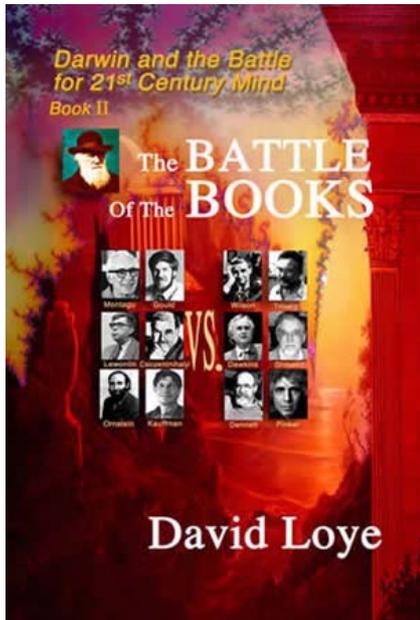


BOOK EXCERPT



The Vanguard of the Super Neos

Chapter 5 of *The Battle of the Books*

By David Loye

The Battle of the Books is Book II of the forthcoming trilogy *Darwin and the Battle for 21st Century Mind* by David Loye, available from online book sellers worldwide November 2009.

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So far we've uncovered an early skirmish and counter positioning for the battle of the books as it poked through the maze of mass mind to reach the general reader and policy makers and leaders — as well scientists who were not themselves evolution theorists.

This became the bonanza to American and British literary agents, publishers, and book reviewers known as the Darwin Wars. On one side of the battle field were the Social Darwinists, the “killer ape” theorists, and the Neo-Darwinians. This side was enormously enriched with the investment of what by the 1970s had become the Darwin Industry with \$100,000 and \$200,000 advances for the “big guns” for sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, i.e., the Super Neos.

On another side were the counter forces marshaled behind the comparatively dirt poor leadership of Kropotkin, the dissidents Huxley and Dobzhansky, the progressive spiritually aligned de Chardinites, and — as we'll see in the next chapter — the late 20th century emergence of Ashley Montagu, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin, to whack at the sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists for misapplication of biology to higher and more advanced levels of organic and human emergence.

On still another side were ranked the visigoths of Creationism. Beating drums and chanting far into the night that anything even remotely Darwinian was either evil or ungodly balderdash,

sporadically they sallied forth to chop away at the other two and harass school boards and legislatures.

E.O. Wilson

Sociobiology formally entered the battle in 1975 with the publication of Harvard eminence Edward O. Wilson's impressive classic for the new field, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press). For this brief section on the books of Wilson, and for Robert Trivers and Richard Dawkins, which follow, I will again to some extent quote without quote marks from what I wrote of them earlier in *Revolution and Counter Revolution* ♣. But I will then go on to explore some insider aspects of a barbaric impact on twists and turns for the fracas.

Sociobiology quickly aroused a wide and sharply divided readership by, one is tempted to say, unintentionally and inadvertently lobbing shells into many camps for both academia and social activism. For certain remarks, Wilson was accused of racism and sexism by sociologists and feminists. At the same time, others found these to be slight flaws because of the appeal of a scholarship Darwinian in scope in Wilson's passion for nature and the range of its creatures, and in his new championship of a central place for moral evolution in a woefully neglectful and needy science and society.

This aspect seized me with great enthusiasm initially. For here at last in a protected place of intelligence within the complex confusion of the battle was a sophisticated scientific understanding of the critical function of morality in evolution.

Few have so succinctly captured as much about the study of morality as Wilson did with his summary of moral theorists and theories from the 18th century into the present, which starts on page 562.

As noted earlier in *Revolution and Counter Revolution*, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and the modern theorist John Rawls were identified by Wilson as "ethical intuitionists." To surge on to better ground for both theory and social action, to go beyond talk and actually *advance* moral evolution, Wilson proposed development of "a new ethical behaviorism" — or to strictly go by what a person does rather than what he or she supposedly thinks.

Opposing this position, he noted, was the developmental-genetic conception of Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget, which I deal with at length in *The River and the Star* ♣. An important piece, however, was still missing. This missing piece Wilson felt that he and biologists Robert Trivers, William Hamilton, and zoologist Richard Dawkins were beginning to supply with the development of a "genetic evolution of ethics."

By now I began to sense the presence of the paradigm. Once again, in all of *Sociobiology* there was nothing on *Descent*, or — of all people for a purported Darwinian — Darwin himself on morality or moral evolution. Further evidence of little or no familiarity with Darwin on morality appeared in a footnote in Wilson's first sequel *On Human Nature* (Harvard University Press, 1978). Here his position was that morality is entirely learned rather than even in the slightest degree also a pre-existing directive — as Darwin had insisted.

Up to a certain point, Wilson's *On Human Nature* also had a good section on ethics. He makes a compelling case for the basically selfish "reciprocal altruism" of Robert Trivers and the basically selfish explanation for altruism of William Hamilton's concept of "kinship selection." Uncredited by Wilson, Trivers, or Hamilton, however, 100 years earlier Darwin had identified both types of apparent altruism as very definitely operating at a "lower" level for motivation and evolution. But then for Darwin came the vital step both differentiating "higher" from "lower" and indicating the two streams of origin to a significant degree independent of one another. As I show in the End Document "Two Stream versus Single Stream Theory and Consequences," Darwin went on to develop the compelling body of the moral and action-oriented completion for his theory of evolution to try to at last scientifically ground "higher" levels for motivation and evolution beyond dispute.

And now the rocket that step by step Wilson had tried to construct to soar beyond the din of battle upward toward the Darwinian second half suddenly faltered, wobbled, and plunged back toward the steaming swamp of the first half. In an astounding choice of words — given their connection to, of all things, pornography — in *On Human Nature* he flatly tells us morality involves either the "hardcore altruism" of kin selection or the "softcore altruism" of a wholly selfish motivational structure.

"True selfishness ... is the key to a more nearly perfect social contract," he wrote.

This was in the sharpest possible contrast to the world of aspirational wonder that Darwin tried so hard over 100 years ago to get across. With, one feels, the eminent entomologist of the bug world at work within him, Wilson wrote that "Human behavior ... is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function."

Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function?

However it may begin to seem this way, this is no mere academic analogue to the argument of church prelates back in the Middle Ages over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. This is no so-called tempest in a teapot.

No other demonstrable ultimate function for morality? What about trying to live together peacefully? Or giving up trying to destroy ourselves and our planet? Was the whole thrust for Jesus, for the lost Darwin, and today for much of social science nothing but a chimera alongside the sacred majesty of the almighty "selfish gene"?

And yet this is the same Wilson who was again, out of the swamp, reaching toward the stars in *The Diversity of Life* (Harvard University Press, 1992). Of the emerging perception of the environmental ethic — which to many of us seems to be the most fundamental and hopeful new development for our species — Wilson tells us this.

"There can be no purpose more enspiriting than to begin the age of restoration, reweaving the wondrous diversity of life that still surrounds us."

"For what, in the final analysis, is morality but the command of conscience seasoned by a rational examination of the consequences. And what is a fundamental precept but one that serves all generations? An enduring environmental ethic will aim to preserve not only the health and freedom of our species, but access to the world in which the human spirit was born."

What can we say? In the convoluted contradictions for sociobiology and the Super Neos were we not looking at the rise within science of something akin to the surrealism of Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte, or Yves Tanguy masquerading as science?

Did they take us to a place just this side of claiming “up” is “down,” or “down” is “up”? Or had they along with hundreds of thousands of book buyers during the Reagan to G.W. Bush years in America, justified by this update for “survival of the fittest,” already crossed the border?

Robert Trivers

The idea that altruism is nothing but disguised selfishness had already been immortalized by biologist Michael Ghiselin in the famous quote “scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed” (see *The Publishers*). It was also an old idea for philosophy — for example, Hobbes, Bentham, Paley. Now it became brand named like a new breakfast cereal of his own production by biologist Robert Trivers.

Trivers was widely respected among other biologists. Both the downbeat social influence and the scientific fallacy of this doctrine, however, can be seen in his *Social Evolution* (Benjamin/Cummings, 1985) — which was, and for all I know, may still be widely used as a text in colleges.

Given this title, one would think that Trivers would provide at least one tiny take off point in Darwin, as is customary for the “review of the literature.” Telling us he had “selected topics important to our own evolution,” however, he quickly fulfilled the prophetic dying complaint of Darwin’s disciple George Romanes (see *Revolution and Counter Revolution*) by cloaking himself in the mantle of Darwinian authority. For not once did Trivers mention the sole work by Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, which deals with the social evolution of our species about which Trivers was ostensibly writing in *Social Evolution*.

Further revealing the power of the paradigm, prior to publication this book had to have been blessed by many authorities to gain publication as a text book. Instead, Trivers told us the following about ourselves — all of which in actuality was not only contradicted but vigorously denied by Darwin as well as by many other modern biologists. Natural selection, he wrote, is not only responsible for all evolutionary change but “we have yet to discover a fact of nature that requires a new theory of evolutionary change.”

Darwin, in fact, not only repeatedly tells us natural selection does not account for everything. Besides the impact of love, moral sensitivity, education, and even progressive religion, which he clearly identifies in *The Descent of Man* as prime factors in shaping human evolution, in *Origin of Species* he had added “sexual selection” and later in *Descent* “community selection” as two more.

As for altruism, this Trivers defined as “An act that benefits another organism at a cost to the actor.” This was in contrast to selfishness, which he defined as “An act benefitting the actor at a cost to someone else.”

On the surface these definitions seem to be properly rigorous and impressive, but as noted in *Revolution and Counter Revolution*, if we take a close look at what Trivers was saying — rather than simply letting it drift in and out of our heads with a nod — at least two things call at first for raised eyebrows and the double-take, and then with reflection, for disgust.

First, it's vital to notice that Trivers' definitions both set the conditions for and guaranteed findings that would substantiate only the "lower" half of the supposed motivation for altruism.

Darwin differentiated between two levels or kinds of motivations for altruism. One was the "base principle" accounting for the "low morality of savages," which he found unquestionably widely operates among us. This he wrote does motivate us to help others, as Trivers claimed.

By defining altruism as "an act that benefits another organism at a cost to the actor," this is the level Trivers carefully presets as the condition his findings must fulfill.

The other level for Darwin, however, was the higher principle of a "moral sense" embedded within us biologically over millions of years, which not only impels us to help others but is also the prime driver of evolution at the level of human emergence — *which Trivers by definition excludes.*

In other words, the counter wording of the excluded alternative — earlier not only laid down with massive backup by Darwin but massively corroborated by modern studies — would be "An act that benefits another organism not only at *no* cost to the actor, but which at the extreme can result in the sacrifice of one's own life."

This is an old game for scientists. Define what you want to find in a seemingly impressive way, and then, lo and behold, why you have found exactly what you said was the case.

The other problem of this definition for implanting in young minds via a textbook on social evolution was the potential for devastating social consequences. If we take a close look at that definition for altruism from the perspective of the hordes of conservatives who took over the ruling of America in the late 20th century, we can see why they pounced upon sociobiology as the "new" scientific answer to their prayers.

"An act that benefits another organism at a cost to the actor." Well, who wants that! Be gone damned welfare state, welfare mothers with Cadillacs, free lunches for the bleeding hearts' poor little school tykes, and all the rest of this do-gooder business left over from the hippy sixties that science now certifies for sure is neither "natural" nor cost-effective!

I must at this point observe that were I, a psychologist also trained in sociology, to write a book and call it *Biological Evolution* I would not only be laughed at but could nowhere in America find publication. Yet so entrenched had the wrong version of Darwin become in America — and increasingly throughout the rest of the world — that, as with the bucket brigade of brooms the Sorcerer's Apprentice brought to life more and more of these books became the flood that could not be stopped.

Filled with psychological, sociological, and cultural pronunciamentos, they were written by people trained solely in biology — or as evolutionary psychology emerged out of sociobiology, by psychologists willing to abandon at least two centuries of social science in order to jump on the lucrative book band wagon of the Super Neos.

Richard Dawkins

Now we come to the most successful of the Super Neos as both concept originator and popularizer. It is easy to see why, as Richard Dawkins had a rare capacity for capturing the

essence of a scientific idea with striking imagery and a clear, strong, and engaging writing style. Because of this talent, “selfish gene,” “blind watchmaker,” and the ubiquitous “meme” everywhere entered the language of both his proponents and critics.

This talent and the truncated vigor of his thinking served further to preserve the invisibility of what Darwin really said. The technical existence of a “selfish gene” has been widely disputed by geneticists, but here we are concerned more with the impact of a phrase connected to a scientist purporting to be Darwinian.

Other sociobiologists attacked the morality and altruism problem with concern, as with Harvard’s E.O. Wilson, or with gusto as the challenge of a “test case.” But Dawkins unloaded most of what he had to say about doing unto others as we would have them do unto us in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976).

We must teach our children altruism because “we cannot expect it to be part of their biological nature,” he told his rapidly expanding legions of readers. In a world generated by successful genes driven by a “ruthless selfishness,” “much as we might wish to believe otherwise, universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts that simply do not make evolutionary sense.”

Obviously no one who had actually read Darwin on the subject could have written this — particularly the Darwin who clearly labeled selfishness a “base principle,” responsible for “the low morality of savages.”

In *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton, 1987) and *River Out of Eden* (Basic Books, 1995), Dawkins also avoided anything to do with altruism, morality, ethics, or values as a matter in which he seemed wholly uninterested.

One must also note the contradiction between his idea of the blind watchmaker — a quite fetching image for the standard Neo-Darwinian paradigm — and the invisibilized Darwin. As in some tale of the ringing of the warning tocsin, at least thrice Darwin tells us that blind chance is “an idea abhorrent to the mind.”

As for the “meme,” this was Dawkins’ all-purpose word for the problem that confronts the biologist who decides to depart the gene, as home territory, to roam the wider world of culture as an explanation for evolution.

The question that led to the “meme” for an answer is what accounts for how we learn, and how learning is then passed on from generation to generation over anywhere from a year or two to many decades, centuries, and millennia.

The explanation of natural selection, with the ingenuity of the 20th century addition of the gene as transmitter, does reasonably well for the longer spans of time. But for the time spans for human history — that is, life as we know it right now, as everyday ourselves involved in some level of evolution — something beyond the gene is needed.

This is why an excellent set of mind tools were built up over centuries of philosophy and psychology to identify what we use to capture knowledge and transport knowledge with. *Ideas* is the chief word we use for this purpose. But we also use words such as *beliefs*, *values*, *ideology*, *norms*, and *paradigm* to further refine our understanding of how, far beyond biology, we use

mind and language as evolutionary drivers. But to use this set of mind tools adequately, the biologist would have had to spend the additional years of education in social science and the humanities necessary to use them with ease or sufficient authority.

Dawkins, rather brilliantly, opted for a more practical tactic. Why put in the years necessary to fight social scientists on their own territory? Why not force the enemy to fight on one's own territory with the simple invention (or cooption) of the new word "meme" to replace all their mystifying and "old hat" mental tools in one fell swoop?

It was the perfect solution as one might thereby move the mindset of "survival of the fittest" and "selfishness *über alles*" Darwinism over wholesale from biology to psychology, sociology, the humanities, and the rest of the complexities involved in cultural evolution.

Gene becomes meme — who could ask for anything better?

It was really a bit like brain surgery with a meat axe versus using scalpel, retractors, clamps, and CAT scan.

Daniel Dennett

Like a nuclear missile aimed at the willy-nilly mind, in 1995 philosopher and artificial intelligence expert Daniel Dennett launched *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster).

Widely popular, it seemed to many the last word on Darwin and morality had at last arrived. The book was, after all, very rare in having not one but actually two chapters on morality. In a prototypical display of the fulsome cross-endorsement process whereby mutual back scratching they built the movement, on the book jacket Richard Dawkins hailed it as "a surpassingly brilliant book" showing how "American intellectuals have been powerfully misled on evolutionary matters."

During my years of digging into and revealing what lies behind the wand waving of invisibility, this book was often pointed out to me as the opus that told all, so forget it and go home.

Indeed, for omitting Dennett from my references, I was lambasted with astounding ferocity in a so-called peer review that did everything but burn and crucify an article on the lost Darwin I had the audacity to submit to *The American Psychologist*, flagship publication for the 150,000 members of that prim bastion for science, the American Psychological Association,

If we turn to Dennett's key chapter "On the Origin of Morality," what do we find? We were first given four pages of the ultra-rightist philosopher Thomas Hobbes, known for two famous pronouncements. One historic Hobbesian dictum — which Dennett didn't mention — was Hobbes' observation that by nature our species is designed to live lives that are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

The other well-known Hobbesian dictum is that society represents the "war of all against all."

In this war "of every man against every man" — which for Hobbes significantly comes, one must note, prior to the imposition of *authoritarian control* as his solution — "nothing can be unjust," he further observed in the original. "The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place."

This is the great first analyst of the origin of morality?

We are next given five more pages of none other than Friedrich Nietzsche, the amazingly gifted but pathologically sexist, racist, exultantly paranoid, and all-around regressive philosopher who helped set the stage for the Nazis with his celebration of the idea of the “Superman.”

This was the Superman who, in glorious superiority, Nietzsche assured us, was above such piddling concerns as the “slave morality” of Christianity and similar “weaklings.”

Assuring us that Nietzsche had merely received a bad press from those who refused to understand the true majesty of his thought, Dennett proceeded to give us an example of what he felt to be Nietzsche’s “often outrageously misrepresented” concept of transvaluation. This, for Dennett, was vital to the proper understanding of morality.

The idea is that through this wonder-working process of transvaluation, according to Nietzsche, “the human soul in a higher sense acquire[d] depth and became evil” — the “two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts.”

We are superior to other “beasts” through an evolution that has driven us to become evil?

This is what constitutes transvaluation to a supposedly higher level of morality? Lewis Carroll could get away with this sort of thing as nonsense. Or George Orwell could put such a wholesale reversal of meaning off in the future as a tactic for the fictional Big Brother. But now are we expected to accept this sort of lunacy because it comes from Nietzsche and Dennett?

Dennett assured us these were examples of Nietzsche’s “terrific” Just So Stories. Go to Nietzsche’s actual writings, however, and you will find that page after page of these “terrific Just So Stories” reads like the raving of an academic Hitler, the most vicious of the beloved “rappers” for modern skin heads, or standard stuff for American street gangs.

There was more of this kind of thing, but the shocker surely even to the sociobiologists must have been the fact that Dennett identified this pair, Hobbes and Nietzsche, as not only our most useful basic moralists but also the first two great sociobiologists!

By this place in the book one wonders if he will ever get to Darwin. At last it comes — not in a favored spot as with Hobbes and Nietzsche in the chapter on “The Origin of Morality,” but in the next one. This chapter Dennett opened with a minor quote from *Descent* that seems to indicate that Darwin in this pivotal book really had nothing to offer about morality except his own (that is, Darwin’s) self-confessed ignorance of how it all began!

Could this actually be true? Here, so the reader may judge for herself or himself, is the actual quote from Darwin that Dennett gave us:

“The imperious word *ought* seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, however it may have originated.”

And that is it.

This was everything Dennett had to offer from *The Descent of Man* — or anywhere else for Darwin on morality. All hail Hobbes and Nietzsche and the Triumph of the Super Man.

Unfortunately, this is beyond humor or classification in any kind of language that might here be printable. It is just not funny.

It is not just inconceivable that a purported scholar, passing himself off as any kind of Darwinian authority, could have written such things and displayed such destructive ignorance of what Darwin really said. It is beyond expression mind-boggling that he could have done this and year after year thereafter got away with it.

What compounded this assault on sanity – further underlining the power of the paradigm that captured and degraded both science and society throughout the 20th century – is that, to my knowledge, what I focus on here was never questioned or decried by any of the hordes of other purported Darwinians, or any other kind of scholar.

A telling commentary on how far off track our minds had been derailed was the fact that in 2004 this prestigious champion of Nietzsche and degrader of Darwin was selected by the American Humanist Association for its Humanist of the Year award.

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