HUMAN EVOLUTION AND THE ORIGINS OF HIERARCHIES

In this book, Benoît Dubreuil explores the creation and destruction of hierarchies in human evolution. Combining the methods of archaeology, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, and primatology, he offers a natural history of hierarchies from the point of view of both cultural and biological evolution. This volume explains why dominance hierarchies typical of primate societies disappeared in the human lineage and why the emergence of large-scale societies during the Neolithic period implied increased social differentiation, the creation of status hierarchies, and, eventually, political centralization.

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HUMAN EVOLUTION AND THE ORIGINS OF HIERARCHIES

The State of Nature

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I first imagined writing this book when I enrolled as a graduate student in political philosophy. I was fascinated by the state as a form of political organization and was determined to dedicate my dissertation to it. The most fashionable stance in the literature at that time – in both political science and political philosophy – was to emphasize the contingent nature of the institution that interested me so much. The state, especially the modern state, was presented as the outcome of a particular history; namely, that of Western civilization during the last five centuries. The world to come, here went the influential tenet, would be one in which the state as we know it would vanish and make way for new forms of “global governance.” In this new era of post-sovereignty, the old Westphalian concepts familiar to us moderns would become unrecognizable.

When I began writing this book, my primary intention was to defend a different view. I wished not to deny that the modern state was in some unquestionable way the contingent outcome of a historical process, but instead, to explore if in another sensible way, it could also result from some robust causes, inseparable from what we are as human beings. Modern political philosophers aspired to understand how the state – or civil society – was taking the human out of the state of nature. In contrast, my objective was to show how the state itself was a part of nature – of our nature.

This naturalist agenda implied that I move quite rapidly beyond my original training in political philosophy and come to grips with the wide range of data and theories relevant to my inquiry. More precisely, it implied having an understanding of variations in social and political organization in humans, of the functioning of the human mind, and of the evolution of both mind and society. Saying that this was an
ambitious program is an understatement, and saying that it can be achieved to perfection would be a lie. Yet in an academic world driven by specialization, many still think that there is a place for large syntheses. This is one of them.

I am grateful to many people who have played a crucial role at different stages of this project. Jean-Marc Ferry was intrepid enough to accept the supervision of a dissertation project that was certainly unconventional and would have been regarded as pretentious by many. I thank him for his constant support. I also thank Joseph Heath, who brought me to understand early on that the debate on the foundation of normativity should play a central role in my argument, and Luc Faucher, who has supported my integration of the philosophy of cognitive science.

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Earlier and slightly different versions of some of the ideas also were published elsewhere. The argument of Section 1.2 overlaps with that of “Punitive Emotions and Norm Violations,” *Philosophical Explorations* 13:1 (2010). A sketch of Sections 2.5 and 2.6 was presented in “Paleolithic Public Goods Games: Why Human Cooperation and Culture Did Not Evolve in One Step,” *Biology & Philosophy* 25:1 (2010). Finally, the ideas of Section 4.5 overlap with the argument of “Strong Reciprocity and the Emergence of Large-Scale Societies,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 38:2.
Preface

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