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It's good to be alive

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Sex, Murder and the Meaning of Life: A Psychologist Investigates How Evolution, Cognition and Complexity Are Revolutionising Our View of Human Nature
by Douglas Kenrick.
Basic, 238 pp., £18.99, May 2011, 978 0 465 02044 7

Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values
by Sam Harris.
Bantam, 291 pp., £20, April 2011, 978 0 593 06486 3

The Fair Society: The Science of Human Nature and the Pursuit of Social Justice
by Peter Corning.
Chicago, 237 pp., $27.50, April 2011, 978 0 226 11627 3

A scientist who believes he has something important to tell us about human nature tends to say things like this: 'If there is any hope of changing the world for the better, from reducing family violence to reversing overpopulation and international conflict, economists, educators and political leaders will need to base their interventions on a sound understanding of what people are really like, not on some fairy-tale version of what we would like them to be.' That, at any rate, is what Douglas Kenrick has to tell us. Sam Harris begins *The Moral Landscape* in much the same way: 'The more we understand ourselves at the level of the brain, the more we will see that there are right and wrong answers to questions of human values.' Kenrick and Harris represent the two scientific fields – evolutionary psychology and neuroscience – that seem currently most determined to convince the public that their success in the lab qualifies them to tell us how to live. Still, for all their bombast, contemporary scientists are generally warier about making prescriptions than they were in the days of William Shockley, the physicist and advocate of eugenics – at the unpardonable end of the spectrum – and Linus Pauling, the chemist and Vitamin C enthusiast, at the nutty end. Their efforts now go towards proving that they know everything there is to know about human behaviour; they leave themselves little time or energy to make actual proposals.

Kenrick wants to put Darwinian ideas to moral use but knows it's no longer fashionable to sound like Herbert Spencer. Eugenicists believed that once we'd figured out that human nature was simply animal competition it was our duty to help the herd thin itself out. Science has corrected itself since then, and we now understand that just because a gene is selfish it doesn't follow that a person should be. The ideas of inclusive fitness and group selection make it clear that we're biologically better off – as a species and as individuals – when we co-operate. Before Kenrick gets to this, however, he tells us that all human behaviour – whatever our proximate justifications for it – can be understood in terms of reproductive ambition and the aggression this instils. This is what drives a man's interest in *Playboy*, or a woman's in a CEO. 'Why are we so attracted to these images? My guess is this: our minds are designed to look for the beautiful and the powerful because our ancestors either picked the local beauties and bigwigs as mates or

competed with them to get mates.' In case anyone has any doubt about this, Kenrick offers plenty of examples. On being afraid of the dark: 'The threat of ambush is greater when you cannot see, so the evolutionary rewards of being especially wary at night can be substantial.' On men buying expensive presents for women: 'Following the peacock analogy, we suspected that men's conspicuous consumption was a form of showing off linked to mating.'

In the second half of the book, Kenrick seeks to convince us that what we call 'culture' is in fact a set of strategies to promote reproductive viability: 'Throughout history, people who perfected their creative performances or showed off their intellectual capacities often gained status, and that often improved their odds of reproducing.' The problem isn't just that Kenrick and his colleagues devote so much time and energy to authenticating commonsense ideas or reproducing elementary Freudian insights; it's that it's hard to know what to make of a book that aims to say something important about human nature by describing the behaviour of ants. The original Darwinian revolution has been achieved (though not so far as the 40 per cent of Americans who still believe in creationism are concerned). What is now to be gained by insisting we'd be better off if we understood ourselves in terms of reproductive fitness?

The scientists who think they've got something deep to say about human nature are those who think we'll make progress only if we get everybody together to agree on a single parsimonious explanation for everything. Hence the animals. When Kenrick reminds us that human nature consists in being a clever ape, he's offering a teleological understanding in terms of survival. The least controversial, or the most defensible, thing to want at any given time – or to accuse someone else of wanting – is to keep living. But the difference between us and the animals is that we tend to be unwilling to see mere survival as equivalent to the good life. Just because sustained existence is generally considered an indispensable precondition for meaning it doesn't follow that sustaining existence is in itself the most meaningful of goals. Kenrick's argument comes down to a reformulation of the fact that existence precedes essence. Sartre saw this as the problem: Kenrick believes it's a solution.

But of course he doesn't, really, because that solution would lead down the slippery slope to Spencer. Since dog-eat-dog survivalism hasn't come back into fashion, evolutionary psychologists talk instead about reproductive viability, which requires co-operation, teamwork etc. Here Kenrick smuggles a metaphysical conception of the good life back into an ostensibly physicalist argument about the necessary life. Yet despite the promise of his book's subtitle, Kenrick has virtually nothing to say about what post-revolutionary life might look like. He claims that the broad ideas he has outlined 'have profound consequences not only for psychology but for every other behavioural discipline, including economics, marketing, management, political science and the law', but gives no examples. 'When the next generation of researchers in these fields overcomes the remaining resistance to thinking about humans as biological organisms,' he tells us, 'there will be a tidal wave of new discoveries.'

Sam Harris means to circumvent survivalism by rooting his claims in something called 'well-being'. Harris, who dabbles in neuroscience when he's not saving the West from the threat of a new caliphate in the pages of the *New York Times*, believes that 'questions about values – about meaning, morality and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures.' Our advancing understanding of the brain will, he believes, help us to arrive at enduring answers. But the neuroscience involved is largely immaterial; he emphasises that the claim he's making is philosophical rather than merely empirical: 'The claim that science could have something important to say about values (because values relate to facts about the

well-being of conscious creatures) is an argument made on first principles. As such, it doesn't rest on any specific empirical results.'

First he has to establish that there are such things as 'facts about the well-being of conscious creatures'. By 'well-being', he means something not reducible to anything as trivial as happiness or success. Like Kenrick, Harris knows he can't say anything about the 'meaning of life' as crude as 'it's good to keep living it.' His strategy for preserving the metaphysical element in the physical depends on analogy: just as it is better to be alive (i.e. healthy) than to be dead, so it is better to have a life worth living (i.e. one with well-being) than a life not worth living. By talking about well-being, he believes he has halted the infinite regress of G.E. Moore's claim that 'goodness could not be equated with any property of human experience (e.g. pleasure, happiness, evolutionary fitness) because it would always be appropriate to ask whether the property on offer was itself good.' (It's not incidental that he mentions 'evolutionary fitness' here.) Harris writes:

> While I agree with Moore that it is reasonable to wonder whether maximising pleasure in any given instance is 'good', it makes no sense at all to ask whether maximising well-being is 'good'. It seems clear that what we are really asking when we wonder whether a certain state of pleasure is 'good', is whether it is conducive to, or obstructive of, some deeper form of well-being.

This is question-begging. Harris's idea of well-being isn't so much a first principle as a tautology. He's posited a single, final, self-evident desideratum and christened it 'well-being'. No doubt he's pleased to have avoided the survival trap of evolutionary psychology, but he has had to invent an empty category to do it.

He can't let the category stay empty for long. Neuroimaging with fMRI machines provides him with the details of the neural state corresponding to well-being: what a person ought to value and why. 'Fairness is not merely an abstract principle – it is a felt experience … neuroimaging has also shown that fairness drives reward-related activity in the brain.' Another 'fact' Harris has discovered through neuroimaging is that our brains treat a fact ('water is two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen') and a value ('cruelty is wrong') in the same way, so we can praise the latter using words like 'objective'. If there were no clear connection between being good and feeling good in the brain, he worries, 'rapists, liars and thieves would experience the same depth of happiness as the saints.' That possibility, however, he regards as 'far-fetched'.

This isn't very good neuroscience, which might be why Harris is so keen on his first principles. Among those neuroscientists whose involvement with actual lab work prevents them from talking about 'the moral landscape', fMRI studies aren't taken very seriously. As David Eagleman writes in his recent book *Incognito*, 'imaging methods make use of highly processed blood-flow signals, which cover tens of cubic millimetres of brain tissue. In a single cubic millimetre of brain tissue, there are some one hundred million synaptic connections between neurons. So modern neuroimaging is like asking an astronaut in the space shuttle to look out the window and judge how America is doing.'[*] Harris knows that his approach is problematic: he follows up most of his empirical defences with apologies for the rudimentary nature of current techniques as compared with the revolutionary ones to come. 'There seems no question,' he insists, that future studies of the brain will prove that no thief, liar or rapist is as happy as a saint.

It would not have surprised William James or W.V. Quine that our brains treat the molecular composition of water the same way they treat the proposition that cruelty is wrong, but neither of them would have concluded that this means that values are facts. They would have said we're better off talking about this in a different way. Even if we could correlate a brain state with an appreciation of 'fairness', Harris has nothing to say about how we might make people fairer, much less about how neuroscience will solve moral dilemmas. What does Harris think we ought to do with all those colourful brain images? Would he confront a rapist with a scan and say: 'I know you thought you were perfectly content to go around raping, but as you can see here you're actually completely miserable'? Harris dreams that the courts and public spaces of the future will have lie detectors built into their walls: 'Just as we've come to expect that certain public spaces will be free of nudity, sex, loud swearing and cigarette smoke – and now think nothing of the behavioural constraints imposed upon us whenever we leave the privacy of our homes – we may come to expect that certain places and occasions will require scrupulous truth-telling.' It's endearing that he takes this fantasy – in which a bright line separates truth from lies and a remote brainscan can isolate and evaluate precise propositions – so seriously that he's worried about the implication for civil liberties.

Peter Corning's argument in *The Fair Society* is similar to Kenrick's: the 'underlying purpose and vocation of human nature' is 'at bottom a contingent survival enterprise'. He uses a grab-bag of recent scientific findings – a little evolutionary psychology, some neuroscience, a bit of game theory and behavioural economics – to defend the idea that 'we are born with an array of biological needs and built-in "oughts" that motivate and organise our behaviour.' But, like Harris, he also argues from first principles. 'To put the argument in its most general form, humankind is subject to a conditional "if-then" imperative: if we want to survive, we must actively pursue a set of specific survival-related preferences (our basic needs), or else there will be predictable (harmful) consequences.' Corning believes that there are 14 of these basic needs.

The first is thermoregulation: 'Maintaining our body temperature within a very narrow range is at once a starting point and a prime example of a primary need … Sometimes thermoregulation may involve taking off clothing or turning off heaters.' Corning then addresses such needs as nutrition, water ('our need for uncontaminated drinking water is incessant and often urgent'), mobility and sleep, before he gets round to respiration. 'Respiration, and the provision of an adequate supply of clean, oxygenated air, can be a serious problem at high altitudes, in enclosed spaces (mines, submersibles and modern habitations like high-rise buildings), during a fire, or when swimming.' He rounds out the first half of his list with physical health, and then moves on to deal with moral issues, couched as 'biological necessities': mental health, communications, social relationships and nurture of offspring. He concludes that neither capitalism, which is indifferent to group or individual survival, nor socialism, which is indifferent to merit, meets his 14 incontestable needs. He proposes instead, under the name of a 'biosocial contract' – which is not, he's quick to say, 'as radical as it may seem' – a 'middle course between free market capitalism and egalitarian socialism'.

Corning's argument may be silly, but the form it takes – like Kenrick's, and Harris's – is representative of whole shelves of books that purport to tell us something new and scientific about human nature. They are a sign that hope of a scientific case for a more just society has come to replace hope of a good case for a more just society. Corning is afraid that unless he can provide an 'explicit theoretical basis' for his vision of the fair society, his efforts will be 'vulnerable to being attacked or dismissed by the many theorists who have a vested interest in value relativism'.

Scientistic writers like Kenrick, Harris and Corning are even more scared of relativism than they are angry about social inequality. Harris worries that relativism leaves us 'supine' before thieves and rapists. It's a nice hope that one day we'll find an argument so irrefutable that thieves and rapists will see the error of their ways. And it's understandable that so much effort is going into finding one at the moment. The more the American right bases its campaigns on religious or crypto-religious appeals, the more those who don't share their beliefs feel they need something just as strong and certain to defend themselves, something like science. Hardly a page goes by without the reader being told of some 'profound paradigm-shift' or 'revelatory' new technique or theory about the 'deep' structure of something or other. The words these writers like most are 'power' and 'powerful' – Corning uses them 68 times in 193 pages. But it's little use insisting that the structure of our brains or the history of adaptation proves that there are no happy thieves. If we're to make moral progress, we could do worse than to begin precisely by acknowledging the possibility of the happy thief, or the self-satisfied banker.