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The frustration of Richard Dawkins

Anarcho

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Richard Dawkins, Britain's leading evolutionary theorists, has been presenting an extremely interesting and informative series on Darwinism ("**The Genius of Charles Darwin**", Channel 4). It is a three part series to commemorate the 150th anniversary of discovery of natural selection (next year marks the same anniversary of the publication of "**On Origin of Species**").

The first part was informative, although Dawkins did simply state, in passing, how Darwin was influenced in developing his ideas by economics, namely Malthus's infamous essay on population. No mention of how that essay, refuted in practice since it was written, became popular in ruling class circles to counter attempts at social reform (it was directly aimed at William Godwin). Given that Dawkins goes out of his way in the second part to attack Social Darwinism, this oversight was strange.

And it is this second part of the series which is so frustrating. In it Dawkins tries to present the "*dark*" side of natural selection but also to show how morality could have evolved. Yet, his

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A review of Richard Dawkins documentary on Charles Darwin.

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account is full of strange exclusions and underdeveloped ideas and concepts.

He starts by proclaiming that while, “*as a scientist I’m thrilled by natural selection, but as a human being I abhor it as a principle for organising society.*” This is understandable, as natural selection has been used by the right to justify everything from laissez faire capitalism to Nazism. Dawkins is at pains to say that he is against attempts to use Darwin’s ideas to justify such ideas and policies. Yet, the rationale for this can be seen from the very one-sided manner that natural selection is portrayed. If the animal world is “*dog eat dog*” and people are animals then the conclusion seems to logically follow that organising human society in non-competitive ways is against “our” nature. Dawkins turns to the capitalist economy, examining whether there are parallels to be drawn between economic and biological systems. He, rightly, notes that it is something of a stretch to apply evolutionary ideas to capitalist economics and best not to.

Sadly, he does not discuss the obvious impact of capitalist economic theory, and the laissez-faire economy of his day, on Darwin’s ideas and how they were interpreted. Darwin’s ideas were not produced in an ivory tower, unaffected by the society and dominant ideology of his times. Russian critics of Darwin made precisely this point, acknowledging the importance of natural selection but noting that Darwin and his followers downplayed the importance of co-operation in nature due to cultural influences. Kropotkin’s “**Mutual Aid**” came out of this critical acceptance of Darwin’s work in Russian scientific circles (see “*The Scientific Background of Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid*” by Daniel P. Todes in ***The Raven*** (Vol. 6, No. 4)).

Nor does he point out the obvious contradiction. Natural selection is about individuals yet modern industry is based on joint activity. Rockefeller, one of the Social Darwinists Dawkins mentioned, did not rise to his position by his own efforts but as a result of exploiting the work of others. His position is, surely, based on

the self-sacrifice of others to enrich him? Similarly, unions are unmentioned in Dawkins account – unlike Kropotkin, who pointed to them as examples of co-operative behaviour in the hostile environment of capitalism.

But that is part of a wider blindness to class and its impact on science. This can be seen when scientists proclaim themselves above cultural influences while, at the same time, explaining nature in terms of the assumptions and practice of capitalism. It can be seen when Dawkins suggested that “poor laws” were an example of us rebelling against our selfish genes. The welfare state would, perhaps, be a better example given how the poor laws were an instrument of ruling class repression (the Tudor Poor Laws, for example, were harsh towards the able bodied poor who were not looking for work – whippings and beatings were acceptable punishments). The workhouse does not suggest altruism. That Malthus wanted the poor laws abolished did not make them a product of altruism but rather a sign that their costs now outweighed their benefits and so had become a burden to the capitalist class.

*The conclusion cannot be avoided that underlying Dawkins account is a perspective influenced, probably unknowingly, by the system he lives in and so he sees ruthless competition between individuals (“nature red in tooth and claw”) as being the core of natural selection. Yet, as Kropotkin stressed, co-operative behaviour is a product of natural selection. By co-operating, individuals of a species gain a benefit and survive to reproduce and, moreover, such mutual aid lays the foundations for altruism. Thus natural selection does not preclude co-operation, altruism and ethics. Yet to “abhor” it with regards to humanity as Dawkins does implies that such behaviour is **not** a product of natural selection and is, somehow, unnatural.*

*In this Dawkins (Darwin’s Rottweiler) to similar to Thomas Huxley (Darwin’s Bulldog). In the essay which provoked Kropotkin to write the articles which would become “**Mutual Aid**”, Huxley argued that we could, and should, organise society*

against the laws of nature. Which, in itself raises an interesting paradox – how can we act in ways against our nature? Can lions become vegetarian? That is the issue Kropotkin addressed and which he proved, beyond reasonable doubt, that co-operative behaviour is common-place in the natural world precisely because it ensures survival and so civilisation was not against nature as Huxley asserted.

Dawkins does discuss this, noting that selfish genes produce altruistic individuals, but this aspect of his ideas does not seem fully integrated with his other views. This can be seen from his repeated comments that he has been struggling with the issues of selfishness and altruism, competition and co-operation, for some time. Halfway through the programme, he states that he considered morality as having evolved but at the end, as with his book *“The Selfish Gene”*, Dawkins proclaims that our big brains ensure that, unique amongst animals, we can rebel against our selfish genes and organise society as we would like it to be.

Yet, ultimately, there is no paradox. Co-operation and displays of sympathy, sensitivity, altruism and, in humans, ethics can be reconciled with the idea of the survival of the fittest. Those who co-operate, as Kropotkin stressed, are the fittest and so survive. This produces group living and, consequently, the basis for sympathy and, ultimately, altruism. Ethical behaviour is just as much part of our nature as competition and ruthlessness – more so, as it is unlikely that we could have survived and prospered if the latter rather than the former predominated.

That is why Dawkins programme was so frustrating. On the one hand, he is aware of how co-operation is natural and a product of natural selection. On the other, he tends to paint a picture of nature as one of individual competition and implies that most of humanity’s altruistic behaviour is against natural selection (a product of our “misfiring selfish genes” as he put it). If he had questioned some of the cultural assumptions he seems to take for granted then the programme would have been improved but, ultimately, Dawkins is a left-wing liberal, even a social democrat,

and not an anarchist so that this was not done is hardly surprising.