

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIAL REASONING  
AND DECISION MAKING:  
FOUNDATIONS OF A NEW SOCIAL-LIBERAL THEORY

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**CONTENTS**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE PROJECT	1.
Section 1.1 Initial Rationale	1.
Section 1.2 Project Outline	3.
CHAPTER TWO: LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND HUMAN NATURE	6.
Section 2.1 Introduction	6.
Section 2.2 Kinds of Human Nature Claim	6.
Section 2.3 Naturalistic Claims Supporting Normative Claims	11.
Section 2.4 Negative and Positive Freedom	12.
Section 2.5 Views of Human Nature	14.
Section 2.6 The Basic Liberal State	31.
Section 2.7 The Social-Liberal and Libertarian Political Schemes	39.
CHAPTER THREE: BACKGROUND ISSUES – NATURALISM AND NEUROSCIENCE	55.
Section 3.1 Introduction	55.
Section 3.2 A Naturalistic Approach: Some Basic Commitments	55.
Section 3.3 Perspectives from Contemporary Neuroscience	59.
Section 3.4 Affective Neuroscience	62.
Section 3.5 Two Useful Terms	69.
CHAPTER FOUR: A MODEL OF SOCIAL REASONING AND DECISION MAKING	72.
Section 4.1 Introduction	72.
Section 4.2 The PF-A Model: Contributing Structures and Systems	74.
Section 4.3 Subsidiary Capacities Contributing to Everyday Reasoning	98.
Section 4.4 Social Reasoning and Decision Making	107.
Section 4.5 Conclusion	116.

CHAPTER FIVE: DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS ON CAPACITIES FOR SOCIAL REASONING AND DECISION MAKING	118.
Section 5.1 Introduction	118.
Section 5.2 Chronic Uncertainty States and Detrimental Impacts on SRD Capacities	119.
CHAPTER SIX: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS ON CAPACITIES FOR SOCIAL REASONING AND DECISION MAKING	141.
Section 6.1 Introduction	141.
Section 6.2 Epidemiology and Social Gradients in Mental Health	143.
Section 6.3 Research Evidence	157.
Section 6.4 Diversion Behaviour	178.
CHAPTER SEVEN: TWO ARGUMENTS AGAINST LIBERTARIANISM	184.
Section 7.1 Introduction	184.
Section 7.2 The Ethical Inconsistency of Libertarianism	185.
Section 7.3 Flaws in the Libertarian Consequentialist Argument	201.
Section 7.4 Conclusion	210.
CHAPTER EIGHT: TOWARDS NEW SOCIAL-LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORY	212.
Section 8.1 Introduction	212.
Section 8.2 Assessing the Social-Liberal Position	212.
Section 8.3 Towards a New Social-Liberal Theory	224.
Section 8.4 Project Conclusion	243.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	247.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the dialectic between two kinds of liberal political philosophy which have strongly influenced Western politics, and remain highly relevant to current debates – libertarian theory and social-liberal theory. In particular, it examines how representative theories on both sides are based on claims about our human nature as reasoning, self-determining, individual agents; and claims about how this nature may be fulsomely expressed or inhibited under different kinds of socio-political conditions. I show that broadly naturalistic claims of this sort support normative claims about aspects of our nature we ought to value, and about the kind of political system we ought to prefer. Social-liberals and libertarians disagree about how human capacities for reasoning, self-determining agency will tend to fare within a liberal State-free market political system. This leads them to different conclusions about the role of the State.

The overall approach is to test the relevant claims about our nature and social psychology against current theory and evidence in cognitive neuroscience and epidemiology, and then to interpret the normative implications for each political position. At the heart of the project is a neuroscience-based model of capacities for everyday social reasoning and decision making ('SRD' capacities), which I claim offers a plausible, evidence-based account of universal human capacities which both social-liberals and libertarians claim to value. Once in place, the model is employed for critical analysis of data in epidemiological research into aspects of mental health within Western populations. I conclude that certain socioeconomic circumstances commonly encountered within Western societies causally contribute to detrimental impacts on SRD capacities, in the form of psychiatric disorders or diversion behaviours.

This material is then used to reinterpret the normative claims of libertarians and social-liberals. I argue that the kind of political system recommended by libertarians will tend to generate conditions which have significant detrimental effects on SRD capacities, which they claim to value; and do so to a greater extent than a social-liberal system. This puts libertarians out of step with their own basic values and initial arguments justifying a liberal State. The libertarian system will also tend to create significant social risks and costs, to the point of being self-undermining. A social-liberal system will tend to mitigate these risks and costs.

Thus I argue that, if SRD capacities are regarded as valuable, we have reason to prefer a social-liberal system over a libertarian system. However, in the light of the proposed model, I claim that the ‘standard’ form of contemporary social-liberal politics and programs also has weaknesses. Familiar forms of egalitarian social program partially address some social conditions implicated in undermining SRD capacities, but there are other aspects of the problem which are outrunning the usual methods. The associated risks and liabilities are still cause for prudential concern. A more creative and psychologically astute politics is required. In conclusion I make a number of proposals in that direction, and claim that the project as a whole offers elements of a new social-liberal theory.

**DECLARATION**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Ian Matthew Fisher and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

PF-A model	The proposed ‘Prefrontal-Amygdala’ model of social reasoning
SRD capacities	Human capacities for everyday social reasoning and decision making
PFC	The prefrontal cortex
OFC	The orbitofrontal cortex
M-PFC	The medial prefrontal cortex
VMC	The ventromedial cortex
ACC	The anterior cingulate cortex
NAc	Nucleus accumbens
CN	Central nucleus of the amygdala
BLA	Basolateral nucleus of the amygdala
VTA	Ventral tegmental area of the brainstem
PVN	Paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus
HPA axis	The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis
SNS	Sympathetic nervous system
DA	Dopamine
NA	Noradrenaline
5-HT	Serotonin
GABA	Gamma-aminobutyric acid
ACTH	Adrenocorticotrophic hormone
CRF	Corticotrophin releasing factor
CS	Conditioned stimulus
US	Unconditioned stimulus
SCR	Skin conductance response
SES	Socioeconomic status
ToM	Theory of mind
fMRI	Functional magnetic resonance imaging
CBF	Cerebral blood flow
MDD	Major depressive disorder
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
GHQ	General health questionnaire

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