

Introduction

Not in Our Nature?

In the spring of 1979, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson was due to give an important lecture at the University of Michigan. Wilson, a specialist on the social behaviours of ants and termites, had become convinced that natural instincts also had an important part to play in human social behaviour. He thought it probable that people's ideas and actions owed rather more to their biology than many, especially in the social sciences and humanities, cared to admit. He wanted to get this idea over to his audience in an original and witty manner. He began . . .

“On one thing we can surely agree! We are the pinnacle of three billion years of evolution, unique by virtue of our high intelligence, employment of symbolic language, and diversity of cultures evolved over hundreds of generations. Our species alone has sufficient self-awareness to

*perceive history and the meaning of personal mortality. Having largely escaped the sovereignty of our genes, we now base social organization mostly or entirely upon culture. Our universities disseminate knowledge from the three great branches of learning: the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the termitities. Since our ancestors, the macrotermittine termites, achieved ten-kilogram weight and larger brains during their rapid evolution through the late Tertiary Period, and learned to write with pheromone script, termitistic scholarship has refined ethical philosophy. It is now possible to express the deontological imperatives of moral behaviour with precision. These imperatives are mostly self-evident and universal. They are very essence of termitity. They include the love of darkness...; the centrality of the colony life amidst a richness of war and trade among colonies; the sanctity of the physiological caste system; the evil of personal reproduction by worker castes; the mystery of deep love for reproductive siblings, which turns to hatred the instant they mate; rejection of the evil of personal rights; the infinite aesthetic pleasures of pheromonal song; the aesthetic pleasure of eating from nestmates' anuses after the shedding of the skin; the joy of cannibalism and surrender of the body for consumption when sick or injured (it is more blessed to be eaten than to eat); and much more . . .*¹

Wilson's introduction certainly grabbed the audience's attention. But he was also making a serious point, for just like his intelligent termites,

we humans too assume our thoughts and behaviours are the creations of our reasoning minds. Biology is for other species, we can do better. As self-aware thinking beings we feel the need to rebel against the cold authority of evolutionary processes. Our likes and dislikes, our moral choices, our behaviours in the social sphere, we prefer to think of them all as subject to our conscious control.

A defining characteristic of modern political and social debate in particular has been an almost complete reliance on nurture rather than nature as *the* explanatory factor in human affairs. This is because, in theory at least, nurture is open to our intervention, whereas nature is a bit trickier. Because of this we prefer to view our social problems as the creations of societal forces, rather than the more intractable products of our biology:

- *‘Jake has really done well in his job, unlike his friend Jimmy. Jimmy’s disrupted childhood obviously took its toll.’*
- *‘Why is Sophie so shy but Sue so sociable and outgoing? Was Sophie bullied at school?’*
- *‘Women fail to get the top jobs because society erects a glass ceiling above them.’*
- *‘Flo gained an ‘A’ in maths but Liam only managed an ‘F’; Liam’s mates must have lead him astray.’*
- *‘Why are Americans so rich but Africans so poor? It must be exploitation.’*

In today's world, problems such as these are almost always seen as sociological in nature; the results of dysfunctional social environments, of difficult personal histories or of conflicting cultural practices. If speculation on innate factors does arise, then conversation quickly becomes awkward and uneasy. *'Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we can't do anything about people with criminal tendencies.'* Deviation from the sociological default is slapped down with cries of *'biological determinism'*, or worse. Intelligent discussion presumes and media debate demands that nurture rather than nature has moulded our patterns of thought and of behaviour.

And following directly on from this comes the great managerial assumption that social action can change the world to order. Modern man can remodel himself as if he were made of play-dough. Any individual, any corporate or bureaucratic body can achieve their targets in life given the right training, enough resources (money), and a sufficiently weighty policy document. *'Education education education'* is the cry of the politician who seeks to build his utopia. The modern managerial state allows us to imagine ourselves masters of our destiny and it's all so convenient and comforting. We have risen above mere nature. Governments, civil servants, commercial companies, NGOs, the UN and the European Union, all now worship at the shrine to social engineering.

In recent times this creed of social determinism has often seemed to aspire to the status of a religion, and one moreover that can brook no

opposition. ‘*You think Liam’s low maths score comes from his genes? That’s a real counsel of despair*’. An underlying theme of this book is that the last half-century’s love affair with social determinism as the sole explanatory factor in human affairs has been horribly misguided. It has no basis in science but is simply an article of faith. It is at best detrimental to and at worst disastrous for the future of our species.

In this book we shall be looking at similarities and differences of race in particular - a taboo subject if ever there was one. But our aim is to produce neither a list of human universals, nor some systematic catalogue of racial variations. That is for others to do. Rather, it is an attempt to loosen up the dialogue; to allow a little fresh air into a debating chamber which in recent times has produced such a fog of worthy obfuscation. In the typical sociological explanation of individual or group differences there is no room for any biological element. For it is not only Christian fundamentalists who seek to deny that *Homo sapiens* is a product of natural evolution, many social scientists do so as well. The only difference is that the former proclaim their denial openly whilst the latter do so by implication and omission.

But although things have been this way since about the 1960s, it was not always so. For most of recorded history, innate human differences between individuals were recognised and accepted as a reality. Some people were said to be constitutionally lazy, others rather more conscientious. There were the good and the bad,

the miserly and the generous, the morally strong and the incurably feckless. People in previous generations were not afraid to use these terms. Men and women too were seen as having differing natures just like their counterparts in the animal kingdom where bulls behaved differently to cows, mares to stallions and cockerels to hens. Each pair were partners, leading differing but complementary lives, and each species benefited from its own unique pattern of sexual duality.

Until the 1960s it was also generally acknowledged that the various races of mankind behaved in different ways according to their inherited natures. True our forebears often got it wrong, and yes the modern science of evolution and genetics was not there to provide an explanation, but common sense did a pretty good job – *‘it’s all in the blood’*. After the 1960s, intellectual fashion became increasingly hooked on the idea that none of it was in the blood – it was all in the mission statement instead.

Now in the first decades of the twenty-first century we are beginning to understand some of the complex genetics behind our varied patterns of behaviour. Common sense alone therefore suggests it is time to prepare ourselves for what our DNA is beginning to reveal. Unfortunately many in politics, in the media and in academic and cultural life are reluctant to tread this path. And ironically it is often their very gifts of intellect which are holding them back. For whilst intellect demands the unfettered right to roam, simpler minds are often more content following the paths carved out by nature.

But science moves on, and today an increasing number of academics who have some inkling of the genetic discoveries to come, live in a sort of intellectual dread of just what these revelations might be. And it is a real irony that during the last half century while the biological sciences had been moving so rapidly ahead, social and political thinkers and policy makers had been galloping so fast in the opposite direction. Increasingly they have taken refuge in a worthy never-never land where all are possessed of the same potential and all are born 'equal', the empty brain of the newborn child eagerly awaiting impregnation with the good-citizen software of the modern managerial state.

As a species we need to show a little more humility in the face of the natural world. We need to acknowledge that under a thin veneer of civilisation, we too are simply the products of evolution. We should recognise and acknowledge that evolutionary processes are just as capable of creating group variation in man as they have been in so many other species. To help us understand some of the social and political differences which exist between nations today, we should try to learn something of the biologically inherited differences between them. Rational understanding rather than pious ignorance would be a far better bequest to our children.

In Chapter 1 our starting point is the concept of human equality, since this underlies so much social and political discussion. What does

the word 'equality' actually mean in the social context, and more importantly perhaps what does it not mean? Chapter 2 looks at genetic influences on the species as a whole, and on the behaviour of individuals. It also considers what is meant by differences between groups. Chapter 3 includes an introduction to the processes of evolution and examines the evidence for racial variation in species other than man. Chapter 4 is concerned specifically with human evolution over its tens of thousands of years, including influences on the evolution of racial variation. Chapter 5 considers medicine and race, and the rapidly expanding use of DNA analysis in genealogy. It concludes by asking whether human races are still evolving. Chapter 6 looks at a selection of modern studies reporting on human racial variation. Chapter 7 suggests three underlying processes which may help to explain racial behaviour, and Chapter 8 shows how the concept of race can provide students of human affairs with a powerful explanatory tool. The Conclusion looks at parallels between ideas of creationism and the concept of equality. It goes on to argue that scientific method provides the only rational approach to an understanding racial difference, and concludes with a final challenge to those who still believe '*we are all the same under the skin*'.

Notes and references are given at the end of each chapter.

Notes

1. Edward O. Wilson, Harvard Professor of Science delivered his talk on *Comparative Social Theory* as a *Tanner Lecture on Human Values*, at the University of Michigan, on March 30th 1979. See:

<<http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/Wilson80.pdf>