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REVIEW ESSAY: INCREASING HAPPINESS BY THINNING THE HERD

BY
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Sandra Peart and David Levy, "*The Vanity of the Philosopher": From Equality to Hierarchy in Post-Classical Economics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. xix, 323.

David Levy and Sandra Peart mean to revise the history of nineteenth-century British political economy. And more. In their latest, fascinating installment, *The Vanity of the Philosopher*, Peart and Levy argue that the transition from classical to post-classical economics is best understood as a sea change in the way political economists regarded human nature. What happened? Well, in the beginning, the humane political economy of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, who together are, for Peart and Levy, synecdoches for classical political economy, insisted that people are basically the same. Subsequently, the Smith-Mill view was, from 1850 to 1890, supplanted by a post-classical economics, which insisted that some human groups are inherently inferior to others, and which, as a consequence, ultimately endorsed eugenic thought and eugenic policy.

Political economy's turn from egalitarianism and sympathy to hierarchy and eugenics, say Peart and Levy, was the work of many hands. Levy's *Dismal Science* had already put Thomas Carlyle in the dock (2001). Carlyle and other Romantic critics of capitalism, such as John Ruskin, defended plantation slavery as morally superior to factory work. For these Romantic reactionaries, the savage chattel slavery of England's Jamaican plantations was preferable to the "wage slavery" of Manchester's factories. Levy's accomplishment was to show that Carlyle's vigorous defense of racism and slavery was not anomalous, as some apologists have claimed, but of a piece with the larger Romantic critique of capitalism. For Carlyle, as for other Romantic critics of capitalism, inferior races like blacks and the Irish required tuition from their moral betters.

In the present volume, Peart and Levy explain political economy's turn to hierarchy with some additional explanators: the allure of natural selection and other new imports from biology, utility theory's openness to the prospect that some have greater capacity for happiness than others, and, closer to the twentieth century, the temptations of expertise—the technocracy in charge of designating and improving

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inferiors would need to be staffed. By the outset of World War I, Anglophone economics had been remade into a social science that could, and readily did, endorse eugenics, in England and in the United States. The roster of Anglo-American economists who advocated eugenics in the Progressive Era is impressively long and distinguished, a *Who's Who* of progressive political economy that includes nine presidents of the American Economic Association (Leonard 2003).

A delightfully omnivorous intellectual history, *The Vanity of the Philosopher* is ambitious enough. But Peart and Levy also press a further, contemporary agenda, one that has received less attention. Belonging, as they do, to the (rump?) group of historians of economics that still believes the history of economics can contribute to social science as well as to history, Peart and Levy want to argue that their historical account in *The Vanity of the Philosopher* also has implications for the way social science should be done. For Peart and Levy, Smith and Mill's political economy, with its emphasis on equality and sympathy, provides a correct social ontology—and thus argues for a method they call "analytical egalitarianism."

Analytical egalitarianism takes the logic of public choice theory and extends it upward to the scholar.[1] Public choice begins with the assumption that people are basically the same. If we assume that market actors are self-interested, so we must assume, on pain of inconsistency, that political actors are self-interested, too. Peart and Levy, taking a page from the economics of science literature, say that we should assume that scholars are also self-interested. Scholars belong in the model, too.

I and others writing in the economics of science have argued that to assume that economic actors pursue self-interest while scholars pursue truth is inconsistent. Peart and Levy go further still: they argue that to posit different motives is "the source of much wickedness" (Levy 2001, p. ix), the unwelcome vestige of human hierarchy in post-classical economic thought. Why? Because, say Peart and Levy, scholars who regard their own motives as different from those of the actors they study will invariably be tempted to inflate "different" into "superior." Their history of nineteenth-century British economics suggests, Peart and Levy argue, that to posit human difference is to effectively guarantee human hierarchy. And, step two, human hierarchy invites eugenics. Ergo their method of analytical egalitarianism: since difference invariably leads to hierarchy, and hierarchy to eugenics, deny human difference and assume human homogeneity.

So *The Vanity of the Philosopher* not only defends a particular reading of classical and post-classical political economy, it also offers this reading as evidence for the social scientific and ethical merits of analytical egalitarianism.

Because I, too, have worked both the eugenics and economics-of-science furrows, my reactions to *Vanity* will be somewhat critical, precisely because they are those of the specialist. But my criticisms are those of a deeply sympathetic critic, and are offered from inside a perspective that is in violent agreement with Levy and Peart's spirit of inquiry, their view of the centrality of these topics, and their high moral

[1]Consider the modifier "upward" here. "Upward" ordinarily connotes better, the implication that the social scientist resides above the people he or she studies. Deirdre McCloskey has called this the "eighth-floor view (2006:416)." Peart and Levy suggest that the naturalness of the construction, the readiness with which we accept the implied betterness relation, reveals something about the way social scientists conceive of their enterprise.

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seriousness. It is because their research program is so creative and ambitious that it merits a close and critical reading.

I. HUMAN HOMOGENEITY: TREATING PEOPLE AS EQUALS OR TREATING PEOPLE EQUALLY?

Lionel Robbins's methodological injunction—"political calculations which do not treat [men] *as if* they were equal are morally revolting"—so well captures Peart and Levy's view, they quote it twice (pp. xv, 209). But Robbins's "as if" formulation points to a fundamental ambiguity in Peart and Levy's case for human homogeneity. Robbins says economists should proceed as if people were equal, which implies, in fact, that people are not actually equal. Indeed, Robbins says: "I do not believe, and I never have believed, that in fact men are necessarily equal or should always be judged as such" (pp. xv, 209).

Does Robbins mean that economists should knowingly make false assumptions about human homogeneity—that, for example, all human-capital endowments are equal—because to proceed otherwise is to invite wickedness? Not necessarily. Robbins can also be read, I believe, as saying something like "we should, especially when making policy affecting many, regard people as *moral* equals, without denying the possibility of substantive inequality." Indeed, we can insist upon moral equality without the as-if fiction that people are substantively equal, that is equal in height or wealth or intelligence or fellow-feeling.

Peart and Levy's fine discussion of F.Y. Edgeworth's utilitarianism helps to illustrate the point. Utilitarianism requires that everyone's welfare counts equally. Peart and Levy themselves adopt a version of this credo (p. iv). What "equally" means is the idea that the welfare of *all* persons should enter into the social calculus, a radical position in Jeremy Bentham's day. But to say that everyone should count is different from saying that everyone should count equally, for individuals may have different capacities for turning consumption goods into utility. If hedonic capacity is unequal across persons (an empirical question), then the utilitarian goal of greatest happiness for greatest number can entail directing more resources to those persons with greater hedonic capacity. At the limit, a "utility monster" could get all. Edgeworth in *Mathematical Psychics*, Peart and Levy show, claimed that some inferior races had less hedonic capacity, so that greater economic resources should be directed to the "superior" races. As Edgeworth so vividly put it: some lamps burn brighter than others, so the greatest illumination can be obtained with a smaller number of lamps.

So where is Edgeworth's error? Analytical egalitarianism seems to argue that Edgeworth goes awry by assuming a substantive inequality—here, inequality in hedonic capacity. The assumption of this substantive difference tempts Edgeworth to inflate difference into hierarchy, which then leads to eugenics.

I am partly sympathetic to this view. My research on eugenics and economics also finds an unhappy connection between human difference and human hierarchy, even if the direction of cause is sometimes unclear. And, as a logical matter, the imposition of substantive equality can work to promote moral equality. In this respect, I tend to regard Peart and Levy as somewhat Rawlsian. John Rawls (1971) famously argued

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that social contractors made unaware of their substantive differences would be, thereby, led to bargain as moral equals. Analogously, for Peart and Levy, economists should proceed as if they were unaware of substantive differences across persons.

The rub is that Rawls's veil of ignorance was a thought experiment, an attempt to predict what would happen were rational contractors blinded to substantive differences. We are not so blinded. But nor need we be, since people with different hedonic capacities can be moral equals, just as people with different heights or different intellects can be moral equals. The moral egalitarian says: "I may not be as smart as you are, or as hard working as you are, or as happy as you are, but I am just as good as you are."

My view, then, is that Edgeworth's error is to conflate an empirically contingent claim about substantive equality—some people have greater hedonic capacity than others—with a claim about moral equality. That Abel is better than Baker at turning consumption into utility does not entail that Abel is morally better than Baker. In fact, in the end, Edgeworth's utilitarianism does not say every person is to count as one, it says, rather, every *util* is to count as one.

Put somewhat differently, Rawls's veil-of-ignorance device may be sufficient, but it is not necessary for moral equality. One can argue for moral equality without believing or methodologically assuming that people are entirely homogeneous. To paraphrase Ronald Dworkin's (1977) famous distinction: there is a difference between treating people as moral equals and treating people equally.

Peart and Levy opt to elide the distinction between substantive equality and moral equality. It shows in the book's varying characterizations of what they call "human homogeneity." People are equal because they possess "equal competence" (p. xi) or "homogeneous competence" or because they have the "same potential," or an equal capacity for language and trade, or a "capacity for individual choice" (p. 18), or "the ability to sympathize" (p. 19) or a "homogenous capacity for pleasure" (p. 216) or are "equally capable of making decisions" (p. xv). Sometimes homogeneity comes from the fact that people rationally "respond to incentives" (pp. 35-36) or from a fixity of human nature or from "motivational homogeneity" (p. 108).

That there is such heterogeneity in Peart and Levy's characterization of human homogeneity reveals something of the manifold ways in which people can be substantively different. Consider the unequal distribution of human capital. Must recognizing differences in human capital lead the scholar to human hierarchy? I think not (though it does suggest the dangers of making moral equality hostage to some empirically contingent kind of substantive equality). Rawls, a moral egalitarian, interpreted human capital differences not as evidence of hierarchy but, to the contrary, as an ethical mandate for a more egalitarian distribution.

This last point returns us to Edgeworth. One notable feature of hierarchical thought is that its human hierarchies, as Peart and Levy document, are most often hierarchies of groups, not of individuals. Like countless others, Edgeworth identified human difference with human groups, that is, he judged individuals by their putative membership in morally arbitrary categories, such as race or sex or ethnicity.

When Vilfredo Pareto was casting around for an explanation for his famous law of income distribution, he entertained but ultimately rejected the scientific racism of anthropologist Otto Ammon, a prolific measurer of human heads. Pareto concluded that not all human differences were reducible to racial or other group differences.

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Even if the human differences that explained difference in income were somehow innate, Pareto argued, they need not be racial or otherwise collective in origin. In this sense, it was Edgeworth's prior belief in hierarchy (of races) that led him to difference (in hedonic capacity), rather than the other way around.

The problem then is not human difference *per se* but the confusion of human difference with moral inequality, and, further, the tendency to map human difference upon morally arbitrary and invidious categories, such as race or sex or ethnicity.

II. ADAM SMITH, ANALYTICAL EGALITARIAN?

All of this goes to the question of whether Adam Smith will serve as an exemplar of analytical egalitarian. The philosopher's vanity in Smith's parable is to think that he is better than the street porter, when, in fact, he is merely better trained. For Smith, philosophers and street porters are moral equals. But the philosopher and the street porter are substantively unequal. Their substantive differences are not innate, but the product of different life chances. Smith attacked not difference but *innate* difference. His humane approach notwithstanding, Smith does not follow Peart and Levy's methodological injunction to assume human homogeneity.

And, on the question of innate difference, Smith is not entirely a (substantive) egalitarian, even with respect to the leveling aspects of sympathy. Peart and Levy, say, correctly, ''for Smith, man becomes a moral agent by *earning* . . . approbation'' (p. 137, emphasis added). Here they confront a central issue for scholars of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: how does the desire for approbation lead to moral behavior, that is, to behavior that merits approbation? How does Smith get from mere moral conformity to moral autonomy? He posits another desire, the desire for self-approval (self-approbation), the desire not merely to be seen by others to be doing good, but the desire to see oneself doing good. Importantly, Smith did not believe that the desire for self-approval was equally distributed—it is, he said, less well developed in some than in others. Many, Smith argued, ascend the ladder of virtue only to the point of wanting praise rather than wanting to be deserving of praise.

It is fair to say that Adam Smith believed in the moral equality of persons. But Adam Smith did not assume human homogeneity. This reminds us that substantive equality and moral equality are different concepts, and also that Adam Smith, at least, did not need complete human homogeneity to arrive at moral equality.

III. CHARLES DARWIN: PERFECTOR OF THE RACE?

The egalitarians, Smith and Mill, are the heroes of *The Vanity of the Philosopher*; the hierarchicalists, Carlyle and the eugenicists, play the villains. Unexpectedly, perhaps, Peart and Levy cast Charles Darwin among the villains, the same Darwin who had joined forces with Mill to bring to justice John Eyre, the colonial governor of Jamaica who perpetrated a massacre of Jamaicans. Peart and Levy rightly rescue Herbert Spencer from the common but preposterous charge that the most strenuous partisan of limited government advocated state control of human breeding. In so doing, however, they relocate Darwin.

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The Darwin of *Vanity* admires the eugenicists Francis Galton and W. R. Greg, who said that ''natural selection should trump sympathy'' (pp. 13, 62); Darwin proposes to substitute ''perfection of the race'' (p. 217) for the Smithian instinct of sympathy; Darwin's goal ''entailed biological perfection or hierarchy'' (p. 210), and Darwin, it is insinuated, even comes down on the side of ''evolution directed by scientific authority'' (p. 217). In this, the authors come close to suggesting Darwin was a eugenicist.

This reading overstates the case. First, ''perfection of the race,'' or even ''perfection'' are not terms Darwin used to describe evolution by natural selection. They are mostly absent from *The Descent of Man*, and the *Origin of Species*, it is worth remembering, omits consideration of the human species altogether.[2] Darwin-industry scholars contend over the matter of whether Darwin ultimately saw evolution as non-teleological change or as progressive change, but ''perfection,'' with its implications of *optimal* progress and of *directed* progress, is too strong of a gloss on Darwin's view of evolution.

Second, I think it misleads to associate Darwin with opposition to Smithian sympathy as such. It is true that Darwin, in *the Descent of Man,* has admiring things to say about eugenicists Galton and Greg and their concern that ''the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind'' (1874, p. 136). But it is also true that Darwin, a few sentences later, says that human beings cannot check our ''instinct for sympathy'' without ''deterioration in the noblest part of our nature'' (1874, p. 136). If ''we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless,'' Darwin continues, ''it could only be for a contingent benefit, with a certain and great present evil.'' Hence, says Darwin, ''we must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and perpetuating'' (1874, p. 136-37).[3] Darwin says human beings are sympathetic and ought to be.

These qualifications made, however, Peart and Levy register an important historical point: Darwin (privately) opposed birth control during the famous Bradlaugh-Besant trial, on grounds that birth control reduced the amount of material on which natural selection could work. Does Darwin's opposition to birth control amount to eugenics, or to ''directed evolution''? And does it require human hierarchy? I am not completely persuaded by the tantalizingly limited evidence, but let us stipulate that Darwin opposed contraception on grounds it impeded natural selection.

Subsequent eugenicists, such as economist Irving Fisher, opposed not contraception per se, but ''laissez-faire contraception,'' on grounds it was dysgenic (that is, selecting for the unfit)—the better classes use birth control, while their inferiors do not. Margaret Sanger made the identical argument in *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922)

[2]Peart and Levy say ''Darwin *explicitly* denied that human foresight . . . can successfully counteract the struggle for existence'' (p. 222), and cite a passage from *The Origin of Species*. But the *Origin* famously omits consideration of human beings.

[3]Partly this is because Darwin equivocated upon the extent to which sympathy and other moral sentiments are themselves the product of natural selection, saying in his valedictory to *The Descent of Man*: ''Important as the struggle for existence has been and even still is, yet as far as the highest part of man's nature is concerned there are other agencies more important. For the moral qualities are advanced, either directly or indirectly, much more through the effects of habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, &c., than through natural selection; though to this latter agency the social instincts, which afforded the basis for the development of the moral sense, may be safely attributed'' (1874, p. 633).

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and elsewhere. Fisher and Sanger, among many others, believed that birth control could prove eugenic, but only if the state planned who would use it. Darwin, a Whig from an abolitionist family, certainly would not have abided this state planning of human breeding. Darwin, unlike Fisher or Sanger, is not proposing to "direct" human evolution in the sense "eugenics" connoted in the three or four decades following Darwin's death in 1882.

The difference between the eugenicists' artificial selection and Darwinian natural selection also goes to the question of hierarchy. Darwinian natural selection is random variation and natural selection; eugenics is purposeful variation and rational selection. The eugenicist judges fitness *ex ante*, thus do Fisher and Sanger want to limit the fertility of those they deem inferior—immigrants, the working class, etc. Darwin, in contrast, would judge fitness *ex post*—who survives and reproduces is fittest, whatever class or race they are deemed to belong to. Thus Darwin wants *not* to limit the fertility of groups later eugenicists identified with biological inferiority. There is a difference between believing that natural selection by evolution is progressive in some dimensions, and, in the case of the eugenicists, the central planning of human heredity, what Peart and Levy call "picking losers for sterilization." Eugenics, we should remember, was often predicated on the failure or inefficiency of Darwinian natural selection.

But, even if Darwin did not propose to direct human evolution and even if there is a difference between hierarchy as assumption and the idea of biological progress, can we still, as Peart and Levy imply, regard Darwin as a eugenicist? After all, the authors might rejoin, Darwin would ban contraception, that is, use state power to interfere in the reproductive choices of individuals. And here Peart and Levy make a powerful point, one that goes to the central question, "what is eugenics?"

IV. EUGENICS: WHO SHALL SELECT THE FITTEST?

Both the authors and I have experienced a stock critical response to the eugenics and economics literature, along the lines of "but surely everyone was a racist in the nineteenth century, so why is eugenics surprising?" One reply is that racism is neither necessary nor sufficient for eugenics. Racism is not necessary because there are examples of eugenic policies that were avowedly (at least) non-racist, such as those in mid-twentieth century Scandinavia. Racism is not sufficient either: racism was indeed widespread, but some governments (generally in Catholic societies) did not enact eugenic laws. Two things follow: first, not all human hierarchies are racist—the Swedish eugenicists, for example, were mostly concerned with the costs to the welfare state of those they judged mentally defective. Second, the belief in human hierarchy may well be pervasive, but eugenic policy requires governments able and willing to act upon belief in human hierarchy.

The last point corresponds to the second link in Peart and Levy's causal chain: difference leads to hierarchy and hierarchy leads to eugenics. Analytical egalitarianism breaks the causal chain by proposing to undo the first link—to eliminate, by methodological fiat, human difference. Historically, as opposed to analytically, the key to the second link was the innovation that made it possible to turn eugenic thought into eugenic practice, that is, to turn hierarchy into eugenics—the rise of the

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welfare state. Francis Galton (1904) was an old man when the English finally began taking seriously the eugenic notions he had first advanced forty years prior.

Another critical response to the eugenics and economics literature asks, ''what exactly is wrong with eugenics, anyway?'' The more thoughtful of these critics point out that some arguably eugenic choices—the parents who abort a fetus revealed to be chromosomally abnormal, for example—generally are not concerned with human hierarchy *per se*. I concur (Leonard 2005): there is a difference between central planning to improve human heredity and parental choice with respect to their own progeny. A broad definition of eugenics—say, all choices with consequences that improve human heredity—elides this distinction. Human beings marry and procreate and raise children (or don't); these human actions unavoidably have consequences for human heredity. The important question, the one the Peart and Levy are engaging, is: ''who decides,'' or, as I have elsewhere put it: ''*who* shall select the fittest?''

It makes little historical sense to define as eugenics any and all actions that improve human heredity. For the eugenicists of the Progressive Era saw their project as the *social control* of human heredity—that is, as the compulsory substitution of state expertise for individual choice with respect to marriage and reproduction. Eugenic experts, with their faith in their own disinterestedness as a reliable guide to the social good, and with their faith in the science of human hierarchy, coerced in the name of eugenics.

V. CONCLUSION

Let us step out the trees in order to better see the forest of what Levy and Peart have accomplished. First, they remind us of the important role assumptions about human equality play not just in political but also economic thought. Plato and Aristotle's defense of slavery and other forms of what they saw as natural hierarchy was connected to their aristocratic hostility to trade, which they saw as fit only for inferiors, such as slaves or foreigners. The connection between hostility to trade and prejudice toward putative inferiors runs deep in the history of political economy (Coleman 2002).

Second, Peart and Levy remind us that liberal capitalism has been criticized not just by the Left, but also by the Right. The same historiographic alchemy that has transformed radicals like Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill into conservatives has also made reactionaries like Thomas Carlyle into honorary members of the Left. Carlyle and the other Romantic critics of capitalism were not concerned with the welfare of the industrial poor, but rather with their perceived threat to the social order. Levy and Peart have excavated an important conservative critique of capitalism, which emphasizes not distributive justice, but the threat to traditional order. Their excavation helps us to understand better the origins of today's false dichotomy that places all of capitalism's critics on the Left and all its defenders on the Right.

Third, they remind us of the powerful influence of biological thought upon political economy at the advent of the welfare state. Without abandoning the American ethos of human improvement, or its distinctly moralizing language, American Progressive Era economics, for example, recast spiritual or moral inadequacy as biological inadequacy. Virtue and vice were remade from matters of character into matters of heredity.

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The history of recent economic thought has focused upon the mathematization of economics, and the influence of information science, operations research and government funding upon mid-twentieth century economics. Philip Mirowski and Esther-Mirjam Sent, Judy Klein, Roy Weintraub, and others have begun to piece together this important story. But Anglo-American economics became an expert policy science before it became a mathematical science. It was biology more than physics that influenced American economic reform when economics professionalized in the Progressive Era, and when it advocated the power to socially control human heredity.

Finally, *The Vanity of the Philosopher* continues Peart and Levy's innovative use of images from popular Victorian sources—satirical cartoons, advertising, and caricatures in the Hogarthian vein, such as those by illustrator George Cruikshank. Even the book's many and extended quotations are almost as architectural as they are textual. The images are one of the pleasures of the book, but they do not merely decorate. The images themselves, we see, helped do the work of promoting hierarchy and of attacking political economy. Victorian political economy mattered enough to be condemned in tobacco advertising. ''Picture that,'' Peart and Levy say to twenty-first century readers, and you can, because they have.

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