



Evolution

The nature of human origins is less important than the origins of human nature.

AS MEASURED by public fuss, the debate about human origins boils down to whether life on Earth evolved over hundreds of millions of years, or whether an all-powerful prankster deity spent a week creating a world that just looks like a product of evolution. As measured by practical significance, however, the more important question is what kind of creature descended with the other apes.

T.H. Huxley and Peter Kropotkin initiated the latter discussion, or at least the evolutionary version of it, over 100 years ago. Both were respected scientists who accepted the idea of natural selection. Beyond that, they looked for and saw entirely different beings.

Huxley, the progenitor of a considerable family of British intellectuals, was a noted palaeontologist, professor of natural history, president of the Royal Society and, as “Darwin’s bulldog,” a celebrated antagonist of clerics who favoured the week-of-creation story. He was also prone to depression and in photos looks grim, despite sporting perhaps the finest pair of mutton chops in the world at the time.

Kropotkin, born a Russian prince, was a geologist and a rebel. He did research in Siberia, wrote up his findings in a Moscow prison, and is remembered mostly for his contributions to anarchist politics. George Bernard Shaw described Kropotkin as “amiable to the point of saintliness,” and in later life he was a ringer for Father Christmas.

Their evolutionary dispute was over the basic inclinations of humans and, for that matter, other animals. Huxley took the then-conventional position, argu-

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ing in his 1888 essay “The Struggle for Existence,” that humans, like all other species, are originally and naturally individuals at war with each other in the competition for survival. Among humans in the natural state, he said, “life was a continual free fight,” and civilization relied on moral and social authority to suppress the species’ natural inclinations.

In response, Kropotkin presented a version of natural selection in which the “best fitted” and therefore most likely to survive, prosper and reproduce, were typically not the toughest and shrewdest individuals. They were the most co-operative. Humans, like other animals, Kropotkin concluded, were naturally inclined towards mutual aid and this, cheerfully, should be the basis for social organization.

For Huxley, who represented the assumed truths of his class and generation, the reality of competitive superiority in commercial and imperial activity seemed obvious. But Kropotkin too found supporting evidence everywhere he looked. Eventually, his responses to Huxley constituted a large book, *Mutual Aid*, all of it devoted to evidence of co-operation’s

role in natural selection.

What is remarkable about the Huxley-Kropotkin exchange is not their disagreement, but how little we have learned from it and from subsequent inquiries. Both views embody some truth. But even together, they only begin to illuminate the long history of biophysical and cultural evolution, and the complex-human result.

Over the past century, we have learned or re-learned much about the intricacies of human nature and nurture, the roles of chemistry and society, the diversity of possibilities and pathologies, the richness of demonstrated capacities and apparent potential. We are, evidently, enormously complex beings whose full expression involves many interlaced prerequisites and opportunities.

Nevertheless, many of our world-saving strategies presume human behaviour is driven by simple motives and inclinations – we just need to get the prices right, or we just need to foster a deeply ecological ethic, or we just need to localize our political economy so that commitment to community will rule. And so on. Like Huxley and Kropotkin, we tend to favour a simple option that fits our inclinations, and overlook the rest.

As a result, we miss the wealth of more highly evolved combinations and connections that would engage more people more fully. Probably both Darwin and the divine prankster are laughing at us. 🐼

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