

I-16. Human Natures

Book Review of *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human*

Prospect by Paul R. Ehrlich. *Quarterly Review of Biology* 76: 345-346

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Recent technological progress among the people of European descent has led to the examination of what constitutes progress, how it relates to human evolution and nature, and what it foretells about the future. The thrust of the arguments has shifted in the postcolonial world. No one anymore argues that the agricultural and industrial revolutions were “the result of a sudden evolutionary restructuring of our brains. After all, while the Arabs were inventing numbers ... , the inhabitants of the British Isles were still living a quite primitive existence. Nonetheless, ... English learned to read, write, .. and gain political and Military advantage over the Arabs and ... “

So the issue is: Does human nature change? If human nature is defined as “the rational use of power over the environment,” then certainly human nature does not change as evidenced by the bombing for the control of petroleum. The list is obviously long and includes profligate use of resources and the invented "theories" for the exercise of controls in human societies. So what is the range of human natures? Why such diversity emerges in very different contexts? Obviously, it is many things to many people. Even if humans evolve slowly, even slower than all other organisms, one may wonder if the epigenetic technological changes are changing the behavior pattern. Yes, compared to all other animals. Relative to post-ice age history, our species has come to represent many things to many people: the bumbling toolmaker has depersonalized war; the glorified chimp is in a constant power struggle; the babbling ape has substituted gossip for grooming; and the loss of estrus has

emerged as cryptic copulation as genes and environments create the follies of mind.

Humans have coevolved with disease-causing bacteria. One can be inoculated and develop resistance to bacteria. However, these same bacteria can bring misfortune to aliens just as the wrath of God, dive-bombers, and bureaucracy strike the innocents. In this use of power, the markets and opinion makers have taken the role of educating the masses to change human perception, learning and consciousness, which are also part of human nature. We are constantly bombarded with such subtle and often insidious influences, and they certainly change human behavior, presumably by influencing the perceptions. Do they change human nature? Certainly such influences do bring out the devil. Broader constraints are quite well articulated in *Woman* by Natalie Angier:

"We are old-fashioned monkeys and futuristic apes. We are sympathetic, canny, crude, and dazzling. We are profoundly aggressive, and we have many loci of control over that aggression. We feel our way to the narthex of love and think our way down its nave. We are like nothing else that has even appeared on this threshing blue planet, and we will become, in the next few centuries, like nothing we can fathom now. And we will do it wearing our same old Stone Age genes."

The purpose of dialectic is to examine the consequences of the newly emerging insight that there is a vast epigenetic world with which humans have to deal as individuals and as social beings on a small planet with a thin layer of hospitable environment. Against this backdrop the Tao of Genes is not going to make us any wiser than the Tao of Physics did.

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