributed to empire-builders, Levin's merit-conferring traits are not valuable to their possessors or anyone else except in conjunction with other facilitating or inhibiting traits. The intelligence and foresightedness of the psychopath are not valuable in context. Aggressiveness is not a desirable trait *per se*. Intelligence is a more useful trait if you are literate than if you are illiterate. But Levin's merit-conferring traits are independent of each other, as he admits, and they have not been empirically demonstrated to be causes of social dominance. According to Levin, only 1/7 of the population of Western democracies have IQs of 115 or more. 'Yet it seems likely,' he ventures, 'that the majority, probably the vast majority, of political leaders, generals, chief executives of large corporations, influential authors, innovative engineers, and the most highly respected academics have

[12] 'Humans don't know what good genes are and neither do monkeys,' observes Meredith Small, *Female Choices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 156. 'The only consistent interest seen among the general primate population is an interest in novelty and variety.' Females seem to prefer full-grown males, 'but it is known that they mate with low-ranking males and go out of their way to do so.' ibid., 153ff.

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IQs above 115.' (p. 255). But the hypothesis that socially prominent individuals have high IQs is not particularly interesting. Take a country like Canada with a population of 30,000,000. The number of adult persons with IQs over 115 will be approximately 2,000,000. In such a country, there are perhaps 1,000 highly meritorious individuals of the sort referred to—CEOs of large corporations, influential academics, and so forth. Even if we are off by a factor of 10 and ought to recognize 10,000 such individuals, it will still be true that the vast majority of people—99% of those who are *ex hypothesi* as meritorious as the visible group in respect of their intelligence—are not especially dominant.

The meritocratic premiss that those who in fact rule have higher merit-scores than non-rulers is never established. It is possible that, amongst the socially non-dominant, there are many people with far higher merit-scores. And, while it is doubtless the case that socially dominant individuals do possess high merit-scores, there are several possible explanations for why this is so in addition to the traits being naturally covariant. For example, it is possible that our institutions are constructed so that they a) differentially develop the abilities of the socially dominant and allow those of quieter people to languish; or b) facilitate the expression of social power and influence in people with great cognitive ability. The resulting coincidence of traits would have been artificially produced in both cases. The institutions described might be considered to be 'good' ones if they increased the social power, right across the board, of all persons in a population who met a certain cognitive standard: this would be a true meritocracy. But a system which differentially develops the intellectual abilities of persons with pre-existing social power by investing greater resources in them, even if the end state is qualitatively similar to that of the meritocracy is not a true meritocracy.

In Levin's world, power is acquired through the exercise and display of power-independent meritorious traits: intelligence, organizational ability and so on. We dominate animals and children because we are more intelligent; we have not come to be more intelligent through the domination of animals. But this inference cannot be extrapolated. A nation which begins, for example, with a minimal military advantage over another can multiply its military advantage many times over by defeating it and expropriating its resources to develop its own weaponry. A group which has no intellectual superiority over another can acquire it by expropriating the labour of the other in order to provide the leisure in which to develop its own intellectual resources. Historically, such cultural leveraging has been a powerful instrument. Europeans were able to turn a small advantage in the knowledge of weaponry, navigation, and fortifica-

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tion to a great advantage by expropriating wealth, first in the form of *specie*, later through captive markets, and plantation labour. The resulting wealth supported technological and administrative developments and intellectual and cultural endeavours. But it would be a mistake to think that a pre-existing state of intellectual and cultural merit was the cause of the European domination of the world in the colonial period.[13] In many cases, pre-existing administrative systems were left substantially in place and re-staffed by the invaders, giving rise to the illusion of creation *de novo* by organizationally-superior newcomers.[14]

Group-merits, it needs to be remembered, are not summations of individual merits. Imagine that New York State is enjoying a heyday in philosophy and that the number of intelligent productions in this area produced is vastly greater than that of any other U.S. State. It is unlikely that the explanation for this fact would lie in the summation of philosophical abilities over each and every New York state resident. So it is generally with cultural superiorities. Suppose that, at present, Poland is a better organized society, that its group-intelligence is higher, as measured by the quantity and quality of scientific and humanistic research emerging from it, and that it is also more capable of displaying military force than is Britain. We can infer nothing about the organizational abilities or level of personal forcefulness of British vs. Poles, and we certainly can't infer from this state of affairs that Poland ought to dominate Britain or that things would go better for everyone if Poland did. The reasons for Poland's high group-merit rating have nothing to do with the merit-ratings of the individuals composing the nation, but are simply a historical contingency, just as the scientific revolution which produced European superiority in technique and cannon did not derive from the underlying ingenuity and intelligence of the population vis-à-vis, say, that of China, but from a series of historical contingencies.

The dominance of an *A*-group is not the summation of domina-

[13] It is not always realized that pre-colonial Africa contained organized networks of kingdoms, that 17th and 18th century Europeans recognized China and India as more advanced in the manufacture of textiles and domestic articles generally, or that 18th century Hellenism in art and philosophy was an attempt to manufacture a rich cultural heritage on the part of people who feared that their own ancestors had been 'barbarians.' On European envy and feelings of inferiority, see Ernest S. Dodge, *Islands and Empires: Western Impact on the Pacific and Asia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1976).

[14] See Part II of *The New Cambridge History of India*, Stewart Gordon (ed.), (Cambridge University Press, 1993), *Indian States and The Transition to Colonialism 1600–1818*. A survey of some pre-colonial bureaucracies is given in Vol. IV, 131 ff.

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tion-tendencies over its individual members. The individual members of the *de facto A*-group may utterly lack the will to dominate their neighbours, the *B*s. Popular support for such ventures needs to be mustered by those who expect to benefit from the arrangements, for ordinary people tend to have reservations, both moral and practical.[15] The successful use of propaganda, either on a tribal or national level, calls up emotions and impulses in a populace which are experienced as deeply-rooted and natural, though they are in a profound sense factitious.

3. Rule by the wiser and more effective is preferable, on consequentialist grounds, to rule by the stupider and more inept.

Levin argues that human welfare is diminished when those with less intelligence, inventiveness and military preparedness are not dominated by those with more. Though the claim promptly summons images to mind of 'recidivist felons,' illiterate unwed mothers, and other such persons carousing irresponsibly through Government offices, it is not self-evident. We know of world-leaders—great dictators—who hold their subordinates and many beyond in thrall. They are expert displacers and object-grabbers, often displacing people right out of the world and life itself. Such persons do not always possess exceptional qualities of intelligence, inventiveness, or organizational capacity, as these would be measured by our best personality tests: social dominance may enable them to capture and retain the services of talented underlings who possess the requisite intelligence, organizational ability, etc. To be ruled by these people is not preferable to being ruled by others who are less forceful and well-organized and who have less mastery over the secrets of nature including the esoterica of weapons of mass destruction.

Suppose we accepted the consequentialist claim that the domination of one group by one possessing superior qualities was justified if it produced more welfare. It would then only remain to be shown that the systems of domination we have historically observed have improved the world according to objective measures of well-being.

[15] As Hobhouse argued, 'Finance manipulates the patriotic forces which politicians, soldiers, philanthropists and traders generate; the enthusiasm for expansion which issues from these sources, though strong and genuine is irregular and blind; the financial interest has these qualities of concentration and clear-sighted calculation which are needed to set Imperialism to work.' L. T. Hobhouse, *Imperialism: A Study*, 3rd. ed., (London: Unwin and Hyman, 1988), 59.

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But this claim is not argued for and would be impossible to substantiate. That de-colonisation produced political upheavals and their well-known sequelae in human misery is no argument that colonial domination produced welfare in the first instance. No evidence is cited by Levin to show that domination by more powerful groups has tended, in the course of history, to be good for those who were dominated.

The 'empirical criteria of well-being' cited by Levin do not include civil liberties, or adult literacy, and they ignore marginality: a life lived in conditions of borderline starvation is longer than one in which a quick death ensues, but mortality statistics are only a putative indicator of well-being, not part of its definition.[16] The same is true of gross national product; a country does not enjoy high levels of what we could consider to be well-being if income is not reasonably well distributed amongst the inhabitants. Such redistribution may require a highly organized bureaucracy and great technical expertise to achieve, once the natural equality of village life has been lost due to conquest and reorganization. But it is not clear why this should involve the 'domination' of one group by another. If Levin-identified meritorious groups wish to improve the welfare of humanity, they can do so by founding schools, by offering scholarships at their own universities, by furthering benign technology transfers and discouraging the arms race. These measures do not involve 'domination' in the social sense; they involve what Hobhouse called, in an admittedly somewhat old-fashioned way, 'enlightened policies of civilized assistance.'[17]

However, there are reasons why we should not accept too readily the argument that domination is justified if it produces greater welfare by objective measures. Suppose that by turning the national government over to a sect possessing great medical knowledge, foresight, and organizational and military power, we could improve human life-expectancy, reduce infant mortality, and, by reducing the number of working days lost, enrich the nation's coffers. The regime would accomplish these ends by banning alcohol, tobacco, smoked meats, and all environmental carcinogens, and it would mandate a high-fibre, low-fat diet and compulsory vitamin injections and medical screenings with frequent biopsies, drug-tests, and ultrasounds. It would triple mandatory pension plan contributions in order to ensure a more secure future for each individual. Welfare,

[16] On recent attempts by economists to capture more adequately, but still in measurable ways, our intuitive conceptions of well-being and welfare, see Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 75ff.

[17] Hobhouse, op. cit., 243.

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on Levin's measures, would be increased at the cost of many vague pleasures, including the pleasure of not being interfered with. Levin has an implicit answer for this: this would not be acceptable because it would constitute an unnatural tyranny. Now, there is nothing wrong on his view with tyranny *per se*. There are problems he says, when a 'naturally subordinate group *B* refuses to heed its natural leader *A* requiring *A* to use force.' (p. 252) But the problem in this case is not with *A*'s domination but with *B*'s perversity. The test of a system is how well it works if everyone does conform, not whether everyone can be persuaded to confirm without the use of force. (ibid.). Levin's view seems to be that the health-and-welfare dictatorship I am imagining could not evolve naturally; medical fundamentalists of the sort described do not exist as a category 'in nature.' They might stage a coup or delude us into accepting their dominance, but they could not naturally accede to such a position through exercise of and recognition of their merit in a competitive situation. But such an insistence on purity of process threatens Levin's arguments from what we observe, for those who have dominated historically have come to do so by extremely wayward paths. Levin's desired conclusion 4.—that rule by naturally dominant groups is not only natural but morally justified—cannot be extracted by way of his earlier claims. We can imagine possible worlds in which meritorious rulers dominate a submissive population and in which everyone is happy and satisfied, but this fictional world is remote from the real world and it is not even clear that such a world is a *good* world. We can be quite certain that we would not automatically consider it in our best interests to be occupied by any civilization, no matter how putatively advanced and meritorious, unless we were certain that, in that world, applications of force were critically reviewed on behalf of those to whom the force was applied.

III

There can be no doubt that Levin believes that the theory of higher and lower races, superior and inferior sexes, has already made great progress. 'The forcefulness and intelligence needed to run the world's many political, economic, military, athletic and intellectual hierarchies may turn out to be significantly genetic in origin,' he informs us. 'What other cases of natural dominance there may be is an empirical matter.' (p. 252) *A*-groups and *B*-groups are not formed from cross-sections of the world's populations; they correspond in Levin's mind to groups already demarcated by their appearances, which provide the empirical criteria for distinguishing between 'natural' dominance and the sort of accidental dominance

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Aristotle thought leads to an unjust state of affairs—as when a Greek is captured in battle and forced to become a slave.[18]

Now, there may well be genetically-influenced emotional, behavioural, and cognitive differences between males and females; and these may be determined in the phenotype by cerebral anatomy and functioning, as well as by hormones. But there is no scientific reason to imagine that they pertain to organizational ability or intelligence. Differences between males and females pertain to 'forcefulness' only in so far as this is tacitly identified with size, vocal timbre, and propensity to fight with weapons, not with industriousness, confidence, conviction, persuasiveness in argument, and so on. I suspect nevertheless that Levin would respond as follows to the suggestion that, in consequentialist terms, world welfare might be increased if women played a greater role in the institutional, educational, social and military hierarchies he regards as producing welfare. We can imagine, he might say, a world in which women have this social and institutional power, but this could not come about naturally. 'A contemporary Aristotelian might also point out that men have occupied the vast majority of positions of power, influence, and prestige in every known society, including the modern western world where feminism is given lip service as the morally correct view of gender relations.'(p. 256) This state of affairs ought to cause Levin to worry that social and political power is not reliably connected with intelligence. When it comes to intellectual output—not a genetic trait, but a socially facilitated production—we can agree with him that it is clear that women, as a group, lack merit. But is this because, from the actuarial point of view, men have always had, as individuals, more intellectual ability, inventiveness, better organizational ability and more forcefulness than women? We saw in the case of Poland vs. Britain that traits may exist amongst individual members of a population without being socially expressed; for historical reasons, Britain might be more disorganized, produce fewer intellectual products, and be less capable of exercising military force than Poland, even if her individual citizens were not lacking in innate ability. Such a situation could be historically prolonged indefinitely.

It is clear that historical patterns of dominance are difficult to alter, in part for 'natural' reasons. Perhaps our biological endowment contains little programming to assist us in interpolating females into pre-existing male hierarchies. Biologically, we don't

[18] For a survey of the role of racial ideology in ancient empire-building, see A. D. A. De Kat Angelino, *Colonial Policy*, translated by G. J. Reiner, 2 vols, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1931), Vol. 1, Ch. VI, 'Empire Building in the Ancient World.' See also Hobhouse's chapter 'The Scientific Defence of Imperialism,' Op. cit., 157–195.

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'know' how to do this, and, in order to prevent social harms to women, we have to learn. But, given that cultural mechanisms for segregation, designed to preclude the very possibility of any such interpolation have been in place for most of recorded history, this task might be much easier for individuals to accomplish than they imagine. Let us return to the question of merit and its *prima facie* entitlement to responsibility and prestige.

As we saw earlier, it is possible for one group to end up with a much higher merit-rating than another group by leveraging a small advantage, appropriating the resources of the Bs by enticement or coercion, and leaving the gap between them enormous. Non-participation in hierarchical institutions has never been shown to correspond to a natural preference in females, despite beliefs that it can somehow be inferred from individual behaviour and group-outcomes. But if an *A*-group could force or persuade an equally intelligent, creative, and organizationally-minded *B*-group to maintain its households, raise its children, contribute its intellectual labours anonymously, and abandon efforts to gain entrance to institutions where *B*s were not wanted, a non-existent gap in innate intellectual merit would eventually lead to an enormous gap in expressed merit.[19]

It is curious in this connection that in his discussion of social

[19] Suppose there are two humanoid groups, *P* and *Q*. The *Q*s have green faces and so are easily recognized as *Q*s. *P*s and *Q*s form pair-bonds, supported by the state and the law, for reproduction, and derive from these attachments the pleasures of companionship. *P*s are geographically highly mobile and work their way through educational and career hierarchies, moving from economic dependency to independence. Individual *P*s tend to be 3–10 years older than their partner *Q*s. Without knowing much more about *P*s and *Q*s, we can expect that, unless compensatory measures are taken, a system of *P*-dominance will develop. This will happen because the *Q*s are younger, can be identified by their green faces, and are determined by their economic status as well as by custom, law, and affect to follow the *P*s around rather than freely seeking their own places in existing hierarchies. But 'being older than my spouse' cannot be accounted, philosophically, as a merit-conferring trait.

Some prominent accounts of worldly success ignore such structural features in favour of predicates attaching to persons. Thus Thomas Nagel argues that inequalities of outcome have exactly four determinants: discrimination, hereditary advantage, talent and effort. Effort is 'a manifestation of the will...and uniquely suitable to be regarded as an individual's personal responsibility.' The remedy for discrimination is, he says, 'negative equality of opportunity, or positions open to qualifications.' *Equality and Partiality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 102ff. Under the circumstances described above, the fact that various positions are in a technical sense 'open' to *Q*'s has little effect on their life-chances.

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dominance, Levin refers vaguely to 'genetics' but not once to reproduction or to the effects of child-raising on females. For approximately a third of her natural life-span, unless special arrangements are made, a female is naturally accompanied by infants or dependent children; creatures who have no place in the intellectual, military hierarchies by which, according to Levin, the world is run. Childbearing did not put females at a moral and social disadvantage in our hunting-and-gathering hominid ancestors. But with settlement and agriculture, the female accepted social subordination and unremitting labour in exchange for rights of residence. At no stage could she see where this was leading, for her instincts were not formed to detect the loss of status in societies manipulating symbolic forms.[20] When status came to be associated with the performance of tasks requiring leisure, seclusion, and specialized training, childbearing became a heavy differential load on women, in actuality and symbolically. Now Levin could argue that men dominate women socially because they are not subject to the (naturally) disabling condition of childbearing in a complex society and because women lack the (natural) markers of forcefulness. But unless it could be made out that not bearing children is a meritorious trait, and that a larger size and a deeper voice reliably signal the hidden presence of intelligence, inventiveness, and organizational ability, his argument that social dominance is a manifestation of natural ability fares badly.

Levin's striking claim that it is 'virtually analytic' to say that everyone is better off when the naturally dominant rule cannot be substantiated. Far from 'feeling right,' submission to the naturally dominant is a deeply unpleasant experience. Nursery-school children who are submitting to more dominant classmates make certain characteristic gestures. They cry or scream, they try to get away, they cringe, cover themselves with their hands, flinch, withdraw; they 'request cessation,' and they seek help.[21] Grown-up individuals who are dominated in violent interactions do the same things, or analogues of them, and so do grown-up individuals who are being dominated by people who are not using physical force against them but are dominating them by words or deeds. It is distinctly unempirical to maintain that, when *A*s are displaying dominance behaviour towards *B*s, everyone's welfare is enhanced. Levin envisions, to

[20] I follow in basic outline the famous accounts of Rousseau and Engels; for an up-to-date version, see Marvin Harris, 'The evolution of human gender hierarchies: a trial formulation,' in Miller, (ed.), *Sex and Gender Hirarchies*, 57–80, and Adrienne Zihlman 'Sex differences and gender hierarchies amoingst primates: an evolutionary perspective,' ibid., 32–36.

[21] Abramovitch and Strayer, 'Pre-school social organization,' 110.

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be sure, a process of pacification, the culmination of which is that the *B*s agree to accept the authority of the *A*s. But if they do so because of the threat of force or the memory of force, it is difficult to see how this is consistent with the enhancement of their welfare. And if the current relationship of the *A*s to the *B*s is not forcible in being based on the threat or memory of force, it is difficult to see why it is termed 'domination' at all.

Levin's evident distaste for real-world *B*-group criminality (p. 242, n.4) strikes a discordant note here. Violence perpetrated within a military hierarchy, so long as it is associated with intelligence and competence, is, in Levin's system, automatically meritorious, while violence perpetrated because one is angry at having to submit, or simply because one acknowledges a gang-leader outside Levin's *A*-group as dominant, is evidence of a bad soul, or rather, as we are now modern, of bad genes. In fact, the category of 'convicted recidivist felons' whom Levin describes as unable to behave 'morally' or to 'adopt coherent life plans' (p. 242) includes a variety of very different individuals. Some are intellectually and organizationally gifted, others are not. Some are highly ambitious and have chosen a criminal milieu in which they can succeed, whilst others simply do not see the point of striving, given the opportunities and rewards within reach. But the human genome is perfectly adequately constituted for the expression of morality—a phenomenon Levin appears to consider uninteresting, except when nonsubmissive *B*s are involved—and forward planning.

IV

To summarize, in order to establish his conclusion, Levin is required to establish the following propositions:

1. There exist natural groups who act in a co-ordinated fashion and in whom certain traits cluster.
2. Some of these groups possess clusters of traits recognizable by us as deeply valuable.
3. These 'meritorious' groups inevitably acquire social power by natural rather than artificial means.
4. It would be better for any group to submit to any other group with more merit-conferring traits than to try to exist undominated.

None of these things has been shown. A natural propensity on the part of meritorious nations or ethnic groups to rise to the top cannot seriously be acknowledged by an empiricist as a 'cause' of any

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historically-observed state of affairs. Nor can the moral damage inflicted on victims and victors alike in contests of strength be transformed by philosophy into a contribution to the advancement of civilization. Finally, the *de facto* domination of an *A*-group is likely to produce, through the appropriation of *B*-resources and the exclusion of *B's* from *A*-group activities, the appearances of group-merit in the *A*s. But merit which has thus been expropriated is not, as Aristotle himself emphasized, the natural possession of its captors.

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