

Anarchism and the Question of Human Nature

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In these first years of the new century anarchism, as a philosophy and as an ongoing praxis, is faced with a number of disconcerting adjustments. Chief among these is the growing evidence that we, along with most other ideologies on the Left, have based our theory on a mistaken concept of human nature. We have learned over the years to distrust words like sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and above all that dreaded buzzword, “hard-wired” — yet we can no longer ignore the fact that these sciences are probably right about human nature. It does exist; it has biological roots; and while it does enjoy a large measure of free will, its most basic drives and emotions are indeed hard-wired. The Left has long resisted and denied these facts, on the grounds that they might justify discrimination based on heredity, or that they militate against the possibility of radical social reform, or both. I hope to demonstrate that these fears are groundless.

The “hard-wired” concept is thoroughly anchored in evolutionary theory, and this is the first obstacle the Left runs up against when objecting to it. Evolution is a fact: we are animals, closely related to other primates and only a little more distantly to the rest of the mammals. We share many physical and emotional traits with them, and it is absurd to suppose that they are governed by instinct but that we are not. We don’t know exactly how evolution works (in fact there are some serious alternatives even to Darwinism’s most basic assumptions, like the central role of the gene); but it *does* work. Very few if any radicals or anarchists would disagree with that. But certain conclusions follow inevitably from that ‘given,’ and if we deny them, we put ourselves into very unsavory company. Biblical fundamentalists insist that we are a separate creation from the animals, our consciousness governed by a ‘soul’ which is in turn answerable to a ‘God’ — do any of us want that idea for a bedfellow? On the other hand, if we accept uncritically (as many on the Right do) the view of human nature suggested by today’s neo-Darwinism, we wander into even more unsavory neighborhoods. The notorious *Bell Curve* is founded on those arguments, and so is neo-Nazism and other overtly racist movements.

This article is, in part, a response to the recent best-seller *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), by Steven Pinker of MIT. Pinker is that rare individual, a compassionate conservative (such creatures do exist, despite the oxymoronic nature of the phrase). He is neither racist nor sexist, and appears to believe sincerely in human equality and freedom, though he does not think we need to abandon capitalism or authoritarianism to achieve those goals. Much of the book is aimed at demonstrating the sources and ongoing project of what he calls the “blank-slate” hypothesis. Classical anarchism, with its origins in the work of Godwin and Proudhon, in the tumults of the French Revolutionary era, and — indirectly — in socialism of various hues, has always assumed that human nature is almost infinitely malleable. It is an idea shared by most philosophies of the Left, and was developed into scientific respectability by such left-leaning anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists as Boas, Durkheim, Mead, Kroeber, Jung, Reich and Goodman. Pinker traces it back to Locke and Mill, at least in its modern form (the idea actually goes back to classical Greece).

It is still the dominant view of human nature in academia, and has usually been accepted unquestioningly by anarchists. Unfortunately (and I do mean ‘unfortunately’), it is wrong.

The blank-slate hypothesis goes like this: humans, unlike all other animals, have evolved in such a way that we have almost entirely freed ourselves from the chains of instinct and biology. Very little, if any, of our behavior is hard-wired. We are essentially products of culture, which is not a biological phenomenon and is therefore capable of very wide variation. All differences among ethnic groups, so-called races, and even individuals are the result of nurture and life experience, not of genetic heritage. Consequently “social engineering” is possible: we can create a better world by manipulating culture. This conclusion has supported many experiments over the past century, ranging from the horrors of Stalinism to the liberal social welfare state, not to mention various anarchist communities. The “blank slate” is therefore associated with liberalism and radicalism generally — with civil rights, women’s liberation, environmentalism, anti-globalism and queer studies, to name a few. But in recent decades, the sciences — notably cognitive psychology, genetics and brain research — have established that, while the human mind is flexible and creative, it is far from being a blank slate. Much if not most of our everyday behavior is in fact “hard-wired.” (This term has become anathema to many academics on the Left.)

The evidence has given rise to several new fields of study, all of which have come under attack from the Left. The most notorious of these — known even to radicals who have no background at all in the sciences — is “sociobiology.” Why do radicals oppose sociobiology? Because they see it as a possible prop for racist and sexist ideologies. It can be, of course, but that is too narrow and facile an interpretation. The idea derives originally from the work of Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard entomologist who noticed similarities between the social behavior of ants and humans, and developed a full-blown thesis of animal behavior as a product of evolutionary pressures. In his *Sociobiology* (1975, updated and expanded in 2000 as *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*), Wilson argued that social behavior in all animals, including us, is primarily founded in our biology, which is in turn shaped by evolution. At no point does Wilson claim that nurture or environment play no part in human nature. Still, he and his followers have been attacked, not only in print but even physically in a few cases. In an attempt to bring these ideas more towards the political center, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides reformulated them as “evolutionary psychology,” which has tended to focus on gender differences. The controversy continues, despite the recent death of Wilson’s most prominent enemy, Stephen Jay Gould. The political problem with sociobiology is its association with neo-Darwinism, which has become a platform for many noisome reactionary academics like Charles Murray, Francis Fukuyama, and Richard Dawkins. The Right is certainly guilty of selective use of sociobiology’s findings; but so is the Left, in its rejoinders. In his *A Darwinian Left: Politics, evolution and cooperation* (1999), Peter Singer attempted to find a middle ground, starting from a Left perspec-

tive; Pinker has done the same in *Blank Slate*, starting from the Right. Neither has entirely succeeded, probably because there is in fact no objective middle ground.¹

Sociobiology challenges the idea that society or culture, the whole collection of human behaviors, is somehow disconnected from the human organisms which practice it. Alfred Kroeber (father of the anarchist novelist Ursula Leguin) once famously said, “Heredity cannot be allowed to have acted any part in history.” (Degler, 1991, p. 84) I am a professional historian, and though I admire Kroeber, the fatuity of this statement astonishes me. Almost as soon as Wilson’s book was published, the waters were irretrievably muddied by Gould, Waddington and other critics who linked him with such unpleasant doctrines as eugenics and Social Darwinism, not to mention racism. This was unfair, and took the debate off in an unprofitable direction. Matters were made worse by some of Wilson’s supporters, like Richard Dawkins, Thomas Sowell, and the authors of *The Bell Curve*, all of whom have advanced selectively exaggerated versions of Wilson’s ideas as backing for their own particular agendas. The end result has been to polarize the educated general public (which for the most part does not really understand the science involved) and to make them victims, in a sense, of an academic controversy (which, like all academic controversies, is really more political than intellectual). We in the West often laugh at Stalin’s Soviet Union for wasting so much time and resources on Lysenko’s crackpot theories — yet is this case so very different?

Sociobiology and its cognates depend for their scientific backing on neo-Darwinism, a set of facts and ideas represented in the popular press by the “selfish gene” metaphor. As the name suggests, this is only the latest version of mainstream evolutionary theory, which is itself still evolving. It pointedly rejects Kropotkin’s claim that in evolution, cooperation is often a stronger driving force than competition. For this reason alone anarchists should question the motives of the neo-Darwinists. The fact that the sociobiological project is based on faulty (or at best, incomplete) biology does not necessarily invalidate its claims, but it does require us to look more carefully at the conclusions drawn from those claims.

No one with any sense really doubts that Darwin got the basics right. Evolution *does* happen; that is not a theory. But controversy still rages over the details of the process. The neo-Darwinists begin from a logical, reductionist and materialist standpoint. Their approach is sometimes called the “synthetic theory” because it combines Darwin’s principles with the science of genetics founded by Mendel, a science that Darwin knew nothing about. The only possible selection is *natural* selection, and its

¹ The controversy touched off by Wilson has been admirably chronicled in Ullica Segerstråle, *Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociology Debate and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The current state of mDNA and Y chromosome research may be found in many places, but see especially the work of the Humane Genome researchers Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Peter Underhill at Stanford University. The best general work is Cavalli-Sforza’s *The Great Human Diasporas: The History of Diversity and Evolution* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

mechanism is genetic. They are fundamentalists on this issue. The word “mechanism” is used advisedly.

Neo-Darwinism is essentially Cartesian, a late branch of that world-view born in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. Nothing is real if it cannot be seen, touched, measured, accounted for objectively. The universe and everything in it is “mechanical” in the sense that it obeys certain simple laws of chemistry and physics. Given enough time and knowledge, we can figure everything out without recourse to emotional, intuitive, spiritual (that is, “unscientific”) explanations. Moreover, this approach is reductionist: Darwin, but moreso his followers, have believed that they can understand the world by examining minutely all the parts in isolation, and then putting them back together — not as they *really* are, in all their messy and illogical complexity, but in the form of a model that makes sense to the scientist. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the neo-Darwinists are as yet undisturbed by the implications of subatomic physics, chaos theory, general systems theory and the like. The best simple way to describe their basic error is that they do not think holistically.

Neo-Darwinism’s chief spokesman, Richard Dawkins, is unremittingly cold and “scientific” — in the negative sense of that word — when it comes to explaining what it means to be human. What it means is simply this: we are robots, mere machines built and programmed by genes whose only (and unconscious) goal is to replicate themselves. The genes too are machines, and therefore so is all of living nature. This extreme Cartesianism is at the heart of old-paradigm thinking, and a primary goal of post-Western science must be to hurry it off to its long-overdue grave. But, as Dawkins himself often points out, just because I can’t or won’t accept something as true, doesn’t mean it *isn’t* true. We cannot dismiss neo-Darwinism merely because it is unpleasant. We can, however, question the uses to which it is put.

Even if all other scientific proofs do not convince, this one should: our emotions, reflexes and senses all evolved in a world very different from the one we have made for ourselves, just in the last ten or twenty generations. This dissonance is no doubt the source of much of our malaise, psychological and physical. Fats and sweets taste good to us because, over several hundred millennia of scraping by on the African savannahs, we needed them to survive. Now, in a sedentary and over-technologized culture, they simply make us obese and diabetic. We evolved a “fight or flight” response to save us from predators; it now comes into play when we are stuck in traffic or on the carpet at work, and we turn it inward, causing ulcers and anxiety. If our slate were truly blank, we could fill it anew in every generation with responses and reflexes appropriate to the milieu, and everyone would be a great deal happier than they are now. The entire science of ecopsychology — an integral part of any post-Western paradigm — would be entirely unnecessary if we did not all have these deep-rooted evolutionary instincts.

It is no doubt true that genes ‘want’ to make more copies of themselves, and as many as possible. It does not follow that they ‘want’ to do so at the expense of other, dissimilar genes. This assumption goes back to one of Darwin’s original errors: that living entities must always compete for scarce resources. This is where the great

anarchist scientist, Peter Kropotkin, comes in. To make a connection between ecology, evolution and anarchism was a stroke of genius, to say the least — in my opinion it makes Kropotkin one of the greatest thinkers of the past thousand years, right up there with Aquinas, Calvin, Marx and Einstein. As all anarchists (but not many others) know, Kropotkin accepted Darwin's basic findings but disputed the Darwinist contention that competition rather than cooperation is the central mechanism of evolution. His *Mutual Aid* framed the idea, and it has been developed much further in the century since, with supporting input from general systems theory, the science of ecology, and other disciplines that Kropotkin himself did not live to see. Graham Purchase and Murray Bookchin, in different ways, have brought his theories up to date.

The other new field which has helped undermine the “blank slate” is usually called “cognitive science.” The name falls a bit short of desirability. Everything is “cognitive” in some sense, so the term is almost too vague to be useful. And the word “science” is tainted. But let's leave that alone and move on.

The philosophical roots of cognitive science are not very long: they reach down through time only so far as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey. Merleau-Ponty was influenced primarily by Kojève and Husserl. Dewey, of course, is one of the best-known educators and philosophers in American life. His simple but profound epistemology, which challenges the traditional boundary between the inner and outer worlds of experience, is the philosophical basis of cognitive science.

Put simply, cognitive science argues that the way we construct our reality — the world we are conscious of, as well as its extensive unconscious foundations — is a product of our sensorimotor experience. The body interacts with its environment in certain ways that are severely restricted by its structure: we have two arms and two legs, eyes in the front of our heads, fronts and backs that are broader than our two sides, and so forth. We can see and hear only narrow frequencies of light and sound. Our eyes are a great deal more sensitive than our noses (we all realize that dogs *smell* the world much more than they *see* it). From birth, our bodies do certain things that produce certain more or less predictable results. This physical interaction with the world ‘out there’ establishes networks of neural connections that last a lifetime, and it is these same connections — not some disembodied ‘mind’ floating in the ether — that also generate our abstract ideas and our languages, that is, our culture. Every such interaction is unique, but they do fall into general patterns. When I push something I can expect it to move, unless it is too heavy or fixed in place. From this general truth I can formulate a definition of “push” that works over a wide span of time and space. All of these processes are more or less unconscious. But the conscious mind is very limited — it can concentrate only on a few things at a time, in a very small time/space region. Therefore it must oversimplify these patterns into metaphorical rules of logic that arise, but are disconnected, from the “real” world. Without this metaphoric ability, cognitive science argues, we could not learn or even function — each event or experience would be new, and we would have to start from scratch in reacting to it.

Currently the leaders in the field of cognitive science are George Lakoff and Mark Johnson of the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Oregon, respectively. Their short book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) is the best introduction to the concept, and their rather-too-long *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*

(1999) extends their findings into every discipline imaginable. Like Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, they start from the assumption, now pretty much proved by late-Western science, that there is no dichotomy between mind and body. In their words, these are the three central findings of cognitive science:

The mind is inherently embodied.

Thought is mostly unconscious.

Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.

(Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 3)

The first and second points would now be accepted by all but the most retrogressive scientists, philosophers and psychologists, though they might argue about the meaning of certain terms like “mind” and “unconscious.” The third point makes a statement about the nature of language, and the ways in which it generates our realities.

The most prized possession of Western philosophy has always been *Reason*: that capacity we supposedly have to look at the world, marshal and analyze what we see according to certain simple rules, and come up with an accurate representation in our minds of what is “out there.” Cognitive science disposes of traditional “reason” rather easily, and undercuts the entire foundation of Western philosophy. The Western view, going back to the pre-Socratics and reinforced by Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes and many others, is that “reason” is a edifice of thought — a set of rules for thinking — that exists quite independently of our physical selves. It goes on in our minds, but is not *of* our minds — this is another way of saying that the world is just as we perceive it to be, or that it would be just as it is now if we weren’t in it to perceive it. This view underlies the blank-slate theory. Cognitive theory says, on the contrary, that our reason is a byproduct of our neural, skeletal and muscular structures: we think the way we do because our bodies work the way they do. It is thus a product of evolution and is “universal” only in the sense that is shared by all human beings (and probably at least some other animals). Nearly all reasoning takes place at a subconscious level; all that comes to the surface is what we need for immediate action in a given situation. Because it is not conscious, it is metaphorical by definition: only a waking consciousness can think in concrete, explicit terms (and even then, only up to a point). And finally, cognitive science undoes the vast error of the Enlightenment, one we have suffered under for several centuries now: reason is not disembodied, following a set of universal rules ‘out there,’ but driven by the emotions and intuitions, just like everything else we do. As Lakoff and Johnson modestly point out, their theory brings down the whole structure of Western philosophy, with considerable collateral damage

to science, psychology, sociology and history. This is not a bad thing. Of course, it also brings down anarchism as we have long understood it, but this is not a bad thing either: it gives us an opportunity to place our ideology on a sounder footing.

Reason as defined by Western philosophy is an impossibility, as even a little reflection will reveal. It is pictured as a sort of computer or calculating machine, housed in a container that insulates it totally from the ‘real world’ — it is absolutely free and autonomous, not subject to any of the laws of nature, not even gravity or time. It is disconnected altogether from the lump of brain tissue it inhabits, yet somehow it can understand and exercise some control over the world outside its cocoon. Those readers who have some familiarity with formal Aristotelian logic will more easily get my point. This system of thought, while certainly very useful in limited areas, is a distillate of the whole vast idea of Reason into a small collection of rules for thinking. Formal logic — and even more so its latter-day mathematized descendants — is a world of absolutes, with no grey areas whatsoever. A is either B or it is not B, with no possibilities in between. We all know that the real world does not work like that. Worse, logic is never swayed by feelings or intuition: if all A is B, and all B is C, then all A is C, whether you *like* it or not. The new discipline known as “fuzzy logic” is just beginning to adjust the concept of reason to the findings of cognitive science, but it has a long way to go.

It should be clear by now that a fundamental cause of anarchism’s shaky foundation (a problem it shares with most other products of Western philosophy) is *dichotomization*. In order to get past this problem we must, first of all, reject certain false dichotomies that contribute to our “blank-slate” fetish. The most basic is that between “nature” and “nurture,” a dichotomy that goes back at least to Plato and Aristotle, but was first delineated in modern terms by John Locke and then developed to an absurd degree by psychologists and by philosophers interested in psychology. Dichotomy itself, as a concept, is a template example of why the nature/nurture binary is unsound. All human cultures have some notion of dichotomy, and it is easy to see why: the human body is bilateral. We have two eyes, two hands, two feet; a front and back; a left and right. Some basic dichotomies also exist in nature, such as night and day, or the somewhat different functions of the right and left brain hemispheres. It is therefore entirely natural to project other dichotomies onto the world around us, whether they are really there or not. In general, though, nature is not dichotomous, nor is the human mind. Cutting-edge physics, along with general systems and chaos theory, now posits that the world is a bewilderingly complicated network of interactions, in which everything is literally connected to everything else. Here is the way out of the conundrum set for us anarchists by cognitive science and evolutionary biology: because of the way our bodies and brains are organized, we see the world in a particular way (dichotomous, reified, logical), and this view has obvious survival benefits, otherwise we would not be here to talk about it. However, we project that model onto the world as a whole, onto vast regions of reality where it does not apply. This is the part of our behavior that is *notis* learning — and we have the freedom of choice to direct that evolution, at least within the limits set by physical nature. Evolution may indeed predispose me to

favor the survival of my genes over the survival of yours; but I can choose otherwise. My bilateral symmetry may predispose me to dichotomize society as Left or Right; but I can choose otherwise, and be Out In Front instead. hard-wired, and therefore, susceptible to learning and change. As Gregory Bateson said, evolution

So we have, for more than a century, built our ideological edifice on shifting sands. But the news is not altogether bad. Predictably, critics on the right interpret the new findings as evidence in favor of their agenda. I do not refer to the crudely racist and sexist uses to which the “hard-wired” model has been put in the past. The conservative mainstream has learned to be more subtle than that. Here is how Steven Pinker summarizes the “blank-slate” fears about these findings:

If people are innately different, oppression and discrimination would be justified.

If people are innately immoral, hopes to improve the human condition would be futile.

If people are products of biology, free will would be a myth and we could no longer hold people responsible for their actions.

If people are products of biology, life would have no higher meaning and purpose.

(Pinker, *Blank Slate*, p. 139)

Therefore, Pinker says, scientists on the ‘Left’ reject the discoveries of evolutionary biology and genetics, all evidence to the contrary. From an anarchist perspective, we might reply that both sides are mis-stating the issue. Try this instead:

whether people are innately different or not, oppression and discrimination are not justified, and need not be an automatic consequence of innate differences. Different means *different*, not ‘inferior’ or ‘superior.’ Even the most hard-wired sociobiologist will admit that we have sufficient mental plasticity to make free choices about how we will deal with difference.

‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ are value judgments, subjective in regard to time, place and culture; and again, we are plastic enough to “improve the human condition,” regardless of whether our sense of right and wrong is biological in origin.

‘free will’ and ‘determinism’ are yet another false dichotomy. Even if our behavior is partly or even largely biologically determined, no one argues that it is 100% determined; we can choose to resist the biological imperative, and so of course people may be held responsible for their actions. The only question is what ‘holding responsible’ is to mean in terms of punishment or reprisal.

whether people are products of biology or of culture is quite irrelevant to whether life has a “higher meaning and purpose.” Aside from the subjectivity of that word “higher,” life has the purpose and meaning *we* give it.

Let us look more closely at some of the social implications of the foregoing, especially as they relate to anarchism.

Recent studies of early childhood development seem to support the “hard-wired” theory, as indeed common sense tells us they should. Heredity establishes the basic personality: aggressive or shy; intelligent or not so bright. Socialization by the peer group is the main factor in how those basic traits are expressed: is the aggression played out on the football field, or in gang violence and rape? Is IQ developed to its full potential, or does it go to waste? Is attraction to the same sex (which nearly *all* children experience to some degree, at some stage in their development) suppressed, or encouraged by chance events and encounters to develop into homosexuality? The role of the parents is far less than most would like to think: they provide nurture and shelter (or they do not); they provide access to skills and knowledge, they have some part in choosing the peer group; it is largely up to them how ‘secure’ a child feels. But they do not seem to contribute much to the basic personality or intelligence, except through their genes. (Pinker, *Blank Slate*, ch. 19, esp. p. 392)

Is human nature essentially peaceful, or violent? Are we hard-wired to be aggressive? This is a crucial question for anarchists, because we are working towards a world in which artificial restraints are removed from human activity. If there is no government, no police, will we all (as one of my students recently wrote) “run wild and murder each other”? Every anarchist philosopher has addressed this issue. Almost all have assumed a blank-slate explanation for human nature: violence and aggression are learned, not innate. If we engineer our society in such a way that aggression is not rewarded, it will not happen. Peter Kropotkin’s *Conquest of Bread* outlines such a society; the State is an “apparatus of violence.” Even Darwin suggested that the “struggle for existence” is not necessarily violent; “As the mistletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on birds; and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit-bearing plants, in order to tempt birds to devour and thus disseminate its seeds rather than those of other plants.” (Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 63) Even Georges Sorel (who may or may not have been an anarchist, depending on whom you ask), in his *Reflections on Violence*, concluded that violence may be employed only to destroy violent institutions. (Sorel, *Reflections*, p. 195) What it comes down to is that we live in a dominative, patriarchal, hierarchic society in which violence is the chief instrument of policy, enshrined as an ideal in the schools and the media, studied extensively by scientists. Therefore we ‘see’ violence first; it is central to our consciousness; alternatives are rarely discussed or even thought about. (This is also, of course, why Darwinists ‘see’ competition in nature rather than ‘cooperation.’) We may in fact be hard-wired for violence, and we may have to accept that science has proved it. But we may also be hard-wired for many other behaviors and attitudes which have not been as well

explored, because our science functions on behalf of our institutions of coercion. We do not need to accept the claim that, because violence is in our genes, we are therefore “violent beings.”

Here, fortunately, Pinker’s case is rather weak. In his chapter on violence, he gives many examples of apparently innate violent behavior, but all of them come either from our culture or from indigenous cultures under threat from Western civilization. The peaceful nature of most indigenous and matricentric peoples, before they ran up against the aggressive West, is well documented in the journals of early explorers and anthropologists. Still, recent studies do suggest that a tendency to violence and aggression is part of our biological heritage. This again is common sense: the most basic of all urges is that of self-preservation (including self-preservation through reproduction), and when faced with the classic “it’s either me or you” situation, we are all going to choose “me.” But that is an oversimplification, and oversimplification is one of the Right’s oldest tricks. Aggression towards other species (such as hunting and killing for food) does not automatically translate into aggression towards one’s own species, and violence in certain types of situation does not necessarily mean a ‘violent nature.’ Indeed the entire idea of ‘violence as natural’ is undermined by Kropotkin’s demonstration that cooperation is more fundamental to evolution than competition is. However, Kropotkin never denied that competition does exist in nature, and never suggested that it was anything other than ‘natural.’ It seems clear that some degree of aggression and violence is hard-wired into us. But biology is not destiny. The issue for anarchists should not be, “is violence innate?” but rather, “how is it directed?” In spite of what Pinker implies, we do not claim that violence is strictly a learned behavior. What we claim is that how we *express* our violent instincts is learned behavior.

A separate article would be required to explore the current status of ‘race’ as a concept, but let us try to dispose of it briefly here. The Nazi era made racism and its fellow travellers (such as eugenics) unacceptable, and science has striven for the past half-century to demonstrate that race is not a rational basis for discrimination. Just since the 1990s, evolutionary genetics has begun to prove that ‘race’ itself, as traditionally defined, does not even exist. Skin color, epicanthic eye folds and the like are very superficial and recent adjustments to environment, not in any way an essential part of what it means to be human. We are all very closely related, and the genealogical overlap among Africans, Europeans, Amerindians, and so forth is so extensive as to make any boundaries meaningless. Studies of DNA markers have produced some surprises: the Norwegians are not very closely related to the Danes; the Poles are more closely kin to many Pakistani tribes than they are to the Czechs next door; the predominant Irish Y chromosome has more in common with that of native Americans than it does with other European Y haplogroups. The closest relatives of today’s Jews, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic, seem to be the Greeks.² These findings relate only to mitochondrial DNA (from your mother’s mother’s mother and so on) or to the Y

² Ibid.

chromosome (father's father's father, etc.) and so do not even take into account the enormous mix that all of us can find in the other branches of our family tree. That being said, it must be added that race certainly *does* exist as an historical and social category, but that is not relevant to the present purpose.

But if much of our behavior is genetically rooted, and if differences can be shown in the genetic heritage of human groups, then scientifically-backed racial stereotyping is a real possibility. Here is Pinker's argument on stereotypes in a nutshell:

Categories and stereotypes may indeed be real, as long as we remember that 'real' is not a simple concept, but an interaction between our minds and the world, further complicated by the fact that our minds and the world are not independent entities. The bottom line is that it doesn't matter whether (for example) race and gender stereotypes are 'real' in some sense as opposed to socially constructed. What matters is that it is not moral or even logical to judge or rank individuals on the basis of membership in a category, or to judge or rank those categories themselves in some kind of value hierarchy based on our own admittedly subjective standards. It may be quite true, for example, that African-Americans as a group score lower on IQ tests than whites or Asian-Americans (leave aside, for the moment, the question of how valid the tests themselves are). It is probably even true that heredity plays a major role in IQ, though it is unlikely that this has much to do with race, as genetic diversity is greater within races than between races. It does not follow, in any case, that it is all right to discriminate against African-Americans because of IQ test results, or that *all* African-Americans are less intelligent than *all* whites or Asians. We cannot even replace *all* with *some*, since intelligence appears to be a strictly individual trait.

Pinker is right — but he doesn't go far enough. This analysis still emphasizes race (however defined) as a prime factor in human differences. What he neglects to consider is that in our culture, a hierarchy of power and privilege does determine many categories, and does rank those categories and stereotypes in a manner that legitimates discrimination. Race — given its usual definition some centuries ago, by privileged Europeans — has long been used as an excuse to cover up discrimination based on other criteria: gender, social status, and other hierarchic considerations. What we anarchists need to do is undermine that hierarchy, not just the categories themselves.

Many philosophers and scientists on the Left have condemned, sometimes on absurd and embarrassing grounds, the findings of cognitive science and evolutionary biology. Radical feminism, for example, sometimes goes to the extreme of arguing that all male/female differences are socially constructed. But even more moderate feminists sometimes ignore the scientific evidence. Countless studies have outlined differences in brain development, hormone balances, perception, and the like, most of them beginning in the womb. Many of the researchers conducting these studies, if not most, are women. The bottom line: it is simply not a matter of culture that little boys like toy guns and little girls like dolls. The general public tends to conflate "feminism" with its radical extreme, though in fact many radical feminists choose to emphasize and celebrate male/female differences. True, radical feminism has made some silly mistakes

due to its reliance on the blank slate. And anti-feminists like Christina Hoff Summers or Camille Paglia have made equally silly errors because they are brainwashed by the dominant patriarchal paradigm. Both sides often miss the point: it doesn't really matter whether the differences between men and women are innate or imposed by culture. What matters is that we respect those differences (or deconstruct them, when appropriate) and refuse to use them as excuses for domination or discrimination. To his credit, Pinker recognizes this simple fact.

One brief article in one journal will not resolve this issue. But I hope that I have demonstrated the need for anarchists to take another look at the scientific evidence. We need not abandon Boas or Kroeber or the many other scientists and philosophers who have contributed to the anarchist stream of thought. But we do need to be critical when necessary, and we need to take cutting-edge science back from the right-wing ideologues who have commandeered it to their own uses. If there's one good thing we have learned from modern science, going all the way back to Bacon and Galileo, it's this: you can't pick and choose your evidence to fit your preconceived opinion. You can, however, choose how to interpret that evidence.

Pinker is no doubt correct that we will never achieve utopia, and the reasons he lists are quite valid. However, we need not accept his conclusion that the only alternative is a free-market economy under an authoritarian government. Each of his points can be reconciled with anarchism and a free society. Let's run through them:

"The primacy of family ties in all human societies and the consequent appeal of nepotism and inheritance." What's the appeal of nepotism when there is no power to bestow, or of inheritance when there's nothing to inherit? What's to stop us from regarding the whole human race as our family?

"The limited scope of communal sharing in human groups, the more common ethos of reciprocity, and the resulting phenomena of social loafing and the collapse of contributions to public goods when reciprocity cannot be implemented." This objection was answered by Kropotkin in chapter twelve of *The Conquest of Bread*: peer pressure, the innate need to be accepted by one's group, is sufficient to enforce communal sharing. Reciprocity may be hard-wired; how we implement it is not.

"The universality of dominance and violence across human societies (including supposedly peaceable hunter-gatherers) and the existence of genetic and neurological mechanisms that underlie it." We have overwhelming evidence that dominance is *not* universal, but is a byproduct of patriarchy. As for violence — yes, we are hard-wired to use it, against the plants and animals we eat to survive; but we use it against one another only when there is some tangible payoff, or when we are threatened. Take away the payoff or the threat, and we are indeed peaceable. Pinker neglects to note that most

indigenous people were in fact nonviolent before they were threatened by contact with aggressive, dominant cultures like ours.

“The universality of ethnocentrism and other forms of group-against-group hostility across societies, and the ease with which such hostility can be aroused in people within our own society.” Here Pinker, like most rightists, confuses human society with the artificially created state. Yes, we are tribal by nature, but not statist. Violence and hostility are aroused in us when we try to put the tribal mentality to the service of the artificial state. Ethnocentrism is not dangerous; state politics is.

“The partial heritability of intelligence, conscientiousness, and antisocial tendencies, implying that some degree of inequality will arise even in perfectly fair economic systems, and that we therefore face an inherent trade-off between equality and freedom.” This is a non-issue. We need not all be equal in all respects in order to agree that we all have equal rights. Inequality arises when we define certain characteristics as “superior,” and reward their possessors with authority of some kind. And of course there is a trade-off between equality and freedom: this is the definition of “human society,” and no anarchist denies it. What we deny is that we require some ‘authority’ to set the terms of the trade-off for us.

“The prevalence of defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, and cognitive dissonance reduction, by which people deceive themselves about their autonomy, wisdom, and integrity.” Another non-issue. Of course we deceive ourselves all the time; the problem is that our society of domination and hierarchy encourages those particular traits, whereas a just egalitarian society would not. We are not so hard-wired that we *must* reward self-serving or self-deceptive behavior.

“The biases of the human moral sense, including a preference for kin and friends, a susceptibility to a taboo mentality, and a tendency to confuse morality with conformity, rank, cleanliness, and beauty.”

We are *all* kin, and if we could get that through our heads, we could all be friends, as well. As for morality: this is learned behavior. The fact that we do not all agree on what is ‘moral’ proves that morality is not hard-wired. Many of us believe that conformity and rank are *immoral*, that lack of cleanliness is a byproduct of hierarchy, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

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