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052159281X - Death, Hope and Sex: Steps to an Evolutionary Ecology of Mind and Morality

James S. Chisholm

Excerpt

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1 Evolution and explanation

Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.

Epicurus (341–271 BCE)

Explanation is not achieved by description of the patterns of regularity, no matter how meticulous and adequate, nor by replacing this description by other abstractions congruent with it, but by exhibiting what *makes* the pattern, i.e., certain processes.

Fredrik Barth (1966:2)

All organisms are all of the time problem-solving.

Karl Popper (1994:55)

Clarity about what it means to be human constitutes not only the highest political and therapeutic vision, but also the height of practical reason. This is because it is from conceptions of human nature that access to all social resources flows. Aristotle argued that humans become aware of their political ideals only through their understanding of shared human nature. Taking his lead, Epicurus and the Hellenistic philosophers developed the idea that both philosophy (knowledge) and politics were medicine (i.e., healing, therapy) carried on by other means (Nussbaum 1994). At some point, everything human has philosophical and political implications, but, as Western philosophers have known at least since Aristotle, in order even to see these implications it is necessary first to have knowledge of human nature – otherwise, what would the implications be *for*? For Aristotle and the Hellenistic philosophers, knowledge of human nature could only lead to *eudaimonia* – i.e., “human flourishing.” They believed that it was only through knowledge of shared human nature that we become aware of where we want to go, the ideals at which we should aim. As Aristotle put it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, illustrating the practical value of therapeutic arguments, “Won’t knowledge of it [i.e., the good; the conditions for *eudaimonia*] make a great shift in the balance

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where life is concerned, and won't we, like archers with a target before us, be more likely to hit on what is appropriate?" (quoted in Nussbaum 1994:60). Knowledge of shared human nature would establish what is appropriate for achieving human flourishing – the target which ought to guide our aim whenever we decide how best to make our way in the world.

Human nature and practical reason

Knowing how to make our way in the world is practical reason. I am grateful for Charles Taylor's (1993) conception of practical reason for it shows that rational and moral arguments share common features. (It also fits nicely with the evolutionary epistemological approach to knowledge that I shall examine shortly.) If we accept human flourishing as our target, Taylor writes,

... then the activity of explaining why things are as they are (what we think of as science) is intrinsically linked to the activity of determining what the good is, and in particular how human beings should live ... The notion that explanation can be distinct from practical reason, that the attempt to grasp what the world is like can be made independent of the determination of how we should stand in it, that the goal of understanding the cosmos can be uncoupled from our attunement to it, made no sense to the pre-modern understanding. (1993:217)

Note that explaining "why things are as they are" entails the use of facts to describe the processes that cause "things" to come into being. These facts are then used to determine "what the good is" and "how human beings should live." Practical reason thus uses facts to approach values.

For Taylor, practical reason is when "we understand an environment [and] can make our way about in it, get things done in it, effect our purposes in it" (1993:218). The environment that we need to understand is the one comprised of our individual and collective human natures, and their products and residues, so to speak, in the rest of nature, over time. For now, Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is as good a way as any to conceive of the ultimate purpose that we try to effect when we make our way and get things done in this environment. Later, however, I will develop the idea that this purpose is a deeply moral purpose and that the reason we

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experience it as such (i.e., as a feeling – a moral sentiment) is because these feelings were the best way that natural selection could devise to reflect or represent a value that exists in nature – the nature of evolutionary biology as it is instantiated in each of us.

To effect our purposes – to approach *eudaimonia* – it is necessary to have a concept of human nature. Without such a concept no target can be better than any other. And if all targets are equally good, how do we know where to aim? If there is no human nature, no target, then anything goes, and we can aim anywhere we please – or where our aim pleases someone else. If there is no pre-existing, a priori human nature that we can look to for guidance, then anyone with sufficient wealth, power or prestige can have us aim wherever *they* please, at the targets *they* construct. If there is no human nature, then Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are right: might makes epistemological right and there is no truth outside of power. But such a stance is not just wrong, it is irresponsible, a counsel of despair, and dangerous, for it opens the door to bullies and despots. As Robin Fox put it:

If there is no human nature, then any social system is as good as any other, since there is no base line of human needs by which to judge them. If, indeed, everything is learned, then surely men can be taught to live in any kind of society. Man is at the mercy of all the tyrants – be they fascists or liberals – who think they know what is best for him. And how can he plead that they are being inhuman if he does not know what being human is in the first place?
(Fox 1975:13)

Likewise, Noam Chomsky observed that

... one can easily see why reformers and revolutionaries should become radical environmentalists, and there is no doubt that concepts of immutable human nature can be and have been employed to erect barriers against social change and to defend established privilege. But a deeper look will show that the concept of the “empty organism,” plastic and unstructured, apart from being false, also serves naturally as the support for the most reactionary social doctrines. If people are, in fact, malleable and plastic beings with no essential psychological nature, then why should they not be controlled and coerced by

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those who claim authority, special knowledge, and a unique insight into what is best for those less enlightened? . . . The principle that human nature, in its psychological aspects, is nothing more than a product of history and given social relations removes all barriers to coercion and manipulation by the powerful. This too, I think, may be a reason for its appeal to intellectual ideologists, of whatever political persuasion. (Chomsky 1975:132)

And Charles Taylor argued that without a theory of value (i.e., without a rational basis for moral action) only power remains:

In a neutral universe, what agreement there is between attitudes seems merely a brute fact, irrelevant to morals, and disagreement seems utterly inarbitrable by reason, bridgeable only by propaganda, arm-twisting, or emotional manipulation. (Taylor 1993:213)

In a similar vein, Karl Popper labelled “intellectually evil” the belief that all rational arguments inevitably rest on a framework of assumptions that are beyond examination:

What I call “the myth of the framework” is a very widely held and often even unconsciously accepted view, that all rational argument must always proceed within a framework of assumptions – so that the framework itself is always beyond rational argument. One could also call this view “relativism”, for it implies that every assertion is to be taken as relative to a framework of assumptions . . . A fairly common form of the myth of the framework also holds that all discussions or confrontations between people who have adopted different frameworks are vain and pointless, since every rational discussion can operate only within some given framework of assumptions . . . I regard the prevalence of this myth as one of the great intellectual evils of our time. It undermines the unity of mankind, since it dramatically asserts that there can, in general, be no rational or critical discussion except between men who hold identical views. And it sees all men, so far as they try to be rational, as caught in a prison of beliefs which are irrational, because they are, in principle, not subject to critical discussion. There can be few myths which are more

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destructive. For the alternative to critical discussion is violence and war. (Popper 1994:137)¹

Finally, consider Nancy Scheper-Hughes' recent deductions concerning our moral nature:

To speak of the "primacy of the ethical" is to suggest certain transcendent, transparent, and essential, if not "precultural," first principles . . . The extreme relativist position assumes that thought, emotion, and reflexivity come into existence with words and words come into being with culture. But the generative prestructure of language presupposes, as Sartre (1958) has written, a given relationship with another subject, one that exists prior to words in the silent, preverbal "taking stock" of each other's existence. Though I veer dangerously toward what some might construe as a latent sociobiology, I cannot escape the following observation: that we are thrown into existence at all presupposes a given, implicit moral relationship to an original (m)other and she to me. (Scheper-Hughes 1995:419; see also 1992:22-3)

If some conception of human nature is a prerequisite for the pursuit of human flourishing, as well as the *sine qua non* of practical reason and ethical action, then why are so many set against it?² I think the answer can only be that the naysayers are made anxious by the very concept of human nature because of their unexamined belief that not only does such a thing really exist, but that it is *essentially, irredeemably evil*. They believe, as William Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

- 1 That man has two real existing principles: viz: a body & a soul.
- 2 That energy, called evil, is alone from the body: & that reason, called good, is alone from the soul.
- 3 That God will torment man in eternity for following his energies.

In his sweeping social history, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*, Carl Degler (1991) made the same point: that resistance to Darwinian thought (read Blake's "energy")

¹ Although not published until 1994, Popper wrote these words for a series of lectures at Emory University in 1969.

² Clifford Geertz, for example, once argued notoriously that the facts of human nature (if any existed) would amount to a "portrait of man" that was no more than a "cartoon" (1973:40).

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rested on an “ideology or a philosophical belief that the world could be a freer and more just place” if only “the immutable forces of biology played no role in accounting for the behavior of social groups” (1991:viii). In short, just as Scheper-Hughes fears that the very “precultural” foundation for her ethical stance causes her to “veer dangerously toward what some might construe as latent sociobiology,” so, too, do many others fear that the essence of biology – evolutionary theory – is inherently, essentially, deterministic and insensitive to historical contingencies, especially those affecting inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, class, and gender. As Brad Shore put it, “Until the issue of cultural diversity could be unhooked from its evolutionary (and racial) moorings, modern anthropologists were not free to contemplate the implications of cultural differences for an understanding of mind” (1996:17–18).

Despite the obvious misuse to which evolutionary theory has been put (and by some still is) I believe that this is wrong and that we have nothing to fear from evolutionary biology. On the contrary, I believe that viewing human nature as a manifestation of our evolutionary biology is the height of practical reason and our best hope for making our world “a freer and more just place.” In this I again follow Robin Fox, who argues that

... to look hard at, and accept the limitations of, human nature as a basis for political action, may turn out to be the least reactionary and most strenuously radical act of the twentieth century. But it will, in the nonpejorative sense of the word, be also a truly conservative act. (1989:51)

In the same vein, and fully in the spirit of Huxley’s evolutionary humanism, Jerry Fodor observes that “Naturalism might turn out to be more of a humanism than, until quite recently, anyone had dared to hope” (1994:103).

Science and wisdom

If some conception of human nature is a prerequisite for rational, moral political action, this raises the question: who gets to define human nature? If human rights derive ultimately from concepts of human nature, then this is a question of some weight, for, threatened as we are by our deteriorating social and physical environments and expanding population, we cannot afford to define ourselves wrongly much longer. It goes without saying, therefore, that I immediately reject science’s traditional antagonists, magic and received religion, for they depend for their

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existence not on rational argument but on the power, prestige, and wealth of their practitioners (Taylor's "propaganda, arm-twisting, [and] emotional manipulation"). This leaves science – but what kind of science? To put the question another way: if I am going to do justice to my central argument that viewing human nature as a manifestation of our reproductive strategies provides a rational basis for a theory of value and a rationally compassionate ethical philosophy, then I should explain why I think the foundation for my argument is sound.

My argument rests on a foundation of two interlocking parts: (1) evolutionary epistemology and (2) an emerging approach to science that is based on what Nicholas Maxwell (1984) called the "philosophy of wisdom" (some call it postpositivism or postempiricism). After a brief look at the anti-science sentiment that has lately become so pervasive, I will begin with the philosophy of wisdom, for, of the two elements in my foundation, it confronts most directly this growing antipathy toward science.

Anti-science

In recent years, the opponents of science have included not just the usual suspects, magic and received religion, but also some adherents of a branch of humanism that has come to be known as postmodernism. All scientists and most philosophers view reality as an "out there" (or "in here" – i.e., the very real [to us] quality of our sensations and feelings) that really exists. Some extreme postmodern interpretivists and deconstructionists, on the other hand, view reality not as something "out there," but as something that is inherently "constructed" by the inevitable interaction between data and observer. Knowledge, or truth, for them, is thus always "negotiated" and ultimately cannot exist except in its interpreters. While this is true in the sense that it certainly takes a knower for something to be known, it strikes me as a narrow view of knowledge because it comes down unfairly on the side of unknowability; it emphasizes our imperfection as observers and interpreters at the potentially catastrophic expense of failing to understand adequately the reality that really exists (either "out there" or "in here").³

This postmodern emphasis on our ultimate incapacity for perfect

³ One almost suspects that postmodernism itself developed as a psychological defense against the painful realization that we cannot have perfect knowledge. It is as if someone who wished to be god was so upset on learning that he could not have god's perfect, pure knowledge that he blamed reality instead: If reality does not exist, then it is not my fault that I cannot know it!

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knowledge may be another manifestation of the ancient antipathy between reason and desire, or cognition and emotion, that Blake captured in his opposition between “reason” and “energy.” I wonder if postmodernism gives pride of place to the internal, subjective side of the relationship between reality and its internal, subjective representations because of its unargued belief that the essence of human nature – that which all people share – is actually their *individuality*: their separateness, their particular subjective experiences, their unique histories. Paradoxically, then, in postmodernism, human nature – that which all of us share – may be precisely that which makes us *different* from each other. If this is so, then viewing people as individuals rather than as a whole, as a species, makes sense as a way of preserving their essential humanity; as Geertz put it, “Becoming human is becoming individual” (1973:52). To do otherwise, to submerge individuals in their species, is abhorrent because it seems to reduce human nature to . . . well, to nature, for, if we are stripped of our individual experience, our acts of observation and interpretation (i.e., our “reason,” which is “called good”), all that will remain (they fear) is some impersonal, universal, species “energy” (“called evil”), which merely manufactures our capacity for individual experience.

After the Enlightenment, as science, technology, and commerce fuelled the quickening pace of political and economic change everywhere, and so threatened the family, kinship, and religion as the organizing principles of society, Romantic anti-science sentiments have never been hard to find. Lately, however, with looming environmental and population catastrophes, world-wide economic downturns and increasing inequalities in the distribution of wealth, greater emphasis in business and politics on short-term results and payoffs, and everywhere the rise of fundamentalism, anti-science sentiments have become fervent and epidemic. In such a climate, the “hard” sciences, medicine, and engineering have fared better than the “soft” social, behavioral, and historical sciences. Indeed, for many, scientist and non-scientist alike, the hard sciences have become the very model for *all* of science. One reason for this is that the reality studied by hard sciences like physics and engineering seems more obviously to be “out there” than the reality studied by soft sciences like anthropology, sociology, or psychology (which seems to range rather more freely between “out there” and “in here” than the reality of the hard sciences).

Another reason, however, is that the hard sciences, including medicine, are often seen as value-free or neutral and therefore nonthreatening, safe

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and familiar, because they are morally neutral, rational tools for solving relatively narrow, short-term, practical problems. But, when by extension all of science then comes to be seen as value-free, then science in general is seen to have failed us, and people come to distrust or abhor it, because it seems bound to treat them as providers or products and to deprive them of their humanity and what they value most – their personal, subjective experience, which is the very basis by which they value anything at all. Myth and magic then abound, and science loses (e.g., Gross and Levitt 1994; Holton 1993). Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, expressed clearly this anger and dismay in his acceptance speech after receiving the Philadelphia Liberty Medal on July 4, 1994:

The dizzying development of science, with its unconditional faith in objective reality and complete dependency on generally and rationally knowable laws, led to the birth of modern technological civilization. It is the first civilization that spans the entire globe and binds together all societies, submitting them to a common global destiny . . . At the same time, the relationship to the world that modern science fostered and shaped appears to have exhausted its potential. The relationship is missing something. It fails to connect with the most intrinsic nature of reality and with natural human experience. It produces a state of schizophrenia: man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being . . . Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. (*New York Times*, Friday, July 8, 1994. p. A17)

Both playwright and politician, Havel has the gift of speaking for many; disaffection for science is indeed widespread. It is also clear to many, however, that Havel's problem – and postmodernism's – is not with science, but with *scientism*, which, in Paul Roscoe's words (he quotes from other definitions), is a version of science that "aims to construct a 'perfectly impersonal or objective,' 'value-free,' cognitive representation (or 'mental map') of reality as a whole" (1995:493). It is scientism's impersonal, value-less vision of reality that Havel, postmodernists, and humanists of all sorts (including me) abhor. But there is more to science than scientism, and epistemologists, philosophers of science, and scientists of all sorts are well along in the intellectual task of constructing a humanistic science – as are humanists (Crook 1991; Roscoe 1995; Turner 1995).

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The philosophy of wisdom

For example, consider the work of the philosopher Nicholas Maxwell (1984). It was to criticize scientism and to provide a rational basis for a humanistic science that he set out to describe what a philosophy of wisdom might look like. In Maxwell's terms, scientism is standard empiricism, i.e., inquiry that is based on the traditional Western philosophy of knowledge, as developed primarily by Bacon, Newton, and Descartes. Standard empiricism holds that because human beings do not possess a priori knowledge of the world, everything that passes for knowledge, truth, or fact must be assessed empirically, impartially, through our own sensory experience. For standard empiricists, of course, sensory experience does not include emotional experience, for they do not consider emotions to be senses. (In fact, as I argue later, just as vision is a priori evidence that light exists, emotions are a priori evidence that value exists.) Therefore, standard empiricism of the traditional philosophy of knowledge sort holds that:

Only by dissociating itself decisively from the goals, values and beliefs of common social life, so that claims to objective knowledge can be subjected to scrupulously *rational* assessment, can inquiry accumulate genuine knowledge, thus ultimately being of benefit to humanity. Rational inquiry must, as it were, ignore human need in order to help fulfil such need. (Maxwell 1984:10)

On this view, and given standard empiricism's huge successes, it is no wonder that so many, scientist and nonscientist alike, accept uncritically the view that:

Feelings, desires, human social interests and aspirations, political objectives, values, economic forces, public opinion, religious views, ideological views, moral considerations, must not be allowed, in any way, to influence scientific or academic thought. (1984:16)

As a consequence, we are now in the curious position that, if we sense that something is *not* value-neutral – then we fear it cannot also be true! And, if something is not true, how can it be worth our consideration? This is the position that Havel so decries, and is the reason why distrust of science is so high: when science excludes from discussion any mention of human values, wisdom, and moral sentiments on the grounds that