Veneer Theory

Aaron Zimmerman (UCSB)

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Someone who means you harm pretends to be a friend. A *veneer* of goodwill effectively masks her self-serving motives. Her apparent concern is mock concern, and thus no concern at all.

When wielded as a slogan, "morality is a veneer," serves as an expression of moral skepticism. At a minimum, it suggests the infrequency of altruism and the commonality of injustice. At a maximum, it implies that moral discourse is a complete sham. We advise brotherly love and demand fairness and respect. But a person will neither give love nor lend respect unless we compel them or appeal to their ulterior ends. Morality is a veneer: a shiny coat of social grease applied to hide amoral selves too rough to interact without violent friction. Morality is pretense: a systemic form of deception.

In *Morality and the Social Instincts*—the Tanner Lectures on Human Values——the esteemed primatologist Frans de Waal coins the term "veneer theory" to describe views on which morality is a cultural construct. He therein converts "morality is a veneer" into something more than a skeptical slogan designed to draw our attention to commonplace forms of hypocrisy. According to de Waal, T.H. Huxley (1895) was the paradigmatic veneer theorist. Against Huxley, de Waal utilizes contemporary primatology to argue that the primate species from which the earliest humans, bonobos and chimps evolved had capacities for empathy and sympathy, a sense of fairness and gratitude, a non-derivative concern for the wellbeing of their kin, and a proclivity to experience anger at perceived injustices. Confronted with the manifestation of these traits by non-human apes and other primates, we must conclude that a contemporary human's moral compass is largely a biological phenomenon, the outgrowth of a genetically inherited "core morality" that emerged long before the evolution of our species.[1]

We can suppose that the earliest humans had the biologically natural set of core capacities and proclivities to which de Waal points without forgetting the enormous diversity in moral codes reported by historians and anthropologists. Diverse tribes

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[1] "One school views morality as a cultural innovation achieved by our species alone. This school does not see moral tendencies as part and parcel of human nature. Our ancestors, it claims, became moral by choice. The second school, in contrast, views morality as a direct outgrowth of the social instincts that we share with other animals. In the latter view, morality is neither unique to us nor a conscious decision taken at a specific point in time: it is the product of social evolution. The first standpoint assumes that deep down we are not truly moral. It views morality as a cultural overlay, a thin veneer hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature. Until recently, this was the dominant approach to morality within evolutionary biology as well as among science writers popularizing this field. I will use the term 'Veneer Theory' to denote these ideas, tracing their origin to Thomas Henry Huxley (although they obviously go back much further in Western philosophy and religion, all the way to the concept of original sin." (de Waal, 2003, 6-7)
De Waal also reads S. Freud (1913), the biologist G.C. Williams (1988) and the evolutionary theorist R. Dawkins (1976, 2003) as veneer theorists, and includes several social contract theorists discussed in the text below.

developed in diverse ways and warred with each other along the way. Group selection therein "winnowed" the diverse space of moral communities spawned by the initial tribe.[2] Some narrowing of the field is supposed to have happened before human language evolved (cf. Sterelny, 2012). But by all accounts, the construction of sentential language proved crucial. Sentential language enabled people to formulate complex contracts, enter into complex economic arrangements and support religious, spiritual and political institutions to codify, inculcate and enforce the rules, norms and principles we associate with "morality" today.[3] These innovations bestowed tremendous advantages on communities competing and warring with groups of inarticulate animals—animals that were limited to gestures, grunts, howls and chirps when communicating roles, duties and privileges to one another.

Still, while de Waal acknowledges that human language instituted a revolutionary alteration of primate morality, he argues that the roots of our contemporary norms in substantive capacities for fellow feeling, cooperative endeavor, and norm-enforcement undermine the veneer theorist's analysis of moral talk in terms of pretense. Whatever one makes of the *metaphysics* of morals, morality is *biologically* and *psychologically real*. Since so much of morality existed before the evolution of human language (and thus human religion and human politics), morality today is much more than a story we tell to elicit behaviors that accord with our reproductive and pecuniary interests.

> We are not subduing the proverbial wolf within us or hypocritically fooling everyone around us when we act morally: we are taking decisions that flow from social instincts far older than our species, even though we add to these the perhaps uniquely human complexity of a disinterested concern for others and the society at large. (de Waal, 2003, 33)

Clearly, de Waal finds some connection between the origins of our moral psychology and its current status; some relatively deep connection between: (a) the innateness of those psychological faculties operative when we judge one another good or bad, fair or unfair, virtuous and vicious (and/or behave in ways that elicit these judgments), and (b) the biological reality (or "depth") of the traits we express or ascribe. After all, if de Waal didn't perceive a connection of this sort, he would not argue from the empathy, sympathy and sense of fairness exhibited by the chimpanzees he has studied to the optimistic conclusion that morality is much more than a veneer.

But is de Waal's inference cogent? Admittedly, discursive hypocrisy is uniquely human. Since the other primates cannot construct sentences, they cannot demand adherence to

[2] When used to denote the extinction of one human group by another, "winnowing" has an objectionably euphemistic feel to it; mutatis mutandis for the "assimilation" of one culture into another.

[3] On the role of early discourse in the evolution of morality see Tomasello (2014) and Boehm (2014). Cf. P. Kitcher, "At some point between the beginnings of ethical life and the invention of writing, our ancestors developed conceptions of self-regarding virtues, of social solidarity, and of respect for the law. It is, nevertheless, quite impossible to pinpoint the changes that occurred or to make responsible estimates of when they happened" (2016, 192).

rules they secretly ignore. But the other primates aren't exactly saints. Though chimpanzees act benevolently and reconcile with one another after disputes in the ways de Waal so vividly describes, chimps are also prone to deception and domination (Byrne and Whitten, 1988). Mightn't chimps engage in pretense with the aim of getting conspecifics to observe rules the pretenders have no intention of observing? And mightn't we have inherited from our primate ancestors a proclivity to engage in these tactics and a concurrent susceptibility to their deployment by others?

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Before assessing de Waal's case against veneer theory, we would do well to focus his reading of the target. For as de Waal conceptualizes it, veneer theory is a complex idea with at least four component theses. The first two theses concern the contemporary function of morality or the *uses* to which moral language and deliberate displays of apparent altruism and fairness are now put. The second two theses concern the *origins* of moral speech and our acts of seeming altruism and justice, and the biological and psychological robustness of these complexes. The first two theses characterize the use of moral language and display as deceptive and coercive; the second two theses limit morality to the effects of these deceptive, coercive acts. We can articulate these four claims as follows.

> Morality is coercive: the main function of moral discourse and behavior is getting other people to behave in ways the speaker or actor desires, where the audience in question is not predisposed to act in the desired manner out of prudence or self-interest.
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> Morality is deceptive: moral discourse and behavior could not play their coercive function were this function advertised (or made explicitly known) to the audience at which it is aimed.
>
> Morality is psychologically superficial: a typical human's de fault motives are immoral or amoral—genuinely moral behavior is invariably the upshot of the coercive and deceptive uses of moral language or behavior referenced above.
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> Morality is biologically superficial: most (if not all) of those aspects of our psychology that we owe to our evolved biology are either immoral or (at least) non-moral.

Do those thinkers de Waal characterizes as veneer theorists embrace these four theses? Are these theses diagnostically adequate?

At times, de Waal casts a wide net, calling Hobbes and several other theorists of the social contract "veneer theorists" because they posit "a rational decision by inherently asocial creatures" to explain the formation of civil societies (2003, 4).[4] But Hobbes is something of a straw man in this context. Social and political theorists have long rejected the idea of a social contract when that idea is put forth as a description of the emergence

[4] Cf. de Waal's criticism of Rawls; de Waal (2003, 4-6).

of civil societies from a supposed state of nature. (As the old saying goes, the social contract is not worth the paper it's *not* written on.) We don't need to employ contemporary primatology to flog a dead horse that we know can't respond to the beating.

Moreover, de Waal's main stalking horse is not Hobbes, but Darwin's bulldog, T.H. Huxley, who de Waal blames for the tendency of biologists and social scientists to adopt veneer theory as a working hypothesis (2003, 34). And Huxley is famous for delivering a particularly harsh *critique* of social contract theory. Indeed, after observing that Rousseau wisely deploys the social contract as an ideal rather than a description of mankind's past (1890a, 298-9), Huxley goes on to reject the ideal in question.[5] "The political lantern of Rousseauism is a mere corpse candle and will plunge those who follow it in the deepest of anarchic bogs" (Huxley, 1890a, 301). If Huxley conceptualized morality as a veneer, it was not because he thought of it as a "choice."

So it is worth going back to Huxley, to see the degree to which Huxley embraced veneer theory's central theses as we've articulated them on de Waal's behalf. Did Huxley think of humans as "naturally" selfish animals? Did Huxley describe his contemporaries' use of moral language—or their more overt displays of apparent altruism and fairness—in terms of pretense? Did Huxley claim that moral assertions and displays of virtue primarily function to conceal the moralist's self-serving ends?

According to de Waal, Huxley inferred the biological superficiality of morality from a mistaken interpretation of natural selection. In a break with Darwin, Huxley is supposed to have ignored reciprocal altruism, kin selection and (non-kin) group selection, and because of these oversights he (i.e. Huxley) is supposed to have mistakenly concluded that evolution favors selfishness.

> Evolution favors animals that assist each other if by doing so they achieve long-term benefits of greater value than the benefits derived from going it alone and competing with others. Unlike cooperation resting on simultaneous benefits to all parties involved (known as mutualism), reciprocity involves exchanged acts that, while beneficial to the recipient, are costly to the performer (Dugatkin 1997). This cost, which is generated because there is a time lag between giving and receiving, is eliminated as soon as a favor of equal value is returned to the performer… It is in these theories that we find the germ of an evolutionary explanation that escaped Huxley. (de Waal, 2003, 10-1)
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> Why did evolutionary biology stray from this path during the final quarter of the previous century? This is probably due to the conviction of some prominent figures, inspired by Huxley, that there is no way natural selection could have produced anything other than nasty organisms. No good could possibly have come from such a blind process. This belief, however, represents a monumental confusion between process and outcome. Natural selection is indeed a merciless process of elimination, yet it has the capacity to produce an incredible range of

[5] Huxley says that conceiving of the social contract as ideal rather than real was wise on Rousseau's part because Rousseau employs a "vicious method of a priori political speculation" which bears little connection to scientific biology and anthropology (Huxley, 1890b, 336).

> organisms, from the most asocial and competitive to the kindest and gentlest. If we assume that the building blocks of morality are among its many products, as Darwin did, then morality, instead of being a human-made veneer, should be looked at as an integral part of our history as group-living animals, hence an extension of our primate social instincts. (de Waal, 2003, 34)

But did Huxley really deny the existence of group selection? Did he really overlook the possibility that competition between groups might select a population of cooperators?

No, he didn't.[6] Even the most cursory look at Huxley's writings will show that de Waal's charges are unjust on this score. Huxley explicitly hypothesized that competition between groups selected for what we might call "in-group" cooperativeness: the kind of *selective* good will manifested by those Europeans colonizing the New World.

> There is no doubt of the result, if the work of the colonists be varied out energetically and with intelligent combination of all their forces. On the other hand, if they are slothful, stupid or careless or if they waste their *energies in contests with one another*, the chances are that the old state of nature with have the best of it. The native savage will destroy the immigrant civilized man. Of the English animals and plants some will be extirpated by their indigenous rivals, others will pass into the feral state and themselves become components of the state of nature. In a few decades, all other traces of the settlement will have vanished. (Huxley, 1895, 17, emphasis added)

There are two things to note about the passage. The first is the *partial* nature of the cooperative motives that will emerge if group selection brings some change to the biological state of American nature.[7] The distribution of phenotypes in the New World will remain largely unaltered unless the colonists cooperate with one another against the natives and other components of the natural order they found there. As we now know, the colonists did cooperate with one another, and did bring about a change in the distribution of phenotypes in the Americas. Like Darwin (1871/1982), Huxley viewed the history of colonization as a process of group selection.

So de Waal is wrong to accuse Huxley of ignoring every evolutionary mechanism save individual selection. It's just that Huxley didn't indulge in the absurd suggestion that group selection had yielded populations of pure altruists. Instead, competition for resources between groups of humans (and other animals) had left a highly *parochial* form of altruism in place: in-group solidarity rather than solidarity simpliciter (cf. Livingstone-Smith, 2011). According to Huxley, the groups that had won in the battle for reproductive resources and therein persisted over time contained a higher proportion of what he called "cooperative intelligence." Holding all else equal, the members of less cooperative

[6] Huxley even countenanced species selection. "Man, the animal, in fact, has worked his way to the headship of the sentient world, and has become the superb animal which he is, in virtue of his success in the struggle for existence. The conditions having been of a certain order, man's organization has adjusted itself to them better than that of his competitors in the cosmic strife" (1895, 51).

[7] See fn. 10 for the second notable feature referenced here.

groups were outbred, extinguished or assimilated.[8]

Is cooperative intelligence, as Huxley conceived of it, a component of deep morality? In one sense of the question, the answer is "yes," but in another it's probably "no." Huxley thought of cooperative intelligence as a "deep" (biologically evolved) phenotype. But whether we conceive of the complex of psychological characteristics that explain a tribe's cooperation with one another genuinely "moral," depends on the sense we lend to that essentially contested term. On Huxley's account, group selection yields the kind of narrowly trained ethos that was endorsed by the majority of his readers. Group selection had produced populations of individuals who were disposed to cooperate (more or less nicely) with those with whom they identified, but these were individuals who were equally disposed to war against those they conceptualized as competitors or enemies. Importantly, given de Waal's invocation of contemporary primatology against him, Huxley did in fact include empathy and a desire for fairness within the human natures that had then emerged from diverse evolutionary pressures. And chimpanzee empathy and fairness are the central capacities de Waal cites when describing morality's core. In fact, Huxley explicitly endorsed the biological precedents that (on de Waal's reckoning) veneer theorists are supposed to reject.

> I see no reason to doubt that, at its origin, human society was as much a product of organic necessity as that of the bees. The human family, to begin with, rested upon exactly the same conditions as those which gave rise to similar associations among animals lower in the scale. Further, it is easy to see that every increase in the duration of the family ties, with the resulting co-operation of a larger and larger number of descendants for protection and defence, would give the families in which such modifications took place a distinct advantage over the others. And, as in the hive, the progressive limitation of the struggle for existence between the members of the family would involve increasing efficiency as regards outside competition. (Huxley, 1895, 26)

This passage conclusively refutes de Waal's claim that Huxley ignored group selection, equated human existence with the struggle of each individual against the rest, and was therein led to equate moral speech with a disguised attempt to coerce essentially self-interested agents into cooperative endeavors. Huxley rejected that conception of morality whole cloth when he claimed, "that, at its origin, human society was as much a product of organic necessity as that of the bees" (ibid.).

Did Huxley claim the English were competing for survival and reproduction and so subject to the force of individual selection? Did he label his neighbors' calls for kindness, justice and patriotic solidarity a ploy used by them to gain advantage in their competition for greater progeny? Again the answer is "no."

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[8] It may be that Huxley thought the colonists were more cooperative than the natives and he may have thought this advantage central to an explanation of colonialisms "success": i.e. the drastic evolution of phenotypes in the New World. The texts with which I am familiar don't address the issue.

> I think it would puzzle Mr. Lilly, or any one else, to adduce convincing evidence that, at any period of the world's history, there was a more widespread sense of social duty, or a greater sense of justice, or of the obligation of mutual help, than in this England of ours. Ah ! but, says Mr. Lilly, these are all products of our Christian inheritance; when Christian dogmas vanish virtue will disappear too, and the ancestral ape and tiger will have full play. But there are a good many people who think it obvious that Christianity also inherited a good deal from Paganism and from Judaism; and that, if the Stoics and the Jews revoked their bequest, the moral property of Christianity would realise very little. And, if morality has survived the stripping off of several sets of clothes which have been found to fit badly, why should it not be able to get on very well in the light and handy garments which Science is ready to provide? (1895, 145)

Of course, the call to war is often diagnosed as a hypocritical bid for the choicest mates, especially when it is loudly trumpeted by those who refuse to join in the fray. But one of Huxley's central conclusions in *Ethics and Evolution* was that natural selection had not affected the population of England over the course of the "four or five centuries" prior to his writing that work (1895, 40). In particular,

> During these three centuries, from the reign of Elizabeth to that of Victoria, the struggle for existence between man and man has been so largely restrained among the great mass of the population (except for one or two short intervals of civil war), that it can have had little, or no, selective operation. As to anything comparable to direct selection, it has been practised on so small a scale that it may also be neglected. The criminal law, in so far as by putting to death, or by subjecting to long periods of imprisonment, those who infringe its provisions, prevents the propagation of hereditary criminal tendencies; and the poor-law, in so far as it separates married couples, whose destitution arises from hereditary defects of character, are doubtless selective agents operating in favour of the non-criminal and the more effective members of society. But the proportion of the population which they influence is very small; and, generally, the hereditary criminal and the hereditary pauper have propagated their kind before the law effects them. In a large proportion of cases, crime and pauperism have nothing to do with heredity; but are the consequence, partly, of circumstances and partly, the possession of qualities, which under different conditions of life, might have excited esteem and admiration. (1895, 39)

We are thus left with an interpretive mystery. Huxley clearly believed in group selection and the persistence of those biologically real forms of human sympathy, benevolence and justice for which it accounts. And Huxley clearly denied that individual selection was operating (or had operated) on English society to affect the distribution of psychological phenotypes therein. So Huxley explicitly posited a moral core and explicitly denied the then contemporary operation of those biological pressures that might favor the use of a "moral veneer" as a reproductive strategy. Why then does de Waal construe Huxley as the veneer theorist *par excellence*?

The answer, I think, can be found in Huxley's infamous rejection of the egalitarian ideology so movingly expressed by American and French revolutionaries in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Huxley is famous for arguing that this rhetoric was obviously false and bankrupt when interpreted in a descriptive sense: men are not "equal" and never have been (Huxley, 1890a). Mightn't de Waal construe Huxley's critique of revolutionary ideology as evidence of Huxley's adherence to veneer theory? Of course, to reject egalitarian slogans is not yet to claim that morality's central function is coercive deception. Nor does it imply morality's biological or psychological irreality. But it's a start.

On this more nuanced reading of Huxley, "the veneer" he sees is not morality as a whole, but the expression of universal moral principles that are supposed to guide revolutionary political movements toward a truly egalitarian world order. What was pretense in Huxley's eyes was not a mother's "natural affection and sympathy" for her sick child or the Englishmen's quite genuine concern for the property rights of Englishmen wherever they may roam. These feelings are indeed both biologically and psychologically real (1895, 37).[9] But then so is our drive to dominate, our will to power.

> The propounders of what are called the "ethics of evolution" when the 'evolution of ethics' would usually better express the object of their speculations, adduce a number of more or less interesting facts and more or less sound arguments, in favour of the origin of the moral sentiments, in the same way as other natural phenomena, by a process of evolution. I have little doubt, for my own part, that they are on the right track; but as the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist. (1895, 79-80)

What is mere pretense, according to Huxley, is not our evolved in-group morality, but the cosmopolitan idea that *we are all in the in-group*.

Though Huxley characterizes group selection as the main source of "the ethical progress" (1895, 35), he insists that ethical progress has a dark side: while it strengthens the loyalties, friendships and pro-social concerns of in-group members, it concurrently augments their hostility to members of various out-groups, who are in consequence conceptualized as "the enemies of the ethical."

> Even should the whole human race be absorbed in one vast polity, within which "absolute political justice" reigns, the struggle for existence with the state of nature outside it, and the tendency to the return of the struggle within, in consequence of over-multiplication, will remain; and, unless men's inheritance from the ancestors who fought a good fight in the state of nature, their dose of

[9] In fact, Huxley endorsed Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" analysis of the sentiments that constitute an in-group's morality and the more neutral, abstract judgments of propriety, virtue and vice to which these sentiments give rise (1895, 31); and de Waal classifies Smith as a paradigmatic *opponent* of veneer theory (2003, 12).

> original sin, is rooted out by some method at present unrevealed, at any rate to disbelievers in supernaturalism, every child born into the world will still bring with him the instinct of unlimited self-assertion. He will have to learn the lesson of self-restraint and renunciation. But the practice of self-restraint and renunciation is not happiness, though it may be something much better (1895, 43-4).

Natural selection has not yielded wholly self-interested individuals who mask their wholly selfish motives in the course of their daily interactions. But the kind of biologically and psychologically real in-group solidarity that emerges from group selection is *inevitably* tied to out-group hostility: the kind of "othering" described by contemporary social theorists.

But the wail of the chorus is real: *why* must we hate others to love one another? The answer, Huxley opines, is that we are naturally competitive in our acquisitiveness. We stop competing for resources with our brothers and sisters to help our family dominate the neighbors. We stop competing with the neighbors to help our village beat the next. And when all Englishmen have what they need to survive and reproduce without fear, when selective pressures fail to operate within the nation, "the struggle for existence, as between man and man, within that society, is ipso facto, at an end" (1895, 36). But the competitive drives of the English were not *eliminated* during this period of social harmony. They were *displaced* or transformed into those that drove British imperialism. Might the kind of "othering" that accompanied this transformation provide the context in which Huxley found moral language functioning as a veneer?

I cannot address this interpretive question with the kind of scholarly care it should be given by a historian with deep knowledge of the period in question. But there are some suggestive facts worth reporting. First, recall that John Locke (1689/1988) used the idea that all men are by nature equal to argue against the authority of a Catholic monarch who lacked the consent of the English people he claimed to govern, and that Thomas Jefferson's (1776) justification for declaring independence from the British invoked Locke's ideology when arguing for the self-evidence of a similarly universal set of principles: that all men are endowed by their creator with equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We know too that Locke profited from the slave trade and was instrumental in writing inegalitarian (viciously inhumane) provisions into the slave code of the Carolinas (Bernasconi and Mann, 2005), and that Jefferson "lived large" off his many slaves and failed to free them in his will (Cohen, 1969; Berlin, 1998). So Locke and Jefferson enslaved men while arguing loudly for the natural injustice of slavery. It is fair to say, then, that the universalist moral language employed by Locke and Jefferson were components of a discursive façade they employed to hide their real lives.

These were veneers for sure, but not evidence for veneer theory as de Waal presents it. For what Locke and Jefferson were hiding in words was not amorality or immorality, but a *partial morality* limited to the wealthy Anglo-American clan of which they were both

members.[10] It is reasonable to suppose that Huxley knew of these instances of historically grand hypocrisy— and many others besides—and that this knowledge led him to conceptualize the revolutionaries' cosmopolitan ideology of universal human rights as pretense. It would also account for the viciousness of his critique of Rousseau.

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In his Tanner Lectures, de Waal indulges in a fairly gross form of interpretive unkindness. Huxley was not a veneer theorist in the sense de Waal there defines and then demolishes with the help of contemporary primatology. But despite his misreading, de Waal was nevertheless onto something. Huxley's (1890a) objections to the revolutionary rhetoric of natural equality can indeed be read as an endorsement of veneer theory. It's just that the theory in question utilizes the idea of a veneer in a much more subtle and defensible manner than de Waal pretends.[11]

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[10] It is worth noting that the Anglo-American clan was not sufficiently united to sustain their trans-Atlantic romance. The American-British resented being looked down up by the British-British. See Breen (1997). Charitably interpreted, Mills' (1997) thesis is compatible with these observations: the racial contract was more pronounced in its effects (colonialism and slavery) than was the British contract in its (the revolution).

[11] In summary, I would like to draw attention to the second remarkable feature of the passage I initially quoted from Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* above, as it provides some insight into the mechanisms of self-deception that Locke and Jefferson employed when laying a veneer of universal human rights over their engagement in racialized slavery. If you look back at that passage you will see that Huxley there characterizes Native American tribes as components of the state of nature. He does not write of the natives as a rival population of people with their own set of norms and laws. He does not write of battles between European colonists and native populations as a clash of civilizations with Darwinian forces selecting the most "fit" group/ethos for survival and reproduction. Instead, Huxley describes colonization as a battle between civilization and *wilderness*, a battle he likens to a gardener's attempts to keep the weeds from choking off the plants of greater beauty and utility he has selected for himself. The natives are conceptualized as weeds rather than domestic animals; the results of natural rather than artificial selection. This habit of thought unique to Huxley. See Mills (1997).

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