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Evolution's Error: How Human Nature Went Awry

BY **RICHARD GRIGG** • 18 APRIL 2017



BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION cannot literally err. The ability to make a mistake requires sentience, and evolution is not a sentient process. Hence, the “error” of my title is employed metaphorically, but is no less telling for that.

It has frequently been remarked that the human skeleton is far from the optimum structure for creatures who walk upright. But what’s more fascinating, and ultimately more significant for human life and for the humanist worldview, is how evolution has failed to provide us with the resources required to secure the kind of life satisfaction that members of our species have sought since our earliest days on this planet. There is a profound disconnect between the “flourishing” (*eudaimonia*) of which Aristotle speaks, something we’d all like to achieve, and the tools evolution has provided us. Indeed, we can go further: the impulses that evolution has bequeathed us can be positively inimical to our quest for fulfillment when filtered through the large brains that we often regard as evolution’s greatest gift to us. Of course, that very desire for personal fulfillment is a function of evolutionary impulses being interpreted by the *Homo sapiens* brain.

That desire is only infrequently fulfilled to our satisfaction. Perhaps Henry David Thoreau overstated the matter when he famously opined that the “mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Still, only the most naïve among us really believe that our lives can ever be perfectly satisfying or that we can attain to the sort of existential meaning we might wish. But is this state of affairs a result of our continually bungling

our own individual life quests? Not really. It turns out to have more to do with a so-called evolutionary bungling.

Many of our existential frustrations are a function of basic evolutionary drives going awry when filtered through our large brains. Obviously we need the survival instincts evolution has built into our species, including the sex drive and the instinct to compete. A competitive streak was especially beneficial back when humans were regularly faced with a challenge such as scarce food resources. But that competitive impulse, to take but one example of our animal instincts, frequently undoes us in contemporary human society.

Consider the following scenario involving poor Fred. Thursday turned out simply not to be Fred's day. His morning at work started off well enough. He successfully plowed through most of the documents in his inbox. But then office politics reared its ugly head. Joanne stopped by his office to say that she really hoped he would get the promotion he was seeking. That fired up his limbic system, and Fred was rewarded with a stomachache. He was in competition with Brian for the promotion, but Brian had been having an affair with their boss, Rhonda. Would Rhonda therefore favor Brian in the competition, or would she distance herself from any possible scandal and reward Fred with the job? Fred's pride was on the line; he wasn't sure if he could show his face around the office if he was denied the promotion.

At lunchtime, Fred went out for a quick bite with his officemates Dan and Julie. He ate only a salad (he had a stomachache, after all). Unfortunately, they too brought up the promotion competition, averring that Fred clearly deserved the advancement. That only deepened Fred's misery. He already felt inadequate as a provider for his family; his wife made a substantially higher salary than he did, and the promotion was his only apparent avenue to partially lessening his anxieties about pulling his weight in the household.

This was the day that Fred replayed in his mind when he got home late that Thursday evening and plopped down in his recliner, with his wife and children asleep upstairs. He pulled a bottle of Xanax out of his pocket. He downed a tablet, or maybe two, with a cold beer grabbed from his refrigerator (and, yes, he had read the warning label on the bottle).

The basic drive to competition that evolution has instilled in us certainly has its moments, even when we aren't competing for something as basic as food or shelter. For example, the spirit of competition is one of the things that pushes human beings to reach for new heights. The Wright brothers would not have labored so untiringly if they hadn't been stirred by the knowledge that others were hard at work on their own heavier-than-air flying machines. But in Fred's case, as frequently in our own, the

competitive instinct gets filtered through the human brain in such a way as to create problems a cheetah simply never has to deal with. This filtering is a large contributor to what we mean by the human “ego” when we use that word not to refer simply to human self-consciousness, but to a self-centered concern with how we are doing in comparison to others. While other animals fight for control over territory and mates, only a human being can self-consciously agonize over the fact that a competitor has made him or her look bad in the eyes of others.

Obviously, braininess, and the self-consciousness that accompanies it, can be beautiful. After all, only the species *Homo sapiens* among all of the species of the animal kingdom can appreciate abstract expressionism or come up with general relativity. And only human beings can invent the concept of justice and write something like Martin Luther King Jr. did with his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Furthermore, our big brains clearly have survival value. Human beings have a good handle on living upon the earth and are not on anyone’s endangered species list, although individual members of the species still starve to death. Bacteria are even better at survival than we are—there is no evolutionary “ascent” or “progression” from single-celled organisms to human beings with their unique brain architecture—but most of us wouldn’t trade what our cerebral cortex can do for the existential security possessed by bacteria.

Still, there is an unfortunate compromise here. Why should the benefits of our big brains have to be balanced out by the anxious conundrums created by the way those brains interact with our basic instinctual drives? Surely the drive to competition is not the only instance of this problem. Americans need only think about the role sex played in their 2016 presidential election season, from the revelation of Donald Trump’s history of groping women to former Representative Anthony Wiener’s “sexting” scandal that led to yet more scrutiny of Hillary Clinton’s notorious emails. How could such a basic instinct, one absolutely necessary for our survival, get so incredibly contorted? It is imagination, a function of the *Homo sapiens* brain, that does the contorting in this case. And because human beings don’t die from inventing ridiculously imaginative permutations of the sexual drive (at least not often), this sort of brain-instinct interaction isn’t going to be deleted by evolutionary forces anytime soon.

It is crucial to recognize that the issue we’re exploring isn’t the age-old struggle to bring our passions under the control of reason, something with which Plato and Aristotle already wrestled. We aren’t investigating the potentially contentious relationship between self-contained passions or instincts and a self-contained rational faculty (our brains), but rather how our brains *transmute* our animal instincts and place us in an often untenable situation. By the time Fred’s instinct to compete gets filtered through the human brain, it isn’t a passion that stands against reason and

needs to be managed by it, but a tendency that has been worked over by self-consciousness in a fashion that ruins Fred's day.

Nor is the issue before us the contention, much discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind and neuroscience, that what we take to be purely rational decisions are actually often motivated primarily by emotions and subliminal forces. We are not always the rational actors that we suppose we are. But in this case the problem, if problem it be, is that reason doesn't have a sufficiently large role to play in our behavior and that non-rational factors often trump reason. By contrast, the problem that we are addressing has to do with how the capacities for self-consciousness and imagination provided by our large brains actually alter the character of some of the non-rational tendencies we share with other mammals, in a fashion that frequently leads to anguish.

We must distinguish our concern too from the observation that something such as the fight-or-flight response evolved into our brain structure worked well for our prehistoric ancestors but can be triggered much too often by the stressors of contemporary society. Dealing with the Department of Motor Vehicles may set my amygdala to work unnecessarily: my life isn't really in danger in that situation, and the constant release of cortisol into my bloodstream may have long-term deleterious effects on my heart and head. But my DMV experience points to how my instincts are artificially triggered by the stresses of modern life, not about how those instincts have been transmuted by the brain itself and the self-consciousness to which it gives rise.

Yet again, the challenge before us must be distinguished from the one that Sigmund Freud claimed to find in the human condition. Freud famously believed that human beings are born with inherently anti-social instincts such as the lust for killing. Social harmony requires society to prohibit our acting on these instincts. What results, avers Freud, is a violent clash between our drives and the social prohibitions, a clash that can throw the psyche out of kilter and produce neuroses. But our topic is not about the claim that our animal instincts are anti-social, but about how essentially benign and even necessary instincts become irreparably altered when they manifest within human self-consciousness.

At this point, one may be tempted to ask whether evolution could have dealt us a better hand. Think about the fact that some persons, through self-conscious effort, do modify the way in which they process their instinctual drives so that they become less enslaved to the more problematic promptings of their egos, the sort of promptings that tripped up poor Fred. But if conscious effort on the part of modern humans can temper the prodding of our instincts and repurpose them so that they fit more comfortably with the Homo sapiens brain and our modern social interactions, why couldn't evolution have set things up in this more helpful configuration from the beginning?

The first answer to this question is that we have no way of knowing how human evolution could have turned out in this alternative fashion. That knowledge could only be had by a well-nigh omniscient being, one who could know every move made by every relevant physical particle in the history of the evolution of the human species, and even then speculation about alternative evolutionary histories would probably run afoul of Werner Heisenberg's notorious uncertainty principle. At the end of the day, however, what really matters is that evolution is a process of trial and error beholden to happenstance in the form of genetic mutations, and that we're simply stuck with the resources it has provided us.

What does all this mean for the humanist worldview? There is no one form of humanism, of course, but surely there are themes common to the vast majority of perspectives that we deem humanist. One of those themes is the need to reject reliance upon a deity and to celebrate our own human resources. Yet, I have just argued that those resources are, on one count at least, decidedly wanting. Human nature is divided against itself. The Buddha had it right when he observed that human life is fundamentally "out of joint," a painful condition that must be addressed with our eyes wide open.

As Stephen Law puts it in his 2001 book, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*, addressing our ethical behavior in particular, "Humanists...believe our ethics should be strongly informed by study of what human beings are actually like." Humanism doesn't often begin with the observation that human nature is broken, but it can surely do so. Accommodation to the realities of an impaired human nature is not the same thing as resignation. One who does decide to advance a humanism that begins with the premise that human nature is broken can claim not only that she is clear-eyed about the human condition, but also that she has avoided the dreaded offense of anthropocentrism, an exaggerated preference for human beings that neglects the importance of the larger natural world in which our species resides. Acknowledging from the start that human nature is in a state of disrelation with itself makes it clear that, far from privileging the human species, evolution wasn't really paying attention when it formed us.

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