In an age when the interminable effort to deconstruct everything human frequently ends in existential emptiness or just plain silliness, the urge to find something, anything, true and significant about human behavior is certainly understandable. This longing for objectivity and certainty may explain, at least in part, the recent surge of interest in Darwinian biology among political scientists. These thinkers argue that Darwinian biology, with its roots in hard, scientific data, can provide us with a measure of reliable insight into political behavior and, in so doing, establish itself as an antidote to the airy abstractions of constructivism and continental postmodernism. Moreover, they insist, Darwinian biology should be readily embraced by a solid philosophy like political realism, because realism, after all, like Darwinianism, takes pride in its stoic ability to accept the difficult and often unpalatable facts of human existence. Before traipsing off to embrace yet another new science of politics, however, we would do well to remember that an earlier generation of political realists vigorously resisted efforts to establish naturalism as a foundation for political science. These thinkers anticipated many of the foundational principles of a neo-Darwinian political science and flatly rejected them, favoring those theories that were grounded in more philosophically attuned first principles instead.

The case against a Darwinian approach to political science advanced by three of political realism’s chief intellectual architects—Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Raymond Aron—still resonates. All three thinkers believed that the various manifestations of scientific naturalism are an affront to human liberty and individual freedom. This was not simply a moral issue for them:

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they believed that by working with a truncated, overly determined understanding of human behavior, naturalism restricts the options that statesmen have at their disposal in attempting to advance the cause of peace and reconciliation. We will see that a purely scientific explanation of a cardinal political reality—conflict and struggle—makes it impossible to practice what was for all three realists a cardinal political virtue, namely, prudence.

Although Morgenthau and Niebuhr devoted a good deal of intellectual energy to the challenge of scientific naturalism, Aron was the only one of the three who had significant training in the natural sciences (he spent a year at the Sorbonne doing graduate work in biology). Consequently, we will devote the bulk of our analysis to Raymond Aron.

One of the most interesting exercises in Darwinian political science has been Bradley Thayer’s recent effort to construct a Darwinian theory of international relations. Thayer attempted to put political realism, especially the “offensive realism” of John Mearsheimer, “on a scientific foundation for the first time.” From Thayer’s perspective, this represents an advance over the more “noumenal” theories of Morgenthau and Niebuhr because Darwinian naturalism can explain why egoism and the urge to dominate emerged as human qualities without resorting to suspect theological or philosophical categories such as “evil” or “the will to power.” Darwinian naturalism also serves as a surer foundation for theorizing than even the postulate of an anarchical system of states, Thayer argues, because it can explain a broader range of phenomena than simply the behavior of states and is for that reason a more powerful theory.

Thayer, then, begins from a premise that is widely accepted by neo-Darwinians, namely, that there is a clear difference between “science” and “non-science,” a difference that implicitly consigns nonscientific forms of knowing to the outer darkness of subjective speculation. The distinguishing mark of scientific knowing, Thayer explains, is that science stands or falls on the principle of verification as articulated by Karl Popper. As Popper understood it, theories were verifiable—and hence scientific—only if they were falsifiable. And falsifiable statements were those that contained, among other things, “observation sentences” of the sort that “proposition P is falsifiable if and only if P deductively implies at least one observation sentence O.” Moreover, theories that are falsifiable also advance predictions that may be matched against empirical evidence. The promise that Darwinian evolution holds for political science, therefore, lies in the fact that the primary components of Darwinian evolution—genetic variation and natural selection—are said to be falsifiable phenomena and should thus be widely accepted as adequate building blocks for the scientific study of political behavior.

None of this would have held much interest for Aron, Morgenthau, or Niebuhr. Aron flatly rejected the sharp distinction Thayer draws between scientific and nonscientific knowledge, and with it the implication that only scientific knowledge is reliable. Not only did Aron question the possibility of a completely objective natural science; he also insisted that there are other forms of knowledge that are equally legitimate.

Although Aron was preoccupied with reconfiguring the conceptual foundations of the social sciences, he meditated from time to time on the nature of the natural sciences as well. His most sustained reflection on the nature of scientific knowledge is contained in a lengthy essay on Michael Polanyi, the
celebrated chemist and philosopher of science. Writing an extensive and sympathetic review of Polanyi’s book *Personal Knowledge*, Aron compressed Polanyi’s philosophy of science into a handful of maxims or propositions. Perhaps the most fundamental idea of Polanyi’s is this: “The theory of science must not ignore the psychology of the scientist.” By “psychology,” Aron wrote, Polanyi meant “intention” or that “sense of beauty” that makes a scientist accept “this or that vision of reality.” Insisting that an aesthetic impulse lies at the heart of great scientific ideas is another way of saying that no body of scientific knowledge is ever definitively or exhaustively demonstrated. Even in physics or biology, Aron argued, “there always exists, in every age, laws or explanations which are admitted as true without our ever being certain of their truth or able to demonstrate them.” All knowledge, then, even in the natural sciences rests on some sort of personal endorsement or “tacit commitment” by the knower.

Indeed, Aron hastened to point out, this “sense of beauty” makes science possible in the first place, a conviction of Polanyi’s that found expression in this maxim of Aron’s: “Any science becomes self-contradictory which because of the nature it attributes to its object renders its own existence inexplicable and unintelligible.” This was a cardinal point of Morgenthau’s. “There can be no fully deterministic control of inorganic phenomena,” Morgenthau wrote, quoting Arthur Eddington, “unless the determinism governs mind itself. Conversely, if we wish to emancipate the mind, we must to some extent emancipate the material world also.” J.B.S. Haldane offered this pithy formulation of the problem: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.” Consequently, Aron argued, “humanity, consciousness, science would not exist in the world envisioned by mechanists or objectivists.”

These epistemological convictions were cut to fit what Polanyi took to be the shape of the material and biological worlds. Polanyi, Aron wrote, rediscovered an idea peculiar to Comte and Cournot, namely, the idea that there are ascending or nested “levels of reality” wherein the lower levels of the natural world are the necessary but not sufficient condition of higher levels. From this perspective, the higher levels—which include consciousness, intelligence, intentionality, and all the cognitive processes—depend on the chemical and physical processes of the natural world but are not completely swallowed up by them. Although the higher levels contain greater quanta of freedom than the lower, these higher levels neither eclipse nor reduce to the levels below. In other words, however much the higher levels may depend on the natural or physical processes of the lower, they are never completely defined by them. Polanyi’s distinctive approach to science and scientific knowledge, then, Aron wrote, “shows that the biologist starts from complex living realities, and that physical-chemical explanation never accounts completely for the phenomena of life, the interpretation of which is impossible apart from reference to the finality of functions and, even before this, the distinction between the normal and the pathological.”

Aron’s insistence that biologists must have recourse to an implicit understanding of “the normal and the pathological” is telling because the phrase comes not from Polanyi but from Georges Canguilhem, Aron’s close friend and colleague (Canguilhem delivered the eulogy at Aron’s funeral). This phrase bears some elaboration. Both a practicing
physician and a professor of the history and philosophy of science at the Sorbonne, Canguilhem was also a member of the French national *agrégation* committee, which meant he had considerable influence over doctoral examinations in philosophy. Aron was well acquainted with Canguilhem’s work in the history and philosophy of science and considered him to be a philosopher of rank. Well he should: Canguilhem had a profound impact on twentieth-century philosophy in France, counting among his students the likes of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser.

Central to Canguilhem’s philosophical and scientific thought are his reflections on how ideas about the normal and the pathological take root in medicine and biology. Judgments about normality, Canguilhem insisted, are essential to the biological sciences. This is due primarily to the fact that all living things have a normative relation to life. By “normative,” Marrati and Meyers explain, Canguilhem meant that “living beings are not, and cannot, be indifferent to the conditions of their life, both to the internal conditions of the organism, let us call them ‘health’ and ‘disease,’ and to the external conditions provided by the natural and social milieu in which they interact.”

Every organism, even those at the cellular level, negotiates with its environment as it struggles to survive. Adaptation, then, is not a passive act but a proactive one. This is why animals and even plants, as Canguilhem once put it, “merit admiration as much as criticism.” Therefore, Canguilhem argued, if it is true that anomaly, an individual variation on a specific theme, becomes pathological only in relation to a milieu of life and a kind of life, then the problem of the pathological in man cannot remain strictly biological, for human activity, work, and culture have the immediate effect of constantly altering the milieu of human life.

In a sense, then, “there is no natural selection in the human species, to the extent that man can create new milieus, instead of passively submitting to changes in the old ones.” And if *that* is true, then the consequences for scientific knowing are profound. “Because they are totalities whose sense resides in their tendency to realize themselves as such in the course of their confrontation with their milieu,” Canguilhem wrote, “living forms can be grasped in a vision, never by a division.”

By declaring that science frequently requires a vision, or some sort of intuitive apprehension of systematic wholes, Canguilhem was forced to confront the problem of what he called “scientific ideologies,” which for him was an intermediate concept pulling both scientific and nonscientific thinking into the same loose orbit. For Canguilhem, a theory is scientific insofar as it fashions itself after a widely accepted scientific theory, Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism being a case in point. Such science-minded ambitions degenerate into ideology, however, when a theory advances ideas that far outstrip what a given scientific theory is able to confirm. Although scientific ideologies often retard the advance of science, Canguilhem saw a fruitful role for scientific ideologies. As Gary Gutting points out, the overly ambitious ideas advanced by scientific ideologies often “provide an essential, if not entirely responsible, dimension of intellectual adventure, without which many scientific advances would not occur.” For these reasons, then, Canguilhem’s antifoundationalism bears a strong resemblance at times to Polanyi’s. Although both see science as a rational enterprise, both also agree that there are few
visible markers that allow us to delineate scientific from nonscientific knowledge. Or, as Peter Dews put it when speaking about the search for clear demarcation criteria, “in the history of science there is ‘case law’ but no ‘canon law.’”

Dews’s reference to case law elicits a final observation about Canguilhem’s philosophy of science, namely, the importance it ascribes to history and a historical sense for scientific study. If biological analysis is frequently riddled with normative judgments, as Canguilhem insisted, then it requires no great leap of the imagination to see Canguilhem’s next point, namely, that biological ideas are inherently variable: what is taken to be normal or pathological changes over time. This is not the place to review Canguilhem’s detailed and nuanced treatment of the place of historical change—especially his discussion of “epistemic breaks”—in the evolution of medical or biological knowledge. Suffice it to say that a detailed examination of the historical setting of biological ideas would go a long way in preventing simplifying generalizations about normality and pathology from taking root. “Too often,” Canguilhem argued,

scientists hold the laws of nature to be essentially invariant. They treat singular phenomena as approximate copies, which fail to reproduce these laws’ supposed lawful reality in its entirety. From this perspective, the singular—that is, the divergence, the variation—appears to be a failure, a defect, an impurity.

A judgment about the normal and the pathological, then, should always be at least partly informed by an understanding of local milieus and temporal circumstances. Biological judgments, in other words, are not only normative but historical as well.

We should not conclude from all this that Aron was a self-professed vitalist like Canguilhem. Nevertheless, Canguilhem’s vitalism certainly reinforced Aron’s conviction that one should not draw a hard line between facts and values, even in the life sciences. By softening the distinction between scientific and nonscientific thinking, Polanyi, Canguilhem, and Aron skirted naturalism’s chief intellectual pitfall, namely, its tendency to compress the seamless continuities of lived experience into overly abstract concepts. Aron’s discussion of the distinction that Max Weber drew between facts and values is instructive here. By cordonning off the two realms as sharply as he did, Aron explained, Weber attempted to protect science from the reach of ideological and metaphysical thinking; at the same time, by insisting that the choice of values is arbitrary and subjective, Weber also liberated the act of choosing from any sort of scientific or historical determinism. However, Aron wrote,

in affirming an opposition in kind between procedures that are bound together in existence, between the discovery of the real and the choice of an action, [Weber] conferred an appearance of irrationality on decisions which are indeed not scientific, but which ought nevertheless be reasonable.

In disavowing the existence of any intermediate category between facts and values, or between science and choice—or between science and nonscience for that matter—Weber “finished by presenting, in terms of sheer choice, what tradition has more appropriately called wisdom.” Unfortunately, Aron added, the very sheerness of choice means that “there is nothing to prevent it being the choice of the devil.” Morgenthau made a similar point. “The dualism of rationalism,”
Morgenthau declared, “has tended to divide that which is united in our consciousness into strictly separate pairs of absolute opposites: to-be and ought-to-be, consciousness and its objects, science and philosophy, philosophy and religion. . . . However, what our conceptualizations assume to be absolutely distinct is in the reality of our consciousness functionally united.”

By accusing naturalism of conceptual overreach, Aron was accusing it of being fundamentally inhumane. If the world yields only to chance and necessity, as naturalism stipulates, then the human condition reduces to two—and only two—unhappy alternatives. The first believes that human behavior and the remarkable complexity of the natural world are shaped by the progressive forces of natural necessity. “Progressive” because nature automatically perfects itself, thanks to the relentless inner workings of natural selection. Darwin was emphatic on this point: the development of the complex from the simple, mind from matter, human being from ape—all arise from the forward march of natural selection. It goes almost without saying that human beings are the unwitting and unwilling products of this process; however evolutionary progress unfolds, it clearly unfolds without the assistance of human agency.

The second alternative, however, recognizes that there is nothing certain about future progress; evolution, after all, is utterly pointless, riven as it is by chance and unpredictability. For that reason, human beings, compelled by the natural urge for self-preservation, invariably come to view science as a sort of Promethean fire, “seized to set men free,” or as an instrument of control commanding the forces of natural necessity. Science may now create a race of “supermen,” human beings whose genes have been altered in order to make evolution conscious and willful. “By determining what our genes are,” Peter Lawler has written, “we will be able to change what natural evolution means us to be.” Harvey Mansfield summarizes naturalism’s predicament in this striking paragraph:

Perfection in the evolutionary struggle comes easily for humanity as a whole, depending only on average behavior from the mass of individuals without demanding moral perfection or heroism from any of them. Darwin’s manliness is totally unheroic; it is so functional that it does not have to be controlled or educated. It could be better understood as the loss of manliness, particularly in the present when civilization overcomes the struggle for existence, which comes to seem past and primitive. At this point science may take over from natural selection and produce an artificial man like Frankenstein’s monster, the imagined creation of a scientist. Manliness either falls back into debility or charges ahead like a mad man. The trouble is that Darwin’s man is aggressive without being assertive; he cannot speak and if he could he would not know what to say. Someone is needed to speak for Darwin’s man of large brain but no thought.

Debility or madness, Übermensch or ape: this, apparently, is all we may hope for scientific naturalism.

Aron, however, struck out in an entirely different direction, seeking a path illuminated not by science but by wisdom. As Aron envisioned it, practical wisdom straddles the middle ground between abstract theory and concrete experience. That there is such a middle ground is evidenced by the fact that theoretical concepts simply cannot capture the fullness of lived experience; conceptual
abstractions, by definition, provide only a partial look at the “durational flux” from which they are abstracted. As Aron put it, “The Spenglerian realist who asserts that man is a beast of prey and urges him to behave as such, ignores a whole side of human nature.” By insisting that concepts are somehow “functionally united” in our consciousness, or that profoundly different intellectual procedures are “bound in existence,” Aron and other classical realists underscored the priority of living vitality over conceptual abstraction and in so doing transformed what naturalism had treated as polar opposites—chance and necessity, for example—into partial truths.

Prudence thus prefers dialectical methods of reasoning to the linear causalities of scientific thought. The inner logic of practical wisdom, Aron explained, “attempts not only to consider each case in its concrete particularities, but also not to ignore any of the arguments of principle and opportunity, to forget neither the relation of forces nor the wills of people.” Morgenthau offered a similar assessment, but one with less of a moral edge to it. “Wisdom,” he declared, “is the gift of intuition, and political wisdom is the gift to grasp intuitively the quality of diverse interests and power in the present and future and the impact of different actions upon them.” In both statements, Aron and Morgenthau call for a more expansive method of thinking, one that reckons with—and seeks to reconcile—different modalities of experience. In fact, it was precisely because Polanyi regarded the different modalities of experience as relative and not absolute (as Weber did) that Aron was prompted to call him “a man of reconciliation.”

In recent years, philosophers have abandoned the search for a clear dividing line between scientific and nonscientific knowledge. “Demarcation arguments,” Martin Eger has declared, “have collapsed. Philosophers of science don’t hold them anymore. They may still enjoy acceptance in the popular world but that’s a different world.” Larry Laudan offers a similar assessment. “If we could stand on the side of reason,” Laudan writes, “we ought to drop terms like ‘pseudoscience.’ . . . They only do emotive work for us.” To many philosophers, the issue is not whether a given theory or hypothesis is scientific but whether it is true. If that is indeed the better question, then there may be more room for “noumenal” knowledge in political science than scientific naturalism currently believes. And if Aron is correct on that score, there may be more room for reconciliation as well.

Even before social scientists had begun to apply the experimental techniques of the natural sciences to the study of human behavior—a turn of mind that Morgenthau and Niebuhr blamed squarely on Darwin—advances in science and technology had dramatically transformed the natural and social worlds, and in Morgenthau’s opinion, “radically changed man’s experience of himself.” Science and technology have developed many of the instruments vital to totalitarian control and have thus contributed to the destruction of that inner realm of human freedom whereby men and women experience their autonomy and moral worth. Under those conditions, Morgenthau wrote, the individual becomes nothing more than “the helpless object of these technological developments and political possibilities. He is reduced to shaking his fists in impotent rage at those anonymous forces which control a goodly fraction of his life but which he cannot control.” Aron agreed. “We suffer from an excess of science,” Aron wrote, meaning that “men often appear to find in the conquest of nature, not the satisfac-
tion of their will to power but new means of fighting, exploiting and tyrannizing one another.”

Aron, then, recognized that there is a dark side to science, one that emerges when the techniques and assumptions of the natural sciences are directly applied to the control of human beings. Aron was particularly disturbed—outraged, really—by those political philosophies that took as their point of departure the biologically inspired idea that man is essentially an animal of prey. The social biologies of Spengler and Nietzsche were particularly offensive to Aron: he saw a clear link between the notion that men and women were “beasts”—the fundamental principle animating “biological philosophies of human destiny”—and the brutalities of National Socialism. Because they believed that human beings were engaged in a struggle of all against all, National Socialists would not abide human weakness. Not only were the incurably ill put to death in Nazi Germany and “terminated like useless animals,” but defeated populations were either enslaved or exterminated as well. At the heart of this barbarity, Aron reminded his readers, was a thoroughgoing naturalism. By accepting naturalism’s single-minded devotion to the principle that chance and necessity govern the universe, Aron argued, “one achieves a transmutation of values: man necessarily recognizes and accepts his animality and now exists only to do battle with other individuals and peoples, impatient to demonstrate by force of arms his title to superiority.”

Aron’s rejection of social biology must not obscure the fact that he believed biology to be helpful in explaining some facets of human behavior. In his monumental treatise on international relations, for example, Aron considered the biological evidence for the existence of an innate tendency among human beings for warfare and considered the evidence to be substantial: “Whether spontaneous or the result of learning, combative behavior, to the observer, often seems adaptive.” Although he would not subscribe wholeheartedly to the notion that frustration leads to aggression, Aron wrote—rather drily—that it nevertheless seemed reasonable to believe that “the frustrated individual is somehow irritable.” Nevertheless, the central point for Aron is that combativeness can be modified by experience and can even be learned or forgotten. For that reason, he declared, “the difficulty of peace has more to do with man’s humanity than his animality.” Indeed,

the mouse who has received a beating yields to the stronger and the hierarchy of domination is stable. The wolf that bares its throat is spared by its victor. Man is a being capable of preferring revolt to humiliation and his own truth to life itself. The hierarchy of masters and slaves will never be stable. Tomorrow the masters will no longer have need of servants and they will have the power to exterminate.

This, incidentally, was a point of central significance for Niebuhr. “Every biological fact and every animal impulse, however obvious its relation to the world below man, is altered because of its incorporation into the human psyche.” Niebuhr believed that at the very core of the human personality is the capacity for self-transcendence. This means that human beings can freely alter the conditions of their own existence, a capacity that resists purely mechanical or material explanations. In underscoring the shortcomings of a naturalistic social science, Niebuhr held up Freudian analysis as an example, arguing that Freudian psychotherapy begins
from premises that are too narrowly biological. Is it not remarkable, Niebuhr observed, that the analysis of the human dream world, of all things, provides insight into a realm of the human psyche (the unconscious) dominated by “purely biological impulses”? Niebuhr could no more resist a jab here than Aron could: if it is indeed the case that strictly biological impulses govern human psychology, Niebuhr mused, then must we not suppose that animals too suffer from an Oedipal complex or from a debilitating sense of guilt generated by the sexual longing for one’s parent? In the end, Niebuhr argued, Freudian analysis unintentionally offers striking proof that human behavior is ultimately composed of a complex compound of ideal realities and natural necessities. On the one hand, the id engages in “subtleties and strategies” that have no part in nature, while on the other hand, Freud insisted that significant elements of the ego and superego are unconscious. Freudianism thus “pretends to explain all the complexities of man’s spirit in biological terms but fails to explain how biological impulses should have become transmuted into such highly complex spiritual phenomena.”

Like many classical realists, Aron was troubled by the overconfidence inspired by the sophisticated inner workings of scientific models. Reviewing the literature on nuclear deterrence, for example, Aron vigorously condemned its penchant for abstract reasoning. Citing the work of Herman Kahn as an example, Aron complained that Kahn “imagines, invents and describes with a minuteness bordering on unreality dozens of situations of conflict reduced to simplified schemes and the decisions that suit those situations.” Although Kahn’s scholarship is not “science fiction,” Aron added, “what other name but ‘strategy fiction’ could one give to this form of literature?” For his part, Aron preferred to treat strategic issues as historically or as concretely as possible. “When it is a question of...the use of force or escalation,” Aron mused, “the analyst who wishes to be the Prince’s adviser must dirty his hands; I mean he has to come down from the ethereal levels of models and plans and get to know in their totality the elements that make up the situation and in terms of which the statesman will have to make his decision.”

The perils of an abstract scientific naturalism for political thinking are perhaps most clearly evident in Bradley Thayer’s recent efforts to graft biological knowledge onto a theory of international relations. As Thayer sees it, the chief merit of Darwinian naturalism lies in its ability to account for two human traits—egoism and domination—and two social institutions—war and ethnic conflict. All these phenomena, Thayer argues, are a direct result of the struggle for survival. In the face of natural scarcity and a hostile environment, human beings, like animals, behave in ways that are intended to maximize their “fitness,” which is to say, their capacity to survive and reproduce. The principle of fitness explains all sorts of behaviors for neo-Darwinians: the creation of social hierarchies (which maintain the social order so necessary for the pursuit of reproductive success), the development of mind (by which rivals are outwitted), and the emergence of war and conflict (for the sake of life-enhancing spoils), among other things, are all explained by the never-ending quest for reproductive success, a quest programmed into our genetic circuitry by the forces of natural necessity. From this perspective, Thayer observes, quoting William Durham, “war is one means by which human beings ‘may improve the material conditions of their lives and thereby improve their ability to survive and reproduce.”
Warfare, in other words, contributes to fitness, as do ethnocentrism, dominance, and egoism: in each case, traits develop (thanks to genetic mutations) that enhance the abilities of some groups and individuals to survive and even flourish in a hostile natural environment.

As a by-product of biological necessity, war is thus “part of the fabric of international conflict.”29 This does not mean that human action has no bearing on the course of armed conflict: Thayer apparently agrees with those who believe that culture deflects natural necessity, at least to some extent. “While the origin of warfare is informed by evolutionary theory,” Thayer writes, “warfare itself has multiple forms and is greatly influenced by the culture and the international system.”

Appealing to culture has the effect of weakening the force of biological determinism and allowing for a measure of historical indeterminacy. By weaving cultural factors into the forces of natural necessity, Thayer is attempting to soften the traditional criticism of sociobiology: that the biologically necessary is the morally right. On the one hand, then, and like Aron, Thayer seems to be reluctant to insist that war is a necessary and ineradicable feature of international politics: states and the international system, he concedes, may work in tandem to suppress conflict and have historically been able to do so. On the other hand, however, Thayer argues that given their historical contribution to evolutionary fitness, xenophobia, war, and ethnocentrism “are likely to be recurring phenomena.”30 The same may be said about the urge to dominate and control. “A state’s elites,” Thayer argues, “the captains of industry and media, and military and political leaders . . . are more likely than average to show [dominance] traits in abundance since most leaders rise to the top of their respective hierarchies through a very competitive process.” Biology, then, although “not destiny,” is in fact “good probability.”31 Thayer is thus apparently satisfied to carve out a comparatively small niche for freedom and contingency, at least one not big enough to override or neutralize the forces of natural necessity.

Thanks to Darwinian naturalism, offensive realism’s core principle—that states not only pursue power but seek to maximize it—now has scientific warrant. Human evolution is responsible for exactly the sort of behavior expected by the offensive realist; the anarchical system of states only exacerbates the sense of insecurity that has been bred into human beings since the late Pliocene era. The theoretical point of all this is to strengthen offensive realism by grounding it in science. When Mearsheimer declares that “genuine peace, or a world where states do not compete for power, is not likely,” we now know scientifically why that is the case.32 Indeed, so predictable are the patterns of human behavior and so unlikely it is that peace will emerge from them that Mearsheimer compares the international system to an “iron cage,” a metaphor that is surely intended to warn the neo-Kantians among us that their efforts on behalf of a peaceful and progressive world order will almost certainly be in vain.

These are not ivory-tower abstractions for Thayer; in fact, these principles have significant implications for foreign policy. Thayer’s proposal for an American China policy provides us with an interesting case in point. Thayer argues that the United States will soon regard China as a threat to its dominant position in the world, just as the Chinese will inevitably see the U.S. as the major obstacle to its “assumption of hegemony.” Because the “struggle for hegemony is ancient and unending,” the U.S. must brace itself for conflict. Accordingly, Thayer ranks a series
of strategies on their ability to contain China and maintain American regional and global dominance. According to Thayer, the most effective strategies for containing China are those that require American military power. The United States must therefore maintain close military ties with the Republic of Taiwan and create a vigorous system of alliances involving the major regional powers near China, such as India, Japan, and South Korea, possibly creating another Asian treaty organization of sorts. Stalemate and equilibrium with China are not options: Thayer insists that the U.S. must not only “have the will to confront China” but “must be bold enough to win the competition” as well. Such a confrontational policy has its risks, to be sure—and among them, Thayer admits, is the possibility of nuclear war—but Thayer quite clearly believes that “boldness” demands that we be fully prepared to run them.

Conspicuously absent in all this is a willingness to deploy diplomacy as an instrument of accommodation. Thayer simply shrugs off the possibility, dismissing the hope of some sort of diplomatic entente with China as Pollyannaish. “While analysts hope that Sino-American confrontation can be avoided,” Thayer argues, “it is important to anchor U.S. policies in realities and probable outcomes rather than hopes.” And what, exactly, are those realities? Although Thayer does not explicitly say so, it is by now difficult to escape the conclusion that they are essentially biological; because the animal kingdom as a general rule knows only winners and losers, and very little of negotiated settlements, we must disabuse ourselves of the hope of any sort of diplomatic accommodations with our rivals.

Thayer’s single-minded preoccupation with hegemony thus propels him far beyond the precepts of Aron’s classical realism. Compared to the realism of Aron, Morgenthau, or Niebuhr, David Lampton has pointed out, offensive realism rests on a rather “dark” understanding of power, one that reserves “virtually no role for diplomacy or intelligent leadership.” Military prowess may not be the only form of power for Mearsheimer (and Thayer), Lampton adds, but it is certainly “the most useful,” especially in “the jungle-like international arena.” Although classical realism, too, stressed the importance of military power, it also believed that power had a softer, more intentional dimension as well; for Aron, power was measured not only by calculating troop strength but also by assessing a state’s diplomatic ability to sway the minds and opinions of others.

Thayer’s Darwinian naturalism, then, culminates not in some sort of uneasy equilibrium but rather in a restless, violent quest for dominance. The struggle for dominance, however, is not endemic to all biologically based theories of international relations. Although we have chosen to focus on Thayer’s work, we must note in passing that other forms of biological naturalism have driven some theorists to reach conclusions that are diametrically opposed to Thayer’s. Jennifer Sterling-Folker, for example, argues that there is significant interest among international relations theorists in more Lamarckian-inspired theories of evolution, which is to say, theories that stress our ability to shape the environment rather than, as Darwin had it, the ability of the environment to shape us.

From a Lamarckian perspective, life and politics are not necessarily governed by death struggles, as Darwinians believe. Far from it: “The anarchic global vacuum,” Sterling-Folker writes, “has become increasingly filled in the twentieth century thanks to the development of modern science and technology.” Advances in science and technology
have had the immediate effect of *postponing* our fear of death—this fear being at the heart of Darwinian theories of international relations—because human beings are now able to manipulate their environments, thus easing their immediate need to survive, a fact that allows human beings to pursue more peaceful and cooperative relations. Although liberal theorists do acknowledge that survival is a prerequisite of sorts in the pursuit of all other interests, they also maintain that the obsession over the fear of dying is not as intense among human beings as it has historically been. Thanks to the cultural transmission of information, we have developed far beyond the other animals and are now able to slough off, at least intermittently, our primordial fear of death. What liberal approaches to politics and international relations have in common, then, is the unshakeable conviction that, as Robert Keohane put it, “people really do make their own history.” We are not, in short, biological automatons obsessively given over to the fear of death and the exhausting, never-ending search for reproductive success.

Midway through her essay, Sterling-Folker pauses to make an interesting observation about evolutionary theories of international relations. “Despite frequent calls to do so,” Sterling-Folker writes, “there is little room for meeting in the middle since each theory views the relationship between the environment, human beings, and human-generated institutions and social practices in diametrically opposed terms.” In other words, and just as Mansfield warned, biological naturalism forces us to choose between two equally unpleasant possibilities. Whether we find ourselves trapped by the force field of necessity or forced to make a leap into the scientific unknown, we quickly realize that neither world is a reasonable one. What, then, are the possibilities for self-determination? How can we be sure that it is possible to break free, however tenuously, from the constraints of biological necessity?

For the philosopher Anthony O’Hear, the simple act of asking the question is profoundly reassuring. “The normativity, the search for truth for its own sake,” O’Hear argues, “engages us in types of considerations which are not found in the scientific descriptions and explanations, whether those of physics or biology.” Indeed, our very “self-conscious agency” or the ability to give ourselves “goals and projects” is not only curious but inexplicable from a Darwinian standpoint, especially if those goals and projects contribute nothing to—or even threaten—our survival. To O’Hear, viewing all human action as simply so many reflexive mechanisms developed in the course of an eternal struggle for survival is simply incoherent and self-defeating. Aron believed much the same thing. The most fundamental philosophical problem with naturalism, Aron argued, is that by focusing so narrowly on competition and struggle, naturalist philosophies “have demanded what is at bottom paradoxical—that the historian disregard, in [other] beings, the will for value or truth, without which the artist himself would not exist and the historical or contemporary student would become unintelligible.” This is “an impossible ambition,” Aron added, because “the historian passes as naturally from man to ideas as from ideas to man.”

Although Morgenthau, Niebuhr, and Aron clashed from time to time over the proper role of diplomacy during the Cold War—especially in regards to the importance of negotiated settlements—all agreed that the future could be significantly shaped and even transformed by acts of enlightened statecraft. Unfortunately, scientific naturalism holds out no such hope. In order to
avoid the more damaging manifestations of materialism and determinism, Aron urged philosophers, statesmen, and educated publics to begin “from the idea of the presence, in each individual, of a soul or a spirit, upon which is founded human dignity and the right to respect.”³⁹ Man must now “use the consciousness he has of himself to better accomplish his task of civilization and not debase or lower himself to the level of an animal species.” Niebuhr and Morgenthau shared these sentiments. Indeed, it was in a book dedicated to Niebuhr that Morgenthau expressed the same pious wish as Aron did. All three thinkers would have agreed that the hope for a better and more peaceful future resides in a conscious effort to strengthen the better angels of our nature, not in doubling down on our chances for reproductive success. 

2. Ibid., 68.
17. Ibid., 609.
23. Raymond Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans* (Paris, 1944), 123, 125. All translations are the author’s.
24. Ibid., 177.
30. Ibid., 144, 150.
36. Ibid., 78.