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The Politics of Evolutionary Psychology

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Abstract. This article describes some political implications of the field of evolutionary psychology.

The field of evolutionary psychology assumes that psychological "stuff" is adaptive. The "stuff" may comprise intrapsychic and behavioral structures, processes, contents, and functions--e.g., combinations of (a) emotional, cognitive, and motivational; (b) conscious, preconscious, and unconscious; (c) surface and source; (d) innate and learned. The adaptiveness of the "stuff" denotes that the latter is beneficial. To most evolutionary psychologists, the benefit is facility in getting one's genes into the next generation. Let's look at the political implications of the above.

The nature of politics is the quest for finite resources in an environment of infinite need. Whether physical, mental, or spiritual need, needs outstrip the resources to satisfy them. In the political world, adaptiveness denotes how closely one can come to satisfying one's many needs as one lives. The concept of evolutionary psychology suggests that the "first among unequals" of needs is to have as many as possible of one's genes--or similar genes of one's blood relatives--to be present in the next generation. Most basically, then, this concept can easily be used as an "opiate of the masses," as a rationale for not effectively decreasing huge disparities between the social and economic haves and have-nots. After all, the "wretched of the earth" may actually be winning the struggle of adaptiveness and the meek shall inherit the earth through tender but aggressive propagation.

The concept of evolutionary psychology may easily leave the impression that psychology is as foreign to Lamarckian inheritance as biology. In fact, for many aspects of psychology, the possibility of inheriting (through cultural transmission) environmentally acquired characteristics is very significant--e.g., the value of education and propensities of child and spouse abuse. Not recognizing psychological Lamarckianism is to foster an unreconstructed Confucianism that values keeping people in their place regardless of their liking for that place. (As an aside, one might posit that the speed and flexibility of Lamarckian inheritance is so much greater than the common notion of Darwin's natural selection that the notion of adaptiveness of the latter may have little to do with that of the former.)

Evolutionary psychology, if it is to be compatible with evolutionary theories in general, assumes that one's individual psychology deals with very short time spans, much shorter than the thousands of years that must occur before barely noticeable psychological differences could begin to evolve. One problem with this is that there are individuals who do quite often think in the "big picture" of thousands and thousands of years. Most people think like this at least occasionally, and from this, many of them profess to derive a sense of continuity. So there may not be such a divergence of psychological time-frames as assumed by evolutionary psychology. Also, unlike evolutionary theory applied to biology, the assumed psychological differences between how one is now and how humans and their ancestors were thousands and thousands of years ago may render understanding these earlier psychological states unperceivable, unbelievable, and unknowable. The tool for analysis is simultaneously under analysis, and self-analysis cannot occur to the whole self because the tool is part of that self. The politics of ideology here and in the next several points is that one may be left with an approach that is unverifiable but purports to be "good science."

This is the case with evolutionary psychology's focus on mating strategies as the final common pathway of adaptation--given that adaptation is predicated maximal propagation of genes into the next generation. In essence, all human behavior is then conceived as contributing to adaptation only in terms of relationship to mating strategy. The point, however, is that a putative evolutionary origin for any aspect of psychology does need to apply adaptiveness at all, and, therefore, there's no necessary relationship with mating strategy. There is no need to posit, as well, that even if an aspect of psychology has no adaptiveness now or may harm us, it must have had an adaptive function a long time ago. Thus, speculations about so-called environments of evolutionary adaptiveness--that seem to be outside the purview of science--need not always be sought.

Very fundamentally, the evolutionary psychology approach that must provide teleological rationales for existing psychological characteristics--e.g., male sexual jealousy to increase one's certainty of one's paternity--may actually reflect one's current need to have meaning in one's life and a purpose to the meaning and, thus, be a violation of Occam's Razor. Certainly, a psychological aspect may have no adaptive value at all but merely be a nonadaptive side-consequence of an adaptive psychological or biological characteristic--reflecting, for example, some neurobiological constraint. And evolutionary psychologists too infrequently consider the roles of a lack of directionality and of luck.

Much of the above seems to be related to psychology's political stance: the quest to be accepted as a "real science" through consonance with theories and methods of the physical and life sciences. This position has been roundly and effectively critiqued by philosophers of science but is still propagating. Is this a survival of the fittest? (See Barkow, J., Cosmides, L., & Tooby, J. (1992). *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*. Oxford University Press; Buss, D. (1990). *Evolutionary social psychology: Prospects and pitfalls*. *Motivation and Emotion*, 14, 265-286; Buss, D. (1994). *The evolution of desire*. Basic Books; Caporael, L. R., & Brewer, M.B. (1991). *The quest for human nature: Social and scientific issues in evolutionary psychology*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 47, 1-9; Gould, S. J. (June 26, 1997). *Evolution: The pleasure of pluralism*. *The New York Review of Books*, pp. 47-51; Gangestad, S.W. (1995). *The new evolutionary psychology: Prospects and challenges*. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6, 38-41.) (Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology, Motivation, Typology.)