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978-0-521-75769-0 - Too Smart for Our Own Good: The Ecological Predicament of Humankind

Craig Dilworth

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Too Smart for Our Own Good

The Ecological Predicament of Humankind

We are destroying our natural environment at a constantly increasing pace, and in so doing undermining the preconditions of our own existence. Why is this so? This book reveals that our ecologically disruptive behaviour is in fact rooted in our very nature as a species.

Drawing on evolution theory, biology, anthropology, archaeology, economics, environmental science and history, this book explains our ecological predicament by placing it in the context of the first scientific theory of humankind's development, taking over where Darwin left off.

The theory presented is applied in detail to the whole of our seven-million-year history. Due to its comprehensiveness, and in part thanks to its extensive glossary and index, this book can function as a compact encyclopædia covering the whole development of *Homo sapiens*. It would also suit many courses in the life and social sciences. Most importantly, *Too Smart for Our Own Good* makes evident the very core of the paradigm to which our species must shift if it is to survive.

Anyone concerned about the future of humankind should read this groundbreaking work.

CRAIG DILWORTH, Canadian by birth, received his PhD in Sweden in 1981, and is presently Reader in Theoretical Philosophy at Uppsala University. A true generalist, his work includes creating and running various environmental projects, as well as purely academic studies in metaphysics, philosophy of science, human ecology, theoretical physics, theoretical biology and the social sciences. He is the author of two major works in the philosophy of science, *Scientific Progress* (1981; 4th edn. 2008) and *The Metaphysics of Science* (1996; 2nd edn. 2007), and an earlier book in human ecology, *Sustainable Development and Decision Making* (1997).

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It is highly probable that with mankind the intellectual faculties have been mainly and gradually perfected through natural selection.

Charles Darwin

Although the brain of *Homo sapiens* is no larger than that of Neanderthal man, the indirect evidence strongly suggests that the first *Homo sapiens* was a much more intelligent creature.

Sherwood Washburn

If there is one thing of which we can be certain it is of the high adaptive value of intelligence as a factor in both the mental and physical evolution of man. Instinct does not permit the emergence of novelty, of innovation, or of originality. Intelligence does.

Ashley Montagu

We can see, that in the rudest state of society, the individuals who were the most sagacious, who invented and used the best weapons or traps, and who were best able to defend themselves, would rear the greatest number of offspring.

Charles Darwin

There are no criteria except adaptation. Intelligence was never an end in itself: it developed because of its adaptive advantages.

Richard Wilkinson

The structure of modern man must be the result of the change in the terms of natural selection that came with the tool-using way of life. It was the success of the simplest tools that started the whole trend of human evolution and led to the civilizations of today.

Sherwood Washburn

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The world has again and again approached the condition of being saturated with human inhabitants, only to have the limit raised by human ingenuity.

William Catton, Jr.

It appears that we must regard the growth of intellect as having enabled man to avoid the serious consequences which a fecundity in excess of that necessary to ensure our species' survival would otherwise have brought about.

A. M. Carr-Saunders

An increase in efficiency by natural selection may endanger the whole population if it reaches the point where the source of food is wiped out. A curb upon the presumed evolutionary trend towards greater hunting skill would therefore be of advantage. For human beings we thus reach the paradoxical conclusion that in times of the pressure of population on food resources any process which tended to *lower* the mental capacity, physical dexterity or perceptual acuity of a certain number of individuals might mean the saving of the race.

D. H. Stott

We have failed to take into account the long-run consequences of just doing what we have always done – but better and better. The further our cleverness departs from nature's well worked out patterns, the greater the likelihood that the clever action will have unintended consequences – ones likely to injure humans and the environment.

Lester W. Milbrath

The very aspect of human nature that enabled *Homo sapiens* to become the dominant species in all of nature was also what made human dominance precarious at best, and perhaps inexorably self-defeating.

William Catton, Jr.

One is tempted to believe that every gift bestowed on man by his power of conceptual thought has to be paid for with a dangerous evil as the direct consequence of it.

Konrad Lorenz

Man is far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom.

E. F. Schumacher

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“Paul here had some questions,” said Kroner.

“Questions? Questions, my boy?”

He wanted to know if we weren’t doing something bad in the name of progress.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

It is because the reality of Progress can never be determined that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have had to treat it as an article of religious faith.

Aldous Huxley

Or is there anybody who would seriously deny that during the past hundred thousand years *Homo sapiens* has made progress and has improved himself?

Max Planck

The growing threat to the planet and to humanity caused by the over-success of technology has generated severe doubts as to the entire notion of progress so popular in the Western world.

Sol Tax

Once again it appears that a formidable group of innovations should not be regarded as the fruits of a society’s search for progress, but as the outcome of a valiant struggle of a society with its back to the ecological wall.

Richard Wilkinson

Society must cease to look upon ‘progress’ as something desirable. ‘Eternal Progress’ is a nonsensical myth.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

To deride the hope of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind.

Sir Peter Medawar

It does happen that what evil people achieve and pass on to evil people following them brings about progress. If this were not so, the world could never have attained its high level of technological development.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

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Rather than progressing, we have developed our technology as a means of approximating as closely as possible the old status quo in the face of our ever-increasing numbers.

Mark Nathan Cohen

One should not be ashamed of a belief in progress. It is painfully slow and intermittent, interspersed with catastrophes and reversals, but there is a strong case for believing that in the long run it is built into the system, provided there is not an ultimate and irretrievable catastrophe.

Kenneth Boulding

The vaunted 'progress' of modern civilization is only a thin cloak for global catastrophe.

Barry Commoner

Man is by nature a jeopardized creature.

Arnold Gehlen

Any group, or clade, that slowly becomes extinct must reach a stage with only one existing species. Humans have reached that stage, as has the aardvark.

Roger Lewin

What is wrong with the world is that many things are wrong with human nature.

R. M. Yerkes and A. W. Yerkes

It is as if the human species were determined to have a short but exciting life.

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen

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Preface

This book is the development of an idea I got back in 1992, after I had been thinking about the nature of humans' ecological problems for some three years or so. I have called the idea *the vicious circle principle*, and my task in this book is to present and apply it as well as I can.

Richard Wilkinson's *Poverty and Progress* (1973) has been my main source of intellectual inspiration, though I have also benefited hugely from the works of Malthus and Darwin.

For comments on various drafts of this book, I would like to thank Dennis Meadows, Richard Douthwaite, David Pimentel, Richard Wilkinson, Herman Daly, Timothy Earle, Anthony McMichael and Allen Johnson.

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