

Human Nature and the Evolution of Society

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PREFACE

For much of the twentieth century, especially after the 1930s, social science was dominated by explanations of human behavior that gave primary (and sometimes overwhelming) emphasis to the causal role of the social and cultural environment. Social scientists embraced the view of the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, who claimed that the human mind was a *tabula rasa*, or “blank slate,” on which society wrote its “script.” Human behavior was therefore principally determined by the social and cultural circumstances in which people live. This is the prevailing view still today. Indeed, the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker calls it “the official view.”

But in the 1970s and 1980s an intellectual revolution began. Some social scientists, mostly anthropologists and psychologists (and a handful of sociologists), returned to the general theory of life adumbrated by Charles Darwin more than a century before. Darwin is, of course, best known for his theory of evolution by natural selection, and he focused mostly on animals. But he also thought that humans evolved from earlier animals—primates, principally the great apes—and he thought that the human mind was much more than a blank slate. It contained numerous features that were evolutionary products and continued to shape behavior. His most important book on humans was *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which he argued that human emotions and their expression, principally in the human face, were universals that were innate.

The new maverick social scientists thought that Darwinian thinking held one of the keys to explaining many features of human behavior and social life. The new approaches were called, first, sociobiology, and then later evolutionary psychology. In time a major intellectual organization was formed, the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, or HBES. The evolutionary analysis of behavior was becoming a significant force. New specialized journals were founded and textbooks started to be written, sure signs that Darwinian social science was becoming institutionalized.

This book is a new contribution to the list. There are several excellent textbooks, but most of them concentrate heavily on theoretical principles and are highly technical. There is nothing wrong with this—in fact, such books are much needed—but

it is not the only way to do it. This book, intended both for students and the general reader, is different in several important ways. First, it is less technical and lighter on theory. The first chapter outlines the most basic principles of Darwinian social science, but only to the extent that they are necessary to understand what follows. Second, an effort has been made to choose topics that are highly appealing to students and general readers and to present them in lively, engaging, and highly accessible prose. Finally, it expands the coverage by adding topics that are either underemphasized in existing texts or ignored altogether. I refer in particular to the subjects of language origins, subsistence strategies, human foodways and dietary practices, gender roles and relations, race and ethnicity, religion, and the arts. The book concludes by asking whether evolutionary theory can shed any light on the perennial question of the meaning of human existence. Just to give a sample of specific topics, the book explores

- ✓ The origins of language
- ✓ Why humans invented agriculture
- ✓ Economic exchange and capitalism
- ✓ Innate tastes
- ✓ Which humans drink milk and why
- ✓ Why some men have many wives
- ✓ Why some women have many husbands
- ✓ Where there is an incest taboo
- ✓ Why men and women seek different qualities in mates
- ✓ Why some people are gay rather than straight
- ✓ Whether there is a maternal instinct
- ✓ Why infanticide occurs
- ✓ The biology of gender
- ✓ Why status strivings exist and sometimes run amok
- ✓ Why people seek power
- ✓ Why people sometimes kill each other and why it is most often men who do so
- ✓ Why war is so common
- ✓ Whether there are biological races
- ✓ Whether racism is modern or ancient
- ✓ Why ethnic groups are frequently in conflict
- ✓ Why people are religious
- ✓ Why some religions have many gods and others only one
- ✓ Why atheism is on the rise
- ✓ Why people like art, music, and stories
- ✓ Why there is something rather than nothing, and why humans are part of the something

Some critics say that evolutionary arguments are mostly “just-so stories,” or made-up explanations that are provocative and interesting but are not supported by real evidence. But in fact there is a good deal of evidence, and in this book I have taken care to present some of the most important evidence for specific evolutionary claims. In the bibliography the many books that contain this evidence, and the specialized journals in which hundreds if not thousands of research articles have appeared, can be found.

To test evolutionary theories empirically it is necessary to study behavior in the full range of human societies that have ever existed. You can't just study Americans or Westerners in general, or just people in any modern society east or west. You also have to look at behavior among people who live by hunting and gathering, by one or another type of agriculture, by animal herding, or by some combination of these. A historical perspective is necessary as well. What were people doing in ancient Egypt, ancient Rome, medieval Europe, or traditional China and India? And you need to explore human action in all of the major regions of the world, where some people live in grasslands, atop tall mountains, in deserts, in tropical rain forests, in hot, humid climates or bitterly cold ones, and so on. This sort of comparative and historical perspective is essential for understanding the similarities and differences in human behavior everywhere. It is essential to understand what thoughts and behaviors may be universal, what may be common but not universal, and what may be rare or not exist at all. No general principles of human behavior and human society can be developed without collecting these sorts of data.

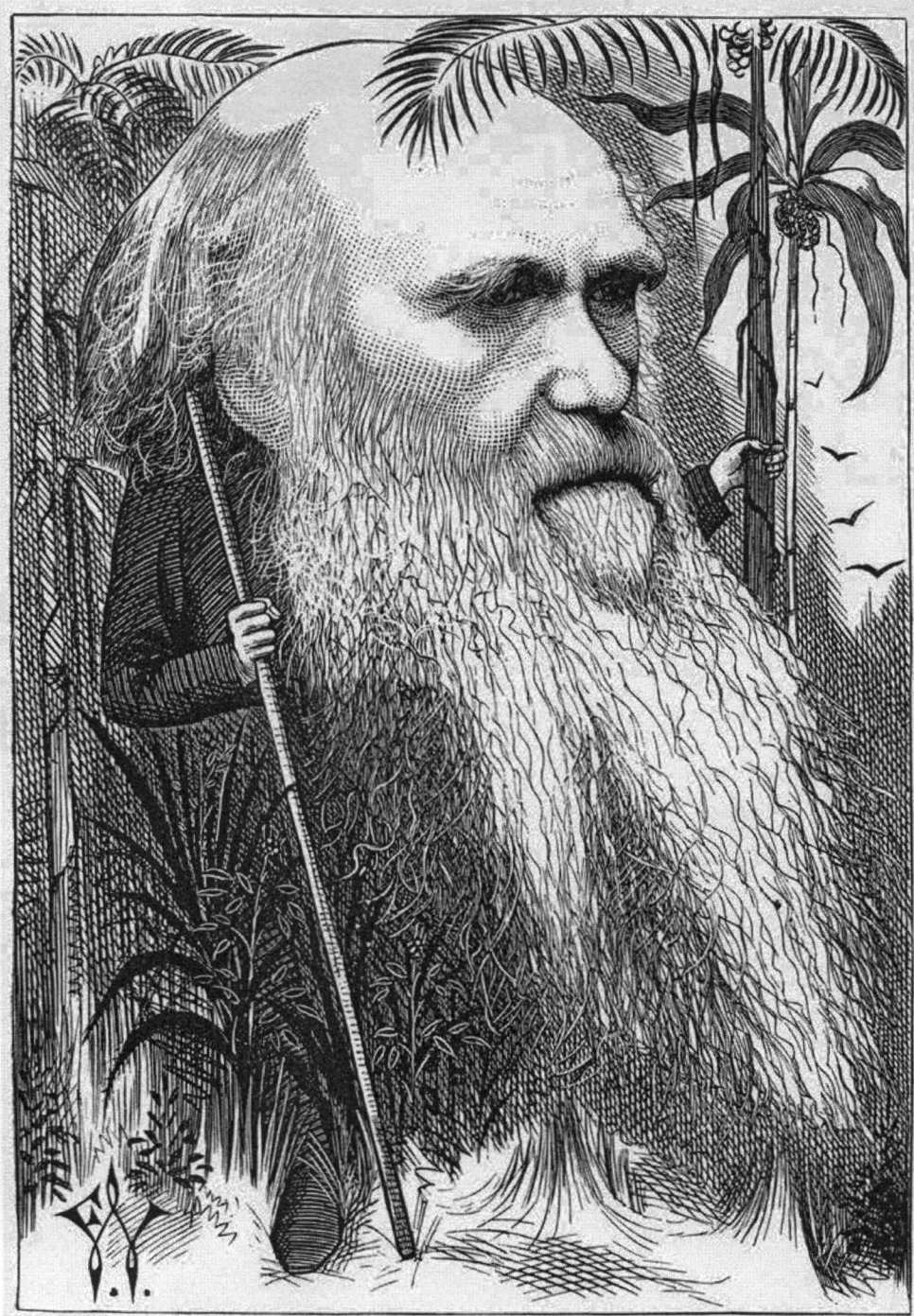
I started out in sociology, but even as a graduate student I knew that a comparative perspective is crucial. The sociologists whose work I respected most were doing comparative research with a heavy dose of anthropology. After my PhD, I felt increasingly attracted to anthropology. Although I am officially a member of a sociology department, I am equally comfortable in both fields and, I believe, equally knowledgeable of both. I feel that this gives me something of an advantage because it allows me to grasp the many details of behavior in the entire range of human societies.

I have presented many of the ideas contained in this book in several courses I have taught over many years. I have always found the vast majority of students to be very receptive to them. (There are of course dissenters and those who can't quite decide.) They have often said that it seems patently obvious that there should be such a thing as human nature, and they have been puzzled that many social scientists wish to deny this. In any event, you read the book and you decide.

As aids to the reader, each chapter contains a summary of the main points and a list of questions that you should be able to answer after reading the chapter. If you struggle to answer these questions, you had better go back and have another look. At the end of the book is a short list of technical terms and their definitions. These are boldfaced in the text.

I am indebted to many people who have contributed to my understanding of the ideas developed in this book, but they are far too numerous to thank individually. I would inevitably leave someone out, and then feelings would be hurt. The people who contributed most to the book's development once a first draft was finished were the reviewers solicited by the publisher: Jennie R. Brown, Franklin Pierce University; Jack David Eller, Community College of Denver; William F. McKibbin, University of Michigan–Flint; Benjamin Grant Purzycki, University of British Columbia; and Andreas Wilke, Clarkson University. I also owe a large debt of gratitude to my editor at Westview Press, Leanne Silverman. She resurrected my book proposal after the previous editor departed and it got buried, said she liked it, and solicited reviews of the book's first draft and another set of reviews of the second draft. This is my twelfth book, but I have never had an editor who got so directly involved. Leanne requested several revisions of some material, important clarifications and additions, and the removal of dubious assertions. She has undoubtedly improved the book greatly and has truly earned the title of editor. She made me work hard, but it has been a delight working with her.

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ARTIST'S CARICATURE OF CHARLES DARWIN Darwin was the greatest biologist of all time. His theories of natural and sexual selection have had enormous impact on evolutionary biology, biological anthropology, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and several other academic disciplines.

(Courtesy of the Archives, California Institute of Technology)