

EVOLUTIONARY INDIVIDUALISM

Presidential Address

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I have for you this evening some generalizations reflecting my recent thought on the historical development of human nature theories in our culture. More specifically, I want to talk about the evolution of the individualist vision of human nature from Hobbes to Kant, and then describe a contemporary version of the theory in sociobiology.

It is my general thesis that the meanings of human actions cannot be fully explained by appeal to their causes. As Socrates argued with such intuitive conviction in *Phaedo* (98-9), his presence in prison could not be accounted for merely in terms of physiology. A causal account is surely a necessary condition for an explanation of a human action, but it is not sufficient. In short, I take it to be intuitively obvious that the "meaning" of an action cannot be explained in causal terms, with appropriate apologies to those who sincerely believe me to be begging the question against them.

I further believe that often an important element in the meaning of an action is its moral significance. Whether from sympathy or principle, people frequently act in ways that they and others would explain most naturally in moral terms. Such explanations are, I would argue, different in kind than all arguments from necessity, causal or otherwise. Moral explanations are premised upon the assumption of free choice. And the most obvious instance of free choice is that which, while causally explicable, is nevertheless intentionally inconsistent with the perceived self-interest of the actor. Such free choices, I would maintain, often stand behind moral action in contexts of inequality among actors. Where there is natural or other inequality, moral action on the part of the more enabled on behalf of those less so stands as a clear counterexample to those who would interpret all action as self-interested.

The early individualist theorists dodged these sorts of issues by positing a premise of empirical equality among humans. Later thinkers, however, dropped that notion in favor of a premise of moral equality. It is on that development that I will focus in my discussion of the evolution of individualist

