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The Evolution of Liberty

A discussion about brain, belief, and politics

Ronald Bailey | September 13, 2011

I am participating in a discussion at Cato Unbound which this month is focusing on the brain, belief, and politics. Michael Shermer, editor of Skeptic magazine kicked off the discussion with his essay, "Liberty and Science." Next up was Eliezer Yudkowsky, an artificial intelligence researcher at the Singularity Institute, with "Is That Your True Rejection?" And the third participant, Joe Carter, the online editor of First Things, asks, "Should Libertarians Trust the Monkey Mind?" My essay is below:

In his lead essay, Michael Shermer usefully defines what he calls the Realistic Vision as one accepting that "human nature is relatively constrained by our biology and evolutionary history, and therefore social and political systems must be structured around these realities, accentuating the positive and attenuating the negative aspects of our natures." Accentuating the positive and attenuating the negative aspects of our natures are exactly what liberalism (libertarianism) has done so brilliantly since its advent a little over two centuries ago at the edges of Europe.

The sweep of history clearly shows that the natural state of humanity is abject poverty. Very much in line with the views of Friedrich Hayek, the most brilliant economist of the 20th century, I understand human evolution and history as a search through time in which thousands of societies and billions of people tested religious, political, family, and economic institutions. Those slowly discovered institutions differentially helped some groups to out-reproduce and out-compete other groups. The institutions that helped groups that discovered and adopted them to succeed against other groups can be thought of as embodying an ever better understanding of our human natures. One gets a good idea of just how slow this undirected search for ever more effective institutions has been when one considers the income data compiled by economist Angus Maddison. Maddison calculated that the average income per capita in western Europe in the year 1 was about \$600 (in 1990 real dollars). Incomes finally doubled to \$1200 by 1820. Nearly 1,800 years for average

western European incomes to double! But after 1820, incomes took off, nearly tripling by 1913, tripling again by 1973, and nearly doubling by 2003 to \$21,000 per person. In other words, people living in western Europe make 35 times more on average than their Roman ancestors did. On the other hand, a group of researchers recently noted that a billion people live on less than a dollar per day and “are roughly as poor today as their ancestors were thousands of years ago.” Why did some portion of humanity finally escape our natural state of abject poverty? Because their societies finally stumbled upon the set of institutions that are broadly defined as liberal.

Jonathan Rauch in his wonderful book *Kindly Inquisitors* offers a nice schema for the institutions that comprise liberal societies. Rauch argues that our Enlightenment civilization stands on three pillars: democracy, which is how we determine who gets to wield legitimate coercive force; capitalism, which is how we determine who gets what; and a third pillar that Rauch calls liberal science, which is how we determine what is true.

In Rauch’s conception, liberal science embodies the principle that the “checking of each by each through public criticism is the only legitimate way to decide who is right.” Liberal science is broadly speaking free speech, and it encompasses everything from the most biased activist pamphlet to rigorously peer-reviewed scientific journals. Shermer highlights this point when he quotes Timothy Ferris, author of the superb *The Science of Liberty*. Ferris asserts that “liberalism and science are methods, not ideologies.” Both embody the freedom to explore and experiment, enabling people to more systematically seek truths about the physical and social worlds. Both science and liberalism advance in better understanding their subject matters by falsifying asserted claims. As Hayek argues, “Human reason can neither predict nor deliberately shape its own future. Its advances consist in finding out where it has been wrong.” It is through a continual process of trial and error that science and liberalism ultimately yield better ways of doing things.

It is telling that the motto for one of the first official organizations of scientists, the Royal Society in Britain founded in 1660 is “Nullius in Verba,” which roughly translates to “Take nobody’s word for it.” Arguments from authority, religious or political, no longer went unquestioned. Another crucial Enlightenment insight might be summarized as “I may not know the absolute transcendent truth, but I do sure as Hell know that you don’t either.” It is the combination of the three institutions identified by Rauch that produced and

continues to produce the material progress that the rising trend of Maddison's income figures so vividly illustrates.

In fact, the World Bank has completed a study that puts a cash value on liberty. It turns out that the vast majority of the world's wealth is embodied in liberal institutions and human brains. The report titled *The Changing Wealth of Nations* [PDF] shows that the average American has access to about \$734,000 in wealth. However, most of it—85 percent—is intangible. In fact, the United States was first in the world in the amount of its intangible wealth, at \$628,000 per person. In comparison, despite a couple of decades of unprecedented economic growth, the average Chinese person has access to just \$19,000 in per capita wealth, of which \$9,000 is intangible.

What is intangible wealth? The World Bank study defines it as “human capital, social, and institutional capital which includes factors such as the rule of law and governance that contribute to an efficient economy.” Note that this is a pretty good summary of the 12 essential institutions of liberty listed by Shermer. The study goes on to point out that free societies are the ones that encourage the accumulation of human capital—they educate their people—and also allow for its effective use.

Effective use is the key. Russians average nearly \$340,000 in human capital, but the effects of the country's bad institutions—corruption and squelched speech—more than offset the benefits of Russian human capital by a negative \$350,000. The bottom line is that the intangible wealth of living in free countries with honest governments surrounded by educated people dramatically boosts a person's ability to earn income and create wealth.

The arc of history must be on the side of liberty, right? After all, don't groups discovering and using successful institutions eventually out-compete groups with less successful institutions? Friedrich Hayek identified a significant problem—human nature brings with it human hubris.

Surely Shermer is right that the values that undergird the love of liberty are “part of our evolved nature.” They would have to be; otherwise relatively free societies like ours would never have arisen. But the slow progress of institutional innovation shows that the countervailing values of tribalism have

been dominant over most of history. As Shermer shows in his excellent new book, *The Believing Brain*, humans are a conservative species. And why not? Most experiments don't work out, and in the Paleolithic era, a failed experiment (like eating the wrong fruit or grub) took the experimenter out of the lottery to become an ancestor.

In his last book, *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek persuasively argued that “an atavistic longing after the life of the noble savage is the main source of the collectivist tradition.” Tribal instincts once helped roving bands of primitive people to survive and are still the bases of the bonds of intimacy we share with our families and friends. However, the more recently evolved institutions of individual liberty—contracts, the rule of law, private property, profit—strike modern tribalists as cold and unfair. This sentiment was well captured in *The Communist Manifesto*, in which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels declared that the avatar of “Free Trade,” the bourgeoisie, “has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.”

Modern progressives are motivated by an old instinct to restore the primitive egalitarianism that characterized human social relations when people lived in intimate hunter-gatherer bands, corresponding to the Marxian notion of primitive pre-state communism. For their part, modern conservatives intuitively dislike the socially disruptive character of markets and free speech and want to protect their group from outside competition and cultural corruption. These atavistic longings are part of the bio-psychological heritage of humanity and must be constantly resisted if the ambit of liberty is to thrive and expand. Liberalism (libertarianism) rises above and rejects the primitive moralities embodied in the universalist collectivism of progressives and the tribalist collectivism of conservatives. In doing so, it made the rule of law, freedom of speech, religious tolerance, and modern prosperity possible.

Hayek also identified a specific problem with the development of science—its success tempts some people to believe that they now know enough to mold society after their hearts' desires (and those desires are always in a collectivist direction). As Hayek pointed out in *The Constitution of Liberty*, “those

intoxicated by the advance of knowledge so often become the enemies of freedom.”

In truth, the would-be molders-of-the-future have it exactly backward. The expansion of science means that every individual is increasingly ignorant relative to the amount of information now known. Free markets, democratic political institutions, and liberal science enable people to discover, marshal, and benefit from new, widely dispersed information. As Hayek explained, “It is because freedom means the renunciation of direct control of individual efforts that a free society can make use of so much more knowledge than the mind of the wisest ruler could comprehend.”

As the history of the last two centuries has shown, Hayek was surely right when he concluded:

Nowhere is freedom more important than where our ignorance is greatest—at the boundaries of knowledge, in other words, where nobody can predict what lies a step ahead....the ultimate aim of freedom is the enlargement of those capacities in which man surpasses his ancestors and to which each generation must endeavor to add its share—its share in the growth of knowledge and the gradual advance of moral and aesthetic beliefs, where no superior must be allowed to enforce one set of views of what is right or good and where only further experience can decide what should prevail. It is wherever man reaches beyond his present self, where the new emerges and assessment lies in the future, that liberty ultimately shows its value.

The discussion continues at Cato Unbound for the rest of the month.

Ronald Bailey is Reason magazine's science correspondent. His book Liberation Biology: The Scientific and Moral Case for the Biotech Revolution is now available from Prometheus Books.