

Isn't Aristotle dead?

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A CRITIQUE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DARWINISM
(Organized by Brian Ferguson)

Going through the literature of psychological Darwinism, I'm struck by the way in which they fail to come to grips with the fact that Aristotle is dead. It's that regardless of whether there is or isn't a basic human nature, different from chimpanzee nature; a basic male nature different from female nature, or a different black nature different from white nature, it's awfully hard to approach rigorously.

The problem is epistemological – how do you know whether you're looking at a difference of basic nature or a difference of the circumstances of life and history. To talk about it without confronting the epistemological difficulties is just stupid.

Dr. Antoniello mentioned old Philippe Rushton, who believes in the essential differences between black and yellow, with whites occupying a middle ground intellectually and sexually. It's interesting to note that the strongest negative academic review of Rushton's work I know of, was in the journal *Animal Behaviour*, by the sociobiologist David Barash, who was explicit about his apprehension that Rushton would give sociobiology a bad name, as if such a thing were possible.

I'm very much in favor of heeding Zuleyma Tang-Martinez's drawing analogies between the genetic determinism of the 1920 and the new millennium that Gar Allen has written so eloquently about. Aristotle has hung on for over two millennia thus far, I suppose it's wishful thinking to hope we can finally bury him now. But it is certainly worth looking at the ways in which earlier generations of scientists utilized differences in basic nature as explanatory devices, gussied up in modern lingo.

Eugenics was at rock bottom a theory of social history in which the principal determinants of contemporary social inequalities were natural endowments. Thus Nordics had great genes because their countries seemed to be running the world in 1916, and other peoples were held back by virtue of their genes for feeble-mindedness among others.

On the one hand Margaret Sanger is inspired by some of their ideas about relative rates of reproduction, and transforms them into the birth control movement.

On the other hand, though, early feminists regarded these ideas with suspicion. The reason was simple: If what other peoples haven't accomplished is an overt manifestation of their lack of natural endowments, and the peoples who haven't invented electric lights, vacuum cleaners and sugarless bubble are simply not well enough endowed to do so, that same argument could be and of course was held against women.

The alternative view obviously is that they had the endowments but lacked the opportunities to express them. And if that were patently true for women relative to men, then it certainly might well be true for Africans versus Nordics.

What people have done is simply not a reliable guide to what they're capable of. And the eugenics movement, as a theory of innate abilities, foundered fundamentally on issues of gender.

The same thing is happening today with evolutionary psychology, which like the old eugenics movement casts itself as a macho hard scientific alternative to fluffy, girly anthropology. And that has precipitated a backlash evident, for example, in Natalie Angier's *Woman: An Intimate Geography* and Sarah Hrdy's *Mother Nature*. That's why Alice Eagly's work is so valuable, in undermining one of the most ubiquitous citations in the ev psych literature, the sexual preference work of David Buss.

One of the extraordinary signatures of evolutionary psychology research is the way in which it presents itself as a Popperian caricature of science. Testing hypotheses isn't just a matter of deciding "if A, then B", finding B, and concluding A. One has to consider the possibility that B might also be caused by C or by D. And more importantly one has to reject those possibilities. Or else the exercise is not hypothesis testing, but simply a consistency argument, which is very different, much less powerful, and much less scientifically compelling. Except to naïve readers, or readers who already believe it.

In considering Gar Allen's presentation, I want to note first of all how gratifying it is to see colleagues in cognate fields with the interest to participate in these meetings, which goes as well for several others on tonight's panel. Prof Allen walks us through a study not in ev psych per se, but in good old fashioned genetic determinism. And there is an important area of complementarity, if not direct overlap here.

I can recall when I was in graduate school, talking about sociobiology to a distinguished sociobiologist, who sternly explained to me that it wasn't at all about genetic determinism. And then I learned that to every genetic determinist claim that comes out, they go, "See?"

Anna Roosevelt's paper brings to mind the work of Misia Landau in the 1980s, which I think was some of the most original research in a field not generally noted for originality, namely the deep-seated narrative component in paleoanthropology. What Dr. Roosevelt's paper tells me quite graphically is that professing to represent science, evolutionary psychology relies more on the literary elements of human prehistory than on the literal elements, that is to say, the contemporary data.

Finally, the panel's organizer, Brian Ferguson, puts a new slant on an old song, War -Huh- What is it good for/ Evolutionary Psychology. Although this literature is diverse, it often comes back to a few major themes, effectively demolished by both Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Sussman. Those are the Yanomamo, as pristine warriors outside of history but inside of biology; and the chimpanzees, who have evolved from the hippy communes depicted in Jane Goodall's *In the Shadow of Man*, to something more closely approximating Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Modern political philosophy rises from Thomas Hobbes, and there is irony in observing at the millennium that it returns to him. Once again, though, the relevant critical analysis is literary, not scientific.

The most famous of these recent treatments is *Demonic Males* from 1996, by a Harvard sociobiologist (Richard Wrangham), Professor and Macarthur Fellow, smarter than me, and a journalist (Dale Peterson), who may also be smarter than me, for all I know, and taken up briefly by Drs Sussman and Ferguson.

Anyway, last April, Wrangam gave a long seminar at the law school at Berkeley on this stuff, and one of the things he showed was a slide of a quote from Radcliffe-Brown describing warfare among the Andaman Islanders, and glibly noted that except for the Andamanese recruiting their neighbors, it was the same as in chimpanzees. And this was duly recorded by the law students some with quizzical looks on their faces. But none as quizzical as mine, because I was reading the quote on the slide from Radcliffe-Brown, which said that the war party goes to a specific place where they know their enemies reside, which is not what chimpanzees do; and that they go there armed with bows and arrows, technology - the chimps certainly don't go to war armed with termite sticks, to stab each other in the eye.

The point I'm trying to make here is to note a willful blindness to the really obvious differences of a fundamental nature, a point made forcefully by Ian Tattersall.

It can't possibly be any credit to Darwin or to evolution to misrepresent so egregiously the very data to make the rhetorical association of people and animals. In the same way that evolution isn't and can't be allowed to be genetic determinism, evolution also isn't and can't be allowed to be, the dehumanization of humans. And it's in that vein that I appreciate Dr. Antonello's presentation on the very unnatural history of rape. The whole argument of evolutionary psychology here is based on the presumption that sexuality is fundamentally reproductive, which is an odd site of convergence between sociobiology and the Catholic Church. But basic evolutionary considerations dictate acknowledging that sexual activity is one of the foremost differences between humans and other animals, and oriented far less towards reproduction in humans than even in our closest relatives. An evolutionary counter-narrative, then would be that sexuality in humans has different components – power, commodification, eroticism – which are present minimally if at all in our relatives, and strongly augmented culturally. In such a view, it's not that rape is sex and sex is reproductive, but rape is sex and sex is polysemic; and that sex may simply be one instrument by which conspecific domination is expressed, and it is specifically the conjunction of penis and vagina that is so obvious and so misleading here. That is no less evolutionary an explanation. And focusing on the polysemic nature of human sexuality also undercuts another chestnut of evolutionary psychology, why did homosexuality evolve? Once human sexuality is viewed as having more facets than just reproduction, homosexuality becomes just another manifestation of the evolved propensity for non-reproductive sex, not requiring a special explanation, much less a pathologizing explanation, at all.

Boy, this shit ticks me off.

The point is, though, that we can't allow them to speak for evolution.

Their allies are the political right and what H. L. Mencken used to call the booboisie. Our allies are history, scholarship, and science.