Beyond the Search for the Subject:
An Anti-Essentialist Ontology for Liberal Democracy

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Abstract: Reading Foucault's work on power and subjectivity alongside "developmentalist" approaches to evolutionary biology, this paper endorses poststructuralist critiques of political ideals grounded in the value of subjective agency. Many political theorists embrace such critiques, of course, but those who do are often skeptical of liberal democracy, and even of normative theory itself. By contrast, those who are left to theorize liberal democracy tend to reject or ignore poststructuralist insights, and have continued to employ dubious ontological assumptions regarding human agents. Against both groups, I argue that Foucault's poststructuralism must be taken seriously, but that it is ultimately consistent with normative theory and liberal democracy. Linking poststructuralist attempts to transcend the dichotomy between agency and structure with recent efforts by evolutionary theorists to dissolve a similarly stubborn opposition between nature and nurture, I develop an anti-essentialist account of human nature and agency that vindicates poststructuralist criticism while enabling a novel defense of liberal democracy.

Key Words: Agency, Power, Freedom, Subjectivity, Poststructuralism, Foucault, Evolutionary Biology

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Introduction

Though it is seldom openly discussed, few would deny that a profound schism structures the practice of contemporary political theory. Scholars with broadly "liberal" commitments and "analytic" methods share journals, conferences, and departments with colleagues working in "critical" and "continental" traditions, yet meaningful engagement across paradigms is strikingly rare. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of the so-called "death of the subject" proclaimed by poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault. Where many in critical traditions (and the humanities more broadly) understand this development as foundational,[1] "analytic liberals" typically dismiss it as a self-defeating species of relativism. As a result, they continue to employ (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) an account of human agency that is understood by their colleagues as thoroughly discredited.[2]

The present essay seeks to bridge this divide. My strategy—unorthodox, if not entirely unprecedented[3]—is to clarify and extend Foucault's one of key insights with reference to recent work in evolutionary biology. This synthesis enables an account of human agency that is consistent with poststructuralist critiques, yet serviceable for constructive normative theories of liberal democracy. Against many "analytic liberals," then, I insist that Foucault's poststructuralism has important implications for normative theory. Unlike many of its adherents, however, I maintain that it is consistent with the sort of generalized normative theory typical of the analytic tradition, and can even provide an alternative basis for endorsing liberal ideals and institutions.[4]

My key innovation is to draw parallels between two familiar conceptual oppositions—agency vs. structure and nature vs. nurture—which persist despite decades of attempts to transcend them. Both dichotomies are widely acknowledged as misconceived, yet both continue to structure popular as well as academic discourse, and in my view, their stubborn persistence has a common culprit. Along with many related oppositions—such as freedom vs. power and biology vs.

culture—both rely on a more fundamental dichotomy between "internal" and "external" sources of human action; whereby internal sources like "agency," "freedom," "nature," and "biology" are understood as more essential to human beings than external sources like "structure," "power," "nurture," and "culture." Theorists disagree vehemently, of course, about the proper location of the boundary between internal and external. In accepting the terms of this dichotomy, however, they retain a more basic *ontological essentialism*: a deeply intuitive sense that human beings must have some bounded and coherent core—whether it is an autonomous will, a capacity for reason, or an "uberbiological" genetic code (Frost, 2016)—which defines humanness and grounds the diversity among us.

What poststructuralism shares with recent developments in evolutionary theory, then, is that both seek to finally transcend this boundary rather than redrawing it once again—i.e., to develop a genuinely *anti-essentialist* ontology. However, alternative accounts of the sources of human action developed by poststructuralists have not been broadly compelling. As a result, many observers have concluded that rather than escaping the dichotomy, poststructuralism simply dissolves agents into deterministic power structures. By contrast, researchers in "developmental systems theory" (DST) and related biological paradigms (including the more recent "extended evolutionary synthesis" or EES) have achieved greater success in replacing the equally stubborn opposition between nature and nurture with a more compelling alternative account of the development of biological entities such as human beings. In short, then, I suggest that political theorists ought to learn from their example.

As this summary indicates, my argument reinforces the growing demand for a return to questions of *ontology* in normative political theory—i.e., questions about what human beings really *are* (Floyd, 2015; Frost, 2016; Rosenthal, 2016; White, 2000). Ontological questions tend

to blur the line between empirical and normative inquiry, and this has often induced theorists to avoid them. In their quest for neutrality between metaphysical or comprehensive doctrines, most famously, Rawls and many of his followers have explicitly sought to sidestep such questions. And while diverse critics have contested this move, arguing that it simply conceals hegemonic assumptions, most have stopped short of offering their own conceptions of human nature, thereby adopting a similar pose of ontological neutrality.[5] Instead of defaulting to this unsustainable pretense, I argue, we should admit that ontology is unavoidable, and endeavor to develop the best account. That is what I attempt in what follows.

I begin by reviewing the attempts of Foucault and other poststructuralists to transcend the agency-structure dichotomy and the essentialist ontology it implies. I then pose two common objections to Foucault's approach—those of scientific and moral relativism—which frame the latter two sections of the essay. By way of answering the charge of scientific relativism, I turn next to the efforts of evolutionary theorists to transcend the opposition between nature and nurture, elaborating the "developmentalist" perspective and exploring how it supports an anti-essentialist account of human ontology (like the one sought by poststructuralists). Finally, I respond to the charge of moral relativism by demonstrating briefly how this ontology could be used to defend certain of the ideals and institutions of liberal democracy.

The search for the subject

In this section, I clarify the specific poststructuralist innovation I seek to defend—often called the "death of the subject"—by contextualizing it within familiar debates about freedom and power. More specifically, I identify three clusters of views associated with the "three faces of power" familiar from Robert Dahl (1957), Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962), and Steven Lukes (1974); pairing each with corresponding views of freedom. Each redraws the boundary between

trustworthy internal subjects and suspicious external constraints while retaining some sort of dichotomy—thus engaging in a perpetual search for the authentic, essential core of human agency. In this context, some have understood Foucault as articulating a "fourth face" of power (Digeser, 1992), but as I explore below, his contribution is more accurately described as "de-facing" power (Hayward, 2000): i.e., rejecting the agency-structure dichotomy which motivates the other views, and the "search for the subject" it implies.

Three concepts of liberty, three faces of power

We may begin with the "classically" liberal views memorably articulated by Isaiah Berlin and Robert Dahl. Famously, Berlin (1969) defends a conception of "negative" liberty: i.e., "the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity" (122), otherwise known as "non-interference." As long as I do not interfere with the free actions of others, the argument goes, I should be left to pursue my *own* ends, similarly free of interference. As others have noted, then, this account corresponds neatly to the definition of power developed by Dahl (1957): i.e., that A exercises power over B when A gets B to do something that B would not otherwise have done. Where Dahl's power consists in getting an individual to make a choice he would not have made otherwise, Berlin's freedom consists in the absence of such interference with individual choice. In both cases, we see a clear opposition between a willing, choosing subject—whose free choices are valued—and the interferences of others, which may constrain the will of that subject to varying degrees. Agency *qua* choice, in other words, is opposed to structure *qua* interference.

In subsequent decades, many have contested these definitions of freedom and power; preferring to draw different boundaries between choosing subjects and external constraints. As Philip Pettit argues in his republican account of freedom as non-domination, for instance, Berlin's definition of freedom as non-interference fails to capture threats to freedom from suspicious power

relations (such as those between men and women or managers and workers) when they do not result in *actual* interference; ignoring the harm to agency caused by the dominating party's *capacity* to interfere arbitrarily (1997: 22–24). Bachrach and Baratz (1962), then, make a parallel argument about Dahl's definition of power; claiming that Dahl's focus on "decision-making" ignores (and thereby conceals) the problem of agenda control, which they call the "second face" of power. Where Berlin and Dahl focus on choices that are actually made, then, Pettit as well as Bachrach and Baratz focus on the choices *behind* the choices; on interference not only as exercised in moments of choice, but as embedded in choice architecture. At the same time, both retain choice and interference as their fundamental categories; revising but not replacing the classical liberal opposition between the free choice of a willing subject and the interference of others. Thus, we may fairly give this second cluster the label of "revisionist" liberalism.

Many views that may be called "radical," by contrast, reject autonomous choice and intentional interference as the appropriate normative categories. Nancy Hirschmann (2003: 29), for instance, claims that Pettit's understanding of freedom "fails to provide a framework for understanding how it is that social forces like patriarchy are able to restrict women's freedom." Patriarchy is not limited to relationships of domination where particular people actively block women's choices; it also "create[s] an entire cultural context that makes women seem to choose what they are in fact restricted to" (11). Some "restrictions," that is, appear "internal" to choosing subjects, rather than imposed upon them by an external source. Yet this is only an appearance: in reality, they *are* external impositions, even if they are not traceable to any particular agent, and even if they do not obviously "interfere" with the subject's apparently free choices.

In debates about power, this view is canonically expressed by Steven Lukes (1974), who proposes a "third face" of power: i.e., A's ability to influence B's preferences. This is often known

as “ideological” power (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971), and is sometimes said to impose a “false consciousness” upon otherwise free agents. Though originally developed by Marxist analysts of class, theorists motivated by issues including gender, race, religion, colonialism, and disability have also found this insight useful; contesting the assumption that choice is the central vehicle for the expression of subjectivity, and that coercion and interference are the only harms which must be addressed through politics. Liberalism, such critics argue, imposes a particular conception of agency upon subjects (typically, rational autonomy), while failing to recognize the forms of agency exercised by non-hegemonic groups (such as women, non-whites, or non-Christians). Meanwhile, liberal rights protect subjects from certain coercive threats to their agency while ignoring those posed by subtler forms of power (including patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalist ideology). Many radical critics thus object not to the broader goal of liberating subjects, in other words, but to the particular form of subjectivity that liberals have emphasized.

Despite other departures from liberal assumptions, that is, many radical views retain an ontological framework which figures the basic political task as the protection of subjects from external impositions. Such views are sometimes called “structuralist,” because they insist that apparently free choices may really be determined by broader structural forces. Yet most structuralists do not altogether abandon the search for an authentic subject beneath these impositions. Though structure *often* overwhelms agency, it is claimed, agency may still be recovered—and in this way, even many radical views replicate the agency-structure dichotomy.

Clarissa Hayward (2000: 4) points out, for instance, that all three positions in the “faces of power” debate perpetuate the notion of a boundary between free action—which is “independently chosen and/or authentic”—and action that has been “shaped by the action of others,” and have disputed only “where and how to draw this distinction” (15). Participants have proliferated what

counts as power—i.e., as an external constraint on freedom—while embracing Dahl's more fundamental assumption that power is "an instrument powerful agents use or direct in order to alter the free action of the powerless" (14).

More broadly, Diana Coole (2005) summarizes, diverse discourses about agency reliably "gravitate towards a stubborn opposition—where agents will either be free or they will be constituted or determined by external forces…" (125). As she demonstrates, even theorists like Habermas and Giddens—who offer an "interactive model" of the relationship between agents and structures, and who explicitly reject the "philosophy of the subject"—remain "transfixed by concerns about the freedom or limits of agents" (135). This, she observes, is "a legacy of the dualistic formula in which the controversy is typically presented. Once agents and structures are theoretically dichotomised, the challenge is to discover what links them" (135-6). On Coole's reading, indeed, not even Bourdieu's "distinction between *habitus* and field manages to avoid the dualism inherent in the agency-vs-structure (subjective-vs-objective) formula" (137). What distinguishes Foucault and other poststructuralists, then, is their decisive rejection of this dualism.

Foucault and the death of the subject

On the poststructuralist view, the normative goal characteristic of liberalism and its radical heirs—i.e., liberating subjects from external impositions—requires an unsustainable ontological distinction between agency and structure. More specifically, Foucault argues, a conception of power as "constraining" otherwise autonomous subjects is incomplete at best, and dangerous at worst. In reality, power may be "productive" (Foucault, 2001d: 120). Far from having an independent existence which can be limited or repressed to varying degrees by inauthentic external influences, therefore, each individual subject "is in fact a power-effect" (Foucault, 2003b: 29–30), necessarily *constituted* by such "external" influences. In light of this, the goal of liberating an

authentic subject from external constraints simply blinds us to the dangers posed by *productive* forms of power; i.e., the processes by which individuals "constitute themselves as subjects," forming habits, identities, and perspectives. Though these processes are often highly suspicious—as when women or people of color are habituated to deference and inferiority, for instance—they are actively concealed by exclusively repressive conceptions of power. Because "subjectification" affects one's internal experience, rather than appearing as an external barrier to one's agency, the resulting subordination is *naturalized*; i.e., rendered normal and thus unrecognizable as injustice.

We have already encountered a similar point from "radicals" like Hirschmann and Lukes, of course: just as patriarchy and ideology are particularly insidious forms of power—leading oppressed subjects to believe they are free—"productive" power is all the more dangerous for appearing internal to subjects. For Foucault, however, the Marxist notion of ideology ultimately mimics liberal conceptions of power, in that it is primarily *repressive* rather than *creative* of the subject: "ideology is a sort of negative element through which… the subject's relation to truth… is clouded, obscured, violated by conditions of existence, social relations, or the political forms imposed on the subject of knowledge from the outside" (Foucault, 2001c: 15). In imagining that ideology imposes a discrete set of false beliefs upon subjects, Marxists and others using a similar framework are still focused on the possibility of liberating the *truly* authentic subject; i.e., that which survives the extirpation of false beliefs. But Foucault is suspicious of this notion of liberation, which

> …runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive

> deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full and positive relationship with himself (Foucault, 1998: 282).

Consider, for instance, that few racialized or colonized subjects explicitly believe themselves to be racially inferior. Nevertheless, "knowledge" of their "inferiority" can become embedded in their experience of the world, their habits and practices, and the narratives through which they understand their lives (Fanon, 2008). Of course, white subjectivity is no more separable from power relations, even if white subjects are thereby advantaged rather than disadvantaged. The point is that there is no *normal* or *natural* subjectivity that is then *distorted* by prejudice. Rather, subjectivity is *always already* what Foucault calls a "power-effect." No matter how many layers of ideology we excavate, that is, our subjectivity cannot be considered as an independent, trustworthy source of authentic will or undistorted reason. That, then, is what is meant by the "death of the subject."

Of course, many theorists working within critical and continental traditions have already accepted some version of this insight. At the same time, however, the goal of liberating subjects from external constraints clearly retains a dominant presence in contemporary political theory and philosophy—especially among those who seek to articulate constructive general principles for the defense and reform of liberal-democratic institutions. Many who accept Foucault's critique are skeptical of liberal ideals, and even of normative theory itself, and have generally left the theorization of liberal democracy to "analytic liberals" who reject or ignore it. That is where this essay intervenes: unlike most who accept the death of the subject, I am committed to constructive normative theories of liberal democracy. Unlike most who are left to craft such theories, however,

I think we must take that development seriously. My goal, then, is to break this deadlock; clearing the way for a defense of liberal democracy that truly escapes the perpetual search for the subject.

In particular, it seems to me that the failure of many theorists to appreciate the significance of this poststructuralist insight can be traced to the appeal of two common objections. The first holds that poststructuralism eviscerates any basis for scientific knowledge and belongs to the pernicious category of scientific "relativism." The second charges poststructuralists with "moral" rather than "scientific" relativism, claiming that in the absence of any ideal of authentic subjective agency, we have no reason to value anything about liberal democracy (or, perhaps, anything at all). I formulate my argument in the rest of the essay, then, as a response to these objections.

Evolved plasticity: An anti-essentialist account of human nature

Is Foucault's approach anti-scientific?

We may begin with the insinuation that Foucault's critical studies of various scientific practices imply indiscriminate hostility toward all scientific inquiry. Though provocateurs claiming Foucault's authority have sometimes made claims to this effect, Foucault himself was clear: the fact that power relations structure a given scientific practice does not categorically invalidate its results.[6] Regardless of what Foucault thought, more importantly, there is no *inherent* contradiction between the practice of science and the particular poststructuralist commitment I have defended.

Foucault was right, of course, to reject simplistic views of science as a monolithic, authoritative body of knowledge. Along with that of countless other sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of science, his work reveals science as a socially and politically constructed practice, inescapably structured by relations of power. And while few would explicitly endorse a caricature of science as infallible, in practice this sort of reminder constantly proves necessary. Especially when the topic of study is human beings, it seems, the spell cast by scientific language can be quite

dangerous. For his part, indeed, Foucault was particularly critical of the "human sciences"; repeatedly demonstrating how their claims to authoritative knowledge have served to create and sustain regimes of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1988, 2003b).

Precisely because science is not a monolithic entity, however, condemning its oppressive moments hardly implies a wholesale rejection of its methods. After all, these methods have also given us particularly clear and systematic *refutations* of racist lies; refutations supported by troves of publicly available evidence (Marks, 2017). We should never invest science or scientists with unquestioned authority, therefore, and we should always look out for particular power formations which cast doubt on particular scientific results. This evaluation, however, must be made on a case-by-case basis. All scientific practice is structured by power, but as Foucault clearly acknowledged, not all scientific knowledge is therefore invalidated. Blanket skepticism is just as unwarranted as blanket trust.

More nuanced critics might offer a different complaint, then: not that Foucault's approach is anti-scientific, but that its skeptical stance towards human nature renders it specifically anti-*biological*. On this account, the "death of the subject" implies cultural determinism, denying the obvious significance of innate dispositions. There is, admittedly, a sliver of truth here. Foucauldians and others keen to emphasize the "social construction" of human practices typically shy away from the concept of human nature. I disagree with this choice: in my view, the best response to pernicious accounts is not to reject the concept altogether, thereby defaulting to a kind of ontological neutrality, but to provide a better one. Nevertheless, their reluctance to use the term is understandable, given the layers of domination littering its history. Regardless of the terminology employed, more importantly, the death of the subject is not incompatible with the

scientific study of human biology. Indeed, I shall argue, the anti-essentialist ontology it implies can draw support as well as clarification from recent developments in biology.

First, poststructuralist skepticism of an essentialized "Human Nature" does not deny the embodied, biological character of human existence. Nor does it imply the impotence of bodily "agency" in the face of the overwhelming power of social and cultural forces. For Foucault and key followers like Judith Butler (1989), bodies are shaped by power while also offering "resistance" to it. What is really at stake, then, is not the idea of a *causally efficacious* body—which poststructuralists clearly accept—but the idea of a *pre-political* body; a body that is "more natural" than others. Thus, what Butler and Foucault are concerned to establish in their celebrated accounts of sexuality (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1988) is the impossibility of identifying a purely "natural" form of sexual desire, which has been liberated from social repression and is thus fully authentic. This hardly means that biological bodies play *no* causal role in producing subjective desire: their role is just vastly more complex than that of a "natural" or "pre-political" body reacting to the "artificial" impositions of culture. What must be contested on poststructuralist accounts, then, is not the concept of a biological human nature as such, but only a particular account of its relationship to culture, which regards the former as a set of innate, essential features that can be identified and analyzed independently of their contingent interactions with the latter.

Yet as Butler acknowledges (1989), there is a genuine puzzle here: how can we understand the causal role of biological bodies without conceiving them as pre-political? More broadly, how can we avoid cultural determinism without reviving the ideal of autonomous, authentic subjectivity? The *post*-structuralism of Butler and Foucault has sometimes been read as an extreme form of *structuralism*—dissolving agency altogether within vast networks of power (Meehan, 2016). Conversely, Foucault has been variously commended and criticized for retreating from this ultra-

structuralism in later work depicting "care for the self" as a practice of freedom (Coole, 2005: 127). Indeed, the apparent ambivalence of both Foucault and Butler on these questions has "puzzled even friendly critics" of poststructuralism (Coole, 2005: 127).

In my view, we should not read Foucault and Butler as equivocating about the agency-structure dichotomy they clearly and consistently sought to transcend. It is more charitable and more theoretically productive to understand them instead as struggling, with mixed success, to articulate a genuinely non-dichotomous understanding of the sources of human action—a difficult endeavor, given how deeply embedded that dichotomy is within our language and culture. Thus, the task which remains is simply to consummate their efforts. Indeed, Coole has begun to do so; building on Foucault's preliminary sketches to articulate a theory of "variable agentic capacities" which "emerge from" and are "immanent to" a particular social field (2005: 138) rather than standing apart from and opposed to it. In the rest of this section, then, I argue that contemporary biology can provide further resources to support this project. More specifically, recent efforts to transcend the similarly stubborn nature-nurture dichotomy in biology have generated a compelling and resolutely anti-essentialist framework for understanding the sources of human action, which can help us appreciate the distinctive nature of poststructuralist claims in the social and political realm.

Before I continue, however, a clarification is in order concerning my engagement with science. Given that science is fallible, socially constructed, and non-monolithic, it never has a single "lesson" to offer, which can be treated as a foundation for normative theory. This is especially true for the research I discuss, which still generates disagreement within the scientific community. The lesson I draw from it, then, is not the only one that could be drawn, and the point of doing so is not to "prove" poststructuralism. Instead, biological research constitutes one form of evidence about

the human condition, which must be integrated with others (see Bagg, 2016)—and it is precisely this sort of integration that I attempt in what follows.

The mirage of a space between nature and nurture

As the historian and philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller (2010) observes, there is a confounding universe of questions implied by the familiar opposition between "nature" and "nurture"—some of which are scientifically legitimate. Children typically "inherit" both a *general* capacity to develop language and the ability to speak a *particular* language from their parents, for example, and there is a real difference between these two mechanisms of inheritance. The way we describe and explain such differences, however, is fraught with ambiguity and confusion. In particular, Keller shows, dichotomies pitting nature vs. nurture, biology vs. culture, and gene vs. environment have long been criticized by biologists as inaccurate.

On one interpretation, such dichotomies are simply nonsensical. Just as it would make no sense to ask how much of a drumming sound is caused by the drummer, and how much by the drum; it makes no sense to ask how much of a trait is caused by genetics (or nature, or biology), and how much by the environment (or nurture, or culture). Just as drum and drummer are both required to produce a drumming sound, that is, gene and environment are both required conditions for the production of every "biological" trait.

What we *can* sensibly ask is how much of the *variation* across several drumming sounds is caused by variation in drums, and how much by variation in drummers. Even then, however, we can only give a straightforward answer if there is no interaction between the two variables: i.e., if the performance of each drummer does not depend upon which drum he is using. In the case of genes and environment, then, it is sensible to *ask* how much of the variation in some trait within a population is caused by variation in genes, and how much is caused by variation in environment.

In practice, however, we cannot usually give a satisfying *answer*, thanks to the complexity of gene-environment interactions across the biological world. Indeed, as it has become more and more difficult to dissociate "genes" from the epigenetic and environmental contexts which are required for their "expression," many biologists have abandoned the particulate gene concept altogether. Even when we can get an answer, moreover, it will depend on the broader (but still contingent) environmental context in which the entire population exists. As Keller summarizes, "the various factors involved in development…are so deeply intertwined, so profoundly interdependent, as to make any attempt to partition their causal influence simply meaningless" (4).

This much has, of course, been uncontroversial among biologists for decades. At least in theory, moreover, biologists largely agree that they confound familiar nature-nurture oppositions. Yet many scientists take little care to avoid reinforcing the salience of such dichotomies, Keller observes—much less science journalists and members of the general public. Indeed, she argues, they are so deeply ingrained in our language and culture that it is difficult for even the most scrupulous biologists to avoid reproducing them. What Keller calls the "mirage" of a space between nature and nurture thus persists despite a century of advances in biological science which were supposed to put it to rest.

Nevertheless, demand for alternative conceptual frameworks is growing, as advances in fields like genomics and epigenetics continually enhance our grasp of the vast complexity of multi-level interaction throughout the natural world (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Carroll, 2006; Charney, 2012; Overton, 2013; West-Eberhard, 2003). Most recently, this has resulted in the declaration of a wide-ranging "extended evolutionary synthesis" (EES) (Fuentes, 2016; Laland et al., 2015; Mesoudi et al., 2013; Pigliucci, 2007; Pigliucci and Müller, 2010). In contrast to the neo-Darwinian approaches associated with the "modern synthesis" (MS), newer approaches associated with the

EES highlight "constructive processes in development and evolution, and reciprocal portrayals of causation" (Laland et al., 2015: 1); and in studies of humans, the "myriad processes that constitute the moving target that is human existence" (Fuentes, 2016: S17).

In exploring the significance of these advances in biological theory, it will be useful to turn first to a slightly older framework known as "developmental systems theory" (DST) (Griffiths and Gray, 1994; Overton, 2013; Oyama, 1985, 2000; Oyama et al., 2003). The key insights of DST theorists have largely been incorporated within the broader EES paradigm, but because DST was targeted more directly at dissolving oppositions between nature and nurture, it still offers a more fruitful starting point for our inquiry here.[7] DST's key suggestion in this regard, then, is that we replace the dichotomous conception of "gene" vs. "environment" with the idea of a "developmental system": i.e., a "heterogeneous and causally complex mix of interacting entities and influences that produces the life cycle of an organism" (Oyama, 2000: 1).

By proliferating the number of causal factors beyond the traditional two, DST better reflects the multiple overlapping scales on which development and evolution are now understood to occur—including (at least) epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic dimensions (Jablonka and Lamb, 2005). It also replaces the conventional account of the "interaction" between those factors—which assumes "separate and independently defined organisms and environments"—with a more dynamic sense of "constructivist interaction" (Oyama, 2000: 3) or "interpenetration" (Lewontin, 1982). Biological entities, it seems—from genes to cells to bodies—are profoundly "porous," and cannot be conceived apart from continuous engagement with their environments, throughout their developmental histories (Frost, 2016; Meloni, 2014; Meloni et al., 2016).

On approaches foregrounding the importance of development, therefore (including DST as well as EES), there is no feature of biology that is not already environmental. For humans,

moreover, the environment engaged by our porous bodies throughout our development is decisively shaped by what is often called "culture"—from conception and gestation (via effects on our parents' gametes, diet, hormones, and so on) through death—and thus, there is no feature of human *biology* that is not already *cultural*. We must therefore reject the image of two separate causal forces trading off in relative importance, one of which is internal to the organism or genome—and is thus figured as more natural, essential, or controlling—and one which is contingent and external to it. Rather, we should foreground the complexity of the constructivist interaction between a shifting range of "interactants," including some traditionally understood as "internal," "genetic," "natural," or "biological" (such as DNA) as well as others often understood as "external," "environmental," "contingent," or "cultural." Where familiar biology-culture dichotomies imply a conception of human nature as a set of innate, essential features, in other words, a non-dichotomous developmental perspective urges the necessity of an anti-essentialist alternative (Dupré, 2011, 2014).

Of course, there are real differences between characteristics traditionally labeled "innate" and "acquired"—and crucially, developmental approaches do not prevent us from capturing those differences. As Keller suggests, for instance, we might reframe nonsensical questions about the relative contributions of gene and environment to particular traits as questions about the relative *plasticity* of traits (i.e., their openness to change) at various points in their developmental trajectories. Similarly, we might ask about the relative "openness" of the entire "trait-developing process," as proposed by Weinberg and Mallon (2006; 2008). If a trait develops in largely the same way throughout the range of normal environments, on this account, the trait-developing process can be fairly called "closed," and the trait itself can be safely called "innate"—even if the trait would not develop under highly abnormal conditions such as the deprivation of all water, light,

oxygen, or contact with conspecifics. The key to both approaches is that they are explicitly *pragmatic*—i.e., designed not to track an underlying essential nature but to provide useful predictions within a range of environmental variation considered to be "normal"—as well as *provisional*; avowedly dependent upon that contingent set of "normal" conditions. The work of generalization and prediction can thus proceed without invoking false, ontologically fraught oppositions between an essential (human) nature and the contingent forces of nurture.

Humans as biocultural creatures

For both scientific and ethical reasons, then, this shift in perspective is especially important when it comes to the study of human beings. First, the behavior of human beings exhibits variation that is especially broad and significant. Nearly everything about human beings exhibits significant *plasticity* at some stage of development, and correspondingly, hardly any behavioral characteristics can be safely considered "innate," even in Weinberg and Mallon's provisional sense. Because we create our own environments to a remarkable degree, moreover, even those traits which *appear* innate given the known range of environmental conditions may yet turn out to exhibit plasticity within novel environments we invent for ourselves.

This plasticity has long been recognized as a key selective advantage, setting human beings apart from other organisms. Dobzhansky and Montagu (1947: 590) observed, for instance, that it is the "plasticity of his mental traits which confers upon man the unique position he occupies in the animal kingdom," thereby "free[ing] him from the constraint of a limited range of biologically predetermined responses." Contemporary scholars routinely echo this sentiment, observing for instance that "the great evolutionary advantage of human beings is their ability to escape from the constraints of evolution" (Gopnik, 2010) and that "what human genes are about, most dramatically, is coding for ways in which you have freedom from the effects of genetics" (Sapolsky, 2010: 1:32).

As others have pointed out, however, the language of "freedom" and "escape" is misleading. Though both Gopnik and Sapolsky are attempting to undermine the distinction between biology and culture, their language unwittingly reinforces that distinction by implying that plasticity, adaptability, and culture are somehow *non*-biological, *non*-genetic, *non*-evolutionary.

Precisely the opposite is the case. The extraordinary adaptability of *Homo sapiens* is an evolved, biological capacity, reflected in our genetic material. Perhaps more importantly, human plasticity is not an entirely open-ended "freedom" or "escape" from behavioral regularities, such that each of us invents our responses to circumstances from scratch. What makes humans unique, rather, is that "we are the only species that acquires the rules of its daily living from the accumulated knowledge of our ancestors" (Pagel, 2013: 10).[8] Plasticity conveys an evolutionary advantage, that is, not simply because it allows us to adapt to new situations as they arise, but far more centrally because it disposes us to learn from one another in a cumulative fashion, eventually building and transmitting extremely complex sets of cultural practices. As a number of biologists have recently argued, then, we are not just evolved to be adaptable in some general sense; we are evolved specifically *to absorb culture* (Marks, 2012; Prinz, 2014; Read, 2011; Tomasello, 2014).

The idea of a generic human being is thus nonsensical in a much stronger sense than the idea of, say, a generic sunflower. Most sunflowers exhibit a narrow range of variation, because they are grown within a narrow range of environmental conditions that can safely be considered "normal." As such, it is possible to define a generic sunflower in terms of a cluster of features, each with a tractable range of developmental variation, which we might pragmatically and provisionally understand as the "nature" of sunflowers.

We cannot extend the same strategy, however, to generate even a pragmatic and provisional conception of a generic human being. As we have seen, first of all, there is no "normal" range of

cultural-environmental conditions within which to imagine a "normal" range of human beings; nor any single "primordial" environment to fall back on: *Homo sapiens* has been a constitutively cultural species as long as it has been a recognizable species (Marks, 2012). Because we continually create new cultural environments, finally, we could never be satisfied that we had captured the full range of environmental variation. As a result, we have powerful scientific reasons to reject and replace our intuitively essentialist conception of human nature as a set of innate capacities which become differentiated through encounters with various cultural environments—i.e., the conception which is implied and reinforced by nature-nurture, biology-culture, and gene-environment oppositions.

In addition, then, the persistent normative significance of the concept of human nature, as an *ontological* category, makes this task especially urgent. Whether or not the inference is logically valid, for instance, normative consequences are widely intuited to follow from claims about the "biological" or "genetic" nature of traits such as sexuality; as well as group differences in intelligence, aggression, and so on. Traits identified as having a genetic "basis" are assumed to be difficult or impossible to change, for instance, and attempts to shape them deemed counterproductive. Group differences linked to "underlying" biological differences are assumed to be natural, meanwhile, and thus not in need of rectification. Needless to say, such "naturalization" of human difference has often provided cover for cruelty and oppression.[9]

Given prevailing assumptions about the interaction between biology and culture, however, those who seek to combat such oppression often find ourselves either denying the existence of group differences, or denying their biological character—and aside from being mutually exclusive, these responses are both implausible (Mallon, 2007). It is obvious that there are differences between individuals, as well as average differences between groups. Some of these differences are

more difficult to change than others; and all of them are—at some level—biological in character. When we insist that such differences are the result of contingent social factors rather than natural biological forces, then, it both undermines our normative position and reinforces the ontological opposition between biology and culture from which oppressive naturalizations draw their strength.

We are right, of course, to maintain that group differences have social causes, yet because of deeply entrenched assumptions about nature and nurture, this assertion is often conflated—on all sides—with a denial of their biological character. In the absence of an explicitly anti-essentialist alternative, an essentialist notion of human nature as separable from the contingent influences of nurture will continue to exert a strong pull on our moral and political intuitions. As a result, we need a different way of understanding the real relationships obscured by that false dichotomy; i.e., a new conception of human ontology.

Drawing on much of the same developmentalist literature I have surveyed, Samantha Frost (2016) proposes that we understand ourselves as "biocultural" creatures—a term which conveys the independent causal contributions of a variety of interacting factors typically categorized as either "biological" or "cultural," while nonetheless insisting that these factors cannot be meaningfully separated. She explicitly presents this conception as an alternative, anti-essentialist ontology (Frost, 2016: 19); a theory of human nature (or "the human") which might displace the implicit ontologies we otherwise unwittingly accept, reorienting political thinking in salutary (if often unconscious) ways.

I endorse Frost's conception, as far as it goes. However, her account emphasizes the "porosity" of biological substance, and its dependence on constant interchange with habitat—meaning that *all* creatures are equally "biocultural" in her sense—and in my view, it is crucial to account for the features which *distinguish* human beings as well. Given that claims of innateness are often

pragmatically justified with regard to other species (such as sunflowers), after all, it cannot be the porosity we share with them which most resoundingly refutes pernicious naturalizations of individual and group difference in humans. Instead, I have emphasized the *complexity* of the interaction between the various factors involved in human biocultural development—especially given our continuous construction and re-construction of our own developmental environments—which yields humanity's uniquely dynamic range of behavioral variation. Because we evolved to absorb culture in substantively significant ways at every point in our development, far fewer of our behavioral characteristics may even provisionally be labeled innate, and that is what justifies an understanding of human beings as "biocultural" in an even more pervasive sense than other species.

At the same time, this complexity also prevents us from accepting any form of *cultural* determinism. Given the interaction between a variety of diverse causal factors in the development of every human being, each of us is an utterly *unique* individual. As such, any attempt to reduce our behavior to some deterministic social, cultural, economic, or psychological process will be just as hopeless as any attempt to reduce our behavior to its biological, genetic, or neurological "basis."[10] This is why the view does not reduce to a kind of "ultra-structuralism." We remain "agentic" in the sense that our actions are neither random nor (precisely) predictable, and we remain "reasonable" in the sense that our actions can be influenced (in non-random but also non-deterministic ways) by discursive interaction with others. We retain the sort of "agentic capacities" described by Coole, in other words, which emerge from complex biocultural systems rather than revealing the presence of a coherent and bounded subject; a "doer behind the deed." Though they do not disclose an authentic, pre-political subjectivity, therefore, practices of resistance and reason-giving are hardly meaningless.

Complexity and poststructuralism

The parallels between poststructuralism and developmentalism should now be apparent: both seek to transcend persistent dichotomies between internal and external sources of human action. Foucault thus asserts that all subjectivity is always already a "power-effect," frustrating the search for some pre-political core of the subject which reflects its truly autonomous choices, authentic identity, or undistorted reason. Similarly, developmentalists assert that all (human) biology is always already cultural, frustrating the search for some "uberbiological" substance which truly controls or directs development (Frost, 2016).

As we have seen, of course, the biological perspective yields a more specific answer about what should *replace* the false dichotomy in question—and that is why it can be especially instructive for political theorists. Rather than *denying* the causal efficacy of one of two supposedly oppositional forces, and thereby granting presumed determinative power to the other, developmentalists *proliferate* the causal influences which are supposed to produce the final result, and emphasize the complexity of the interaction between them. Similarly, then, poststructuralist skepticism of an independent, internal source of agency (i.e., the "subject") need not imply that external social structures have determinative power. Instead, poststructuralists can understand each individual human subjectivity as the contingent result of irreducibly complex interactions between a multitude of interactants in a biocultural developmental system.

This perspective thus yields what we have been seeking throughout: an anti-essentialist conception of human nature. Because the developmental systems shaping human creatures are much more similar to one another than they are to the systems which produce other creatures, we are justified in understanding human beings as a distinct category. Yet each individual is the unique product of factors whose complex interaction is unpredictable, and thus renders any kind of determinism (or structuralism) unjustified. More importantly, no particular set of features or

capacities can plausibly be identified as normal, generic, or essential, such that those "universal" or "natural" features may be opposed to the contingent impositions, modifications, or modulations of nurture. To be a human being is to be the product of a developmental system similar to those of other human beings—a cluster that is pragmatically recognizable but, because of the open-endedness of cultural practices, can never be definitively circumscribed.

In turn, finally, this conception enables us to resolve the puzzles posed at the beginning of this section: i.e., how can we understand the independent *causal* role of biological bodies without conceiving them as *pre-political*? And how can we avoid cultural determinism without reviving the Enlightenment ideal of autonomous, authentic subjectivity?

First, biological bodies are constantly engaging with an array of other "interactants," including those we ought to consider "political," and together these interactants compose a developmental system. Bodies thus have causal force that is independent of power in the sense that they are not *determined* by power, and can be fairly said to exert "resistance." Nevertheless, bodies are never *fully* independent, in the sense that they are free of the *influence* of cultural power. Because the interchange of "biological" and "cultural" factors is so profoundly complex throughout human development, moreover—and because the range of cultural variation is so open-ended—it is impossible to trace these cross-cutting, recursively interacting influences in any remotely comprehensive way; i.e., any way that would allow us to disaggregate the sources of action into those which began as "internal" to a body, and those which began as "external" to it. Given the constant and overwhelmingly complex exchange between bodies and politics, in other words, no body can be considered pre-political.

More broadly, then, poststructuralists should not be understood as cultural determinists or ultra-structuralists, in the terms of the dichotomy they reject. The fact that "power is everywhere"

does not mean that human action is determined by any remotely comprehensible set of "external" structural forces; rather, the complex biocultural systems from which we emerge also furnish all of the "agentic capacities" that are "worth wanting" (Dennett, 1984). What poststructuralists deny is not the idea of a causally efficacious individuality—i.e., the locus of these agentic capacities—but only the idea of pre-political subject; an authentic will, reason, or identity, which can be excavated from underneath external impositions and trusted as the *true* or *undistorted* representative of the agent's interests. In its place we have irreducible complexity, which precludes both biological and cultural determinisms while enabling an anti-essentialist ontology of the human being.

Normativity beyond subjectivity: An anti-essentialist ontology for democracy

Of course, we must still face the second objection raised above—the accusation of "moral" rather than "scientific" relativism—which may seem to strike nearer to the heart of Foucault's approach. Indeed, some poststructuralists embrace a version of it, asserting that if we accept the death of the subject, we cannot proceed with constructive normative theory, and must confine ourselves to critique (Hendrix, 2012). As I shall demonstrate, however, this does not follow.

If the central task of politics is to protect subjects from external impositions, of course—as assumed by the theorists of freedom and power surveyed above—then Foucault's claim that there is no escape from power can seem unhelpfully pessimistic or even "conservative" (Fraser, 1985). This accusation, however, relies on precisely the sort agency-structure dichotomy that Foucault explicitly rejects. Rather than seeing a "face to face confrontation of power and freedom as mutually exclusive facts (freedom disappearing everywhere power is exercised)," for instance, Foucault maintains that "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'" (Foucault, 2001b: 342). By "free," then, he means that subjects are "faced with a field of

possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available. Where the determining factors are exhaustive, there is no relationship of power" (Foucault, 2001b: 342). Freedom is defined not as the absence of any sort of power, therefore, but as the absence of *total* control by "determining factors," as in the case of perfect slavery or purely physical constraint. Power, by contrast, is "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions" (Foucault, 2001b: 340).

Freedom, being constitutively enmeshed in power relations, has no intrinsic value, good or bad, and as a corollary, power is not inherently evil: "that idea, which is very far from my way of thinking, has often been attributed to me. Power is not evil. Power is games of strategy" (Foucault, 1998: 298). In arguing that there is no escape from power, Foucault explains, he seeks to show not that "everything is bad," but merely "that everything is dangerous" (Foucault, 2003a). If everything is a power-effect, and so everything is dangerous, this does not mean that it is impossible to discern better and worse relations of power; better and worse power effects. Indeed, we should: "the ethico-political choice we have to make… is to determine which is the main danger" at any given time (Foucault, 1998: 256). As with scientific investigation, then, normative inquiry is clearly permissible on Foucault's account. Though Foucault is notoriously quiet on the question of how we might *make* these determinations of relative danger, we need not take his silence as an indication that nothing can be said. In my view, in fact, the anti-essentialist ontology we have drawn from his work suggests a particular normative outlook on the world—an outlook which emphasizes uncertainty and humility, but not relativism.

Assume, first, that we seek to respect the interests of others when we act in world.[11] The important and interesting theoretical question, after all, is not *whether* to respect the interests of others—which most of us try to do already—but *how*. On standard teleological views, an objective

account of human flourishing is inferred from an essentialist ontology, which is in turn derived from sacred texts or observations of human nature. Rather than presuming to know what is best for others, by contrast, the liberal innovation is to respect others by deferring to their *own* conception of what is good for them—i.e., by deferring to their subjective agency. In various ways, this aspiration drives all of the subject-centered ideals of freedom examined above.

Given this background, Foucault does not advocate a return to objective accounts of human interests, which have rightly been discarded by liberals and their theoretical heirs. What he shows, however, is that many have substituted a different form of essentialism; imagining humans as fundamentally *willing* or *reasoning* beings whose greatest perfection is self-determination or sovereignty. We should read his poststructuralist view, then, *neither* as an extreme celebration of subjectivity—and therefore as a descent into relativism—*nor* as a call for a return to teleology. Instead, it is a rejection of both essentialist ontologies in favor of *anti-essentialism*.

Again, a biological perspective can elucidate this somewhat vague aspiration. As we have seen, the developmentalist conception of human nature suggests just such an anti-essentialist ontology, and in my view, the normative lesson implied by this conception is deep and irremediable uncertainty about human interests. Out of respect for what human *beings* really are—creatures distinguished by a remarkable degree of "evolved plasticity"—we should reject the temptation to make advances in political theory by articulating more and more precise conceptions of what human *interests* really are, either in objective *or* subjective terms. If it is true that discourse inevitably structures experience, and that human capacities like sexuality or reason can therefore have no neutral, authentic, or natural form, then there can also be no final or definitive conception of the goods in human life.

At the same time, we also cannot remain silent about those goods. First, an anti-essentialist ontology is still an ontology; it is just consciously and deliberately imprecise. Without making claims that are overly precise, then, we can still make provisional claims about the *general shape* of human interests.[12] To refrain from reflecting on the sorts of normative concerns we accept in making judgments, after all, is not to avoid the theoretical and political imperialism associated with objective or universalist moralities by retreating into the safe harbor of relativism—which, I have suggested, chases endlessly after the mirage of subjectivity. Given that we *inevitably* exert power over other people, and that most of us want to consider their interests when doing so, reflecting on those concerns is the only responsible way forward. In place of an inert relativism, then, an anti-essentialist ontology yields an attitude of active *humility*, and it is this humility which suggests an alternative justification for liberal and democratic institutions.

Consider that on this account, what we can be relatively certain about is precisely our *uncertainty*. It is true that we should not be particularly confident about the content of others' interests—but neither, of course, should anyone else. As a result, the political recommendation of a *responsible* humility is not to withdraw from political action—thereby ceding power to others who are equally unlikely to possess certainty—but to ensure, as far as we can, that power does not become too concentrated. We need not assume that individuals are particularly *good* at recognizing their own interests, in other words; only that in most situations, it is even riskier to entrust care of their interests to others. On this view, the point of liberal and democratic institutions is not to protect the intrinsic value of subjective choice from external impositions—a goal which presumes the agency-structure dichotomy—but simply to resist certain particularly dangerous *concentrations* of power within the biocultural developmental systems we inhabit together.

So far, of course, this is only an invitation to democratic theory; nothing more. As an invitation, however, it is more than many have thought compatible with poststructuralist premises.

Endnotes

[1] On the extent to which the "death of the subject" is taken for granted in the humanities—and on the pessimistic implications often associated with it—see Ruddick (2015).

[2] For a similar view, see Floyd (2015), who writes that the difference between analytic and continental political theory "stems from a basic disagreement concerning human nature… For the Continental, the understandings we have of both ourselves and our surroundings are fundamentally contingent… For the analytic, we should broadly accept the scientific view of both self and environment, which means, in the case of moral and political philosophy, that fundamental principles, rather than being cultural epiphenomena, are more properly seen as natural essences to be discovered and dissected, much as geologists or astronomers study rocks or stars." This seems mostly right, except for one crucial point. As I demonstrate in this essay, *biological* science furnishes resources for anti-essentialist thinking, which may enable some degree of reconciliation between the two approaches.

[3] Though this article offers a unique reading of Foucault's core lesson and its relationship to contemporary biological theory, others have noted complementarities between the two approaches (Connolly, 2002; Thiele, 2006). Perhaps the closest analogue to my approach is Johanna Meehan's (2016) proposal that developmental systems theory presents a middle way between "inside-to-outside" approaches to the self, favored by Enlightenment feminists such as Seyla Benhabib (1995), and the "outside-to-inside" approaches of poststructuralist feminists such as Judith Butler (1995). As we shall see, however, I read the poststructuralists, more sympathetically, as

consistently resisting the dichotomy between agency and structure (and thus as already occupying Meehan's desired middle ground); while Meehan reads them as coming down on the side of structure (i.e., the "outside-to-inside" model). See also Bagg (2015).

[4] In this respect, the paper complements recent work emphasizing compatibility of Foucault's perspective with liberal precepts such as human rights (Behrent, 2009; Golder, 2015; Patton, 2016).

[5] This alliance includes communitarians (Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1989), perfectionists (Raz, 1979), multiculturalists (Kymlicka, 1989), feminists (Hirschmann, 2003), race theorists (Mills, 1999), and many others.

[6] As he said in a later interview, for example, "One can show… that the medicalization of madness, in other words, the organization of medical knowledge around individuals designated as mad, was connected with a whole series of social and economic processes at a given time, but also with institutions and practices of power. This fact *in no way impugns the scientific validity* or the therapeutic effectiveness of psychiatry: it does not endorse psychiatry but neither does it invalidate it. It is also true that mathematics, for example, is linked, albeit in a completely different manner than psychiatry, to power structures, if only in the way it is taught, the way in which consensus among mathematicians is organized, functions in a closed circuit, has its values, determines what is good (true) or bad (false) in mathematics. This in no way means that mathematics is only a game of power, but that the game of truth of mathematics is linked in a certain way – without thereby being invalidated in any way – to games and institutions of power" (Foucault, 2001a: 296). Emphasis added.

[7] In addition, the EES is sometimes understood to include certain claims on behalf of "cultural evolution" of which I am skeptical (Bagg, 2017).

[8] This is qualitatively different from the limited forms of "cultural" learning exhibited by other species, which are rarely cumulative, and which affect only minor and isolated segments of their daily lives. As the philosopher of biology John Dupré summarizes, therefore, "the extent to which humans construct the environment in which they develop… greatly exceeds in several dimensions anything found in any other species" (Dupré, 2011).

[9] That said, the alignment between naturalizing, essentializing ontologies and regressive politics is far from perfect. Defenders of gay rights, for instance, have successfully deployed a conception of homosexuality as "natural," "biological" or even "genetic" in expanding their base of support (a strategy often challenged by queer activists and scholars such as Butler). Meanwhile, biological plasticity and even anti-essentialism can also be deployed for racist and discriminatory ends (Mansfield, 2012; Meloni, 2016).

[10] Admittedly, this ontological picture may commit us to some form of *philosophical* determinism: we have, after all, neglected to posit a supernatural will. Yet this abstract stance has none of the negative practical consequences associated with both biological and cultural forms of determinism (Dennett, 1984).

[11] The term "interests" here is intended to capture a very wide range of concerns. The only other options, then, are to hold that we should be indifferent to the interests of others (an extreme form of nihilism); or that we should refrain from acting altogether (extreme philosophical anarchism); neither of which is particularly plausible.

[12] Dupré (2011), for instance, suggests (quite plausibly) that "humans do not flourish as slaves."

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