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Lure of Beauty

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Taking the Beauty Out of Beauty

Steven Pinker is a psychology professor at MIT, but more specifically, a biological robot, or at least that's what he thinks. Pinker is one of the leading advocates of a new branch of highly controversial science called evolutionary psychology. In order to understand the criticisms and implications of this field of study, one must first know what it entails. Developed by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby at the University of California, evolutionary psychology hypothesizes that brain function and cognitive structure, like physiological structure are a result of the Darwinist concept of natural selection, commonly known as adaptation. By dissecting and analyzing the human brain, scientists such as Pinker argue that "it is the interaction of different modules within it, honed by millions of years of evolution, which generates the conscious mind" (Steven Pinker). If this were true, that would mean that our ability to reason and interact has been acquired over time and biologically inherited, but it is important to note that evolutionary psychology is still merely a theory. Those opposed to this scientific movement cite its lack of concrete evidence and weak support. Steven Jay Gould, a science writer who pits himself against Pinker and his views, has written that supporters of evolutionary psychology hold a "penchant for narrow and often barren speculation" (Evolutionary Psychology). Besides its insufficient proof, many others disagree with this trend because of the political incorrectness that accompanies it and the perhaps sexist, racist, and atheist implications evolutionary psychology has.

It is not the concept of evolutionary psychology to which Gould is opposed. “I praise the field’s goal” (Evolutionary Psychology), he states before elaborating on how noble the task of explaining our existence certainly is. Gould has indeed adopted the widely accepted notion among scientists that the human is an animal species that has evolved over millions of years. Like Pinker, he even extends Darwinist ideas of physical adaptation and applies them to brain mechanisms. So then why the fierce argument between them? The difference is that evolutionary psychologists believe that the driving force of adaptive change is survival. Pinker, for instance, articulates that “complex design [even that of the brain] comes from natural selection” (Evolutionary Psychology) and the only reason we develop new features is because we all need them to live. Since giraffes needed to eat tree leaves in order to survive, they developed long necks over time so this could be accomplished. There is no doubt that efforts to advance have resulted in mutations among various animals, but perhaps survival isn’t the *only* reason for physical change.

Gould asserts that evolutionary psychology is much too restrictive and does not allow for the possibility of chance influencing evolution or certain characteristics that are *nonadaptive*. He points out that many biological features are a result of environmental factors and need far different explanations than just a quest for survival. He dubs these features “spandrels – that is, nonadaptive side consequences of a building device with such structural complexity” (Evolutionary Psychology). Tonsils and appendixes are examples, for they serve no purpose or function and we could easily have them removed without doing any damage. The fact that spandrels do exist adds to Gould’s belief that all evolutionary psychologists should take on a “pluralist” approach, namely one that understands the field cannot explain

everything. George C. Williams, said to be the "founder" of spandrels, has emphasized this notion of caution in his writing:

> Evolutionary adaptation is a special and onerous concept that should not be used unnecessarily, and an effect should not be called a function unless it is clearly produced by design and not by chance. When recognized, adaptation should be attributed to no higher a level of organization than is demanded by the evidence. (Hagen)

Essentially, Gould's problem with evolutionary psychology lies in the function of spandrels. To put it most simply, Pinker acknowledges them, but notes that they too can be explained through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Gould claims this to be an "adaptationist bias" and denounces Pinker's reliance on survival and natural selection as being such a significant part of evolution. Even if this is somewhat confusing, the point is that their schools of thought differ in very minor ways. There are other, far more serious implications of evolutionary psychology that cause others to strongly protest its discourse.

Teaching evolutionary concepts in some of America's educational systems has been a hot debate over the past few years. Some institutions have even banned Darwin's publications from curricula primarily because they feel that the ideas do not coincide with the religious ones they preach. Since evolutionary psychology is a relatively new field, the focus in this discussion is on *physiological* evolution. But one could certainly see how much more vehemently these same administrators would oppose psychological adaptation. Just as "God created man" is a central tenet of most monotheistic religions, so is the concept of free will, a concept that many say evolutionary psychology attempts to disprove. In his book, *How the Mind Works*, Steven Pinker states our minds only serve the function of computation and evolve so that we can face increasingly complex problems, a thought that is a bit daunting. "Tom Wolfe, articulating the attitude of many writers and artists, said he was depressed by the trend

of neuroscience to extinguish the notion of a 'soul' and replace it with the function of an organ" (Steven Pinker). Many, like Wolfe, are unwilling to accept the notion that the behavior of human beings "reflects a mind that formed by adapting to the environment 100,000 years ago, on the African savanna" (Ahouse). If evolutionary psychology were true, this would mean that we are merely products of nature and each thought we have is biased to survival.

Writer Nancy Etcoff has used this type of analysis when claiming any judgment of beauty to be based on evolutionary psychology. In her book, Survival of the Prettiest, she argues that the people we find most attractive are the ones who appear to be the most reproductively capable. Etcoff attributes this to survival instincts and a subconscious decision evolved over thousands of years. She and Pinker, who were at once married, keep the same logic here by basing human reasoning and perception on adaptive properties. We can see from this example how broad a range of topics "evo-psych" encompasses and how many areas of human life it affects. Here again exists the fear that these ideas "are somehow dehumanizing, that they portray us instead as meat robots or gene machines" (Steven Pinker). But Pinker denies the claim that his field rejects the notion of free will. "We have meaning and purpose here inside our heads, being the organisms that we are. We have brains that make it impossible to live our lives except in terms of meaning and purpose" (Steven Pinker), he says. For Pinker, a simplistic definition of free will is allowed, but since he is atheist, he simply does not think our decisions mean anything outside of our heads. Even if Pinker is correct, there are other issues with evolutionary psychology that cause it not to sit well with many.

Analyzing Nancy Etcoff's application of evolutionary psychology to the topic of beauty can help us understand some of the dissatisfaction with not only this burgeoning science, but also particularly her novel, Survival of the Prettiest. Academically on par with both Pinker and

Gould, Etcoff's credibility allows her to essentially take Pinker's side and assert her view of how and why we perceive beauty every day, one very interesting application of evolutionary psychology. Her contention, which is perhaps not as straightforward in her writing as it should be, is that beauty is a psychological mechanism evolved through survival motives. She writes that beauty "tells us whether a person is potentially fertile, healthy, and strong and might have genes that combine well with ours to make healthy babies…our brains cannot help it," (242). Right away we can notice how in line this is with the ideology of evolutionary psychology. She introduces empirical evidence, mainly scientific studies that support her notions of our largely uncontrollable observation of aesthetics. But if we examine this book in its entirety, from its structure and writing style to its content, we will come to realize that her words must be taken with not a grain, but a pound of salt.

It is apparent from the first couple of paragraphs who the target audience is for Etcoff's book. With an overwhelming number of references to popular culture and overuse of examples, this is certainly a mainstream work that looks to make profit more than anything else. Although she notes that she wishes to provide a biological explanation for beauty, it is clear that her primary intention is to entertain the reader and avoid loss of interest. This is also seen by her frequent manipulation of subheadings. By introducing a new section head, Etcoff is not bound by logical flow and can jump from topic to topic as she does throughout the whole work. One reviewer writes that "Etcoff's book is descriptive rather than argumentative, very repetitive and makes Harlequin romance seem chock full of social-psychological insights," (Pawlett). It is not unfair to say that one could read through all of her book and completely miss her theory of beauty being an evolved concept. If her claims were so sound and rooted in science, it would follow that a more academic account would express them in a manner more clear and

forthright. Sam Pawlett, the same reviewer, notes that her writing is several hundred pages of this: “Good-looking people are more likely to win arguments and persuade others of their opinion. People divulge secrets to them and disclose personal information...” (46). He sarcastically follows this by saying that “no argument or evidence [is] necessary when you are an evolutionary psychologist with graduate degrees from Ivy League schools,” (Pawlett).

It may seem as if Etcoff has sufficient evidence for her presumptions, but many critics note that this is because her writing style allows her to circumvent citation and proper documentation. The reader is somewhat persuaded to accept what she writes as fact and almost be impressed by the studies she incorporates. Many discount the experiments she discusses and feel that Etcoff merely sees what she wants to see by reading too much into each study. The majority of the studies she mentions were originally not intended to make any observation of beauty and attractiveness. “Etcoff's evidence consists in an "experiment" she undertook at a Boston hospital where she showed photographs of human faces to newborns. She observed that newborns tend to look longer at the good looking faces (the faces Etcoff thought were the best looking anyway.) This is supposed to prove that the power of physical beauty is somehow biological,” writes Pawlett, rather pessimistically. It is true that some of the studies she uses as support are not given any citation at all and are not scientific, but just ideas and quotes taken from literature and poplar culture. On the contrary, it should be noted that positive reviews of her work usually include a strong belief in her sources. “Etcoff’s ideas were backed up by an astounding amount of evidence, (Whaley)” writes Megan Whaley, an amateur reviewer who was obviously easily deceived by Etcoff’s proficient writing style. Thus it follows that those who enjoyed the book and praise it are the ones who bought into the author’s sources, but the reliability of Etcoff’s testimonies are only the beginning of the criticism she receives.

Naomi Wolf is an author who offered a very different analysis of beauty at around the same time Etcoff published hers. In The Beauty Myth, Wolf argues that what humans find attractive is developed by cultural cues. Sometimes it is the people our friends and/or the media tell us to find pretty whom we admire. An example of this theory in action would be claiming supermodels are beautiful because we know they are supermodels. Wolf, herself, also often alludes to popular culture and includes reasoning many would consider "scientific." Etcoff writes that "the assumption that beauty is an arbitrary cultural convention may simply be not true" (24). All of these valid points brought up by Wolf are neglected in Etcoff's work and it should come as no surprise that another central criticism of her book is that it is very narrow and does not articulate what evolutionary psychology ceases to explain. Steven Bates writes about her failure to discuss the interaction between genetic behavior and learned behavior in regards to beauty (Bates). Such a strong advocate of evolutionary psychology should be able to focus on our ability to learn and acquire information and how this might influence out perception. Bates writes how odd it is for Etcoff to compare humans with other animals when discussing survival instincts. Bates and many biologists and psychologists consider such comparison invalid simply because humans and animals are not identical species and therefore their behavior, although similar, does not necessarily indicated biological, psychological, or evolutionary likeness. A more thorough explanation would be supplemented by preferences inside of other species. One critic writes that "in general, the book downplays the evident heterogeneity, whether intra-cultural, intercultural, or concerning the availability of alternative theories and hypotheses and inconsistent findings, or concerning the very concept of 'beauty'" (Todosijevic).

According to Etcoff, we inherit the ability to judge the beauty of another person. Acknowledging that she believes beauty is hardwired into the human brain, it is rather ironic that she would include the following quote on beauty by George Santayana: “No account of the principles of the mind can be at all adequate that passes over so conspicuous a faculty” (2). From her own poor choice of quotes early on in the book and some independent thinking, it is clear that an explanation of beauty cannot be completely biological. There are certainly limits to her theory highlighted by the fact that she only focuses on the beauty of people and not of other objects. In the scope of philosophical history, writers such as Kant and Hegel have kept the definition of beauty very broad for fear of doing exactly what Etcoff did here, make inaccurate and erroneous reductions. Not once does she mention the beauty of a landscape painting or the emotive power of a classical symphony. Can these be looked at through the lens of evolutionary psychology? Indeed art serves no role in reproduction so perhaps Etcoff would say no, but no where in her work does she do so. Rather she elaborates on the consequences of survival propelling beauty, which really have nothing to do with her so-called “purpose” of writing this book. The fact that men like women with smaller waist sizes does nothing for her argument but add fluff to her writing and keep the reader’s attention. A more complete analysis of the origins of beauty would include the beauty of nature, poetry, and music. Anne Sheppard writes that “all theories [of aesthetics] fail in not doing justice to the diversity of things which we can appreciate aesthetically in both art and nature” (64).

It is also apparent that Etcoff takes her theory a bit too far in allowing it to explain more than it can. She writes, for instance, that “the spoils of success are sexual success” (68). That, of course, depends upon one’s definition of success. Although in the midst of America’s capitalism many measure success monetarily, there are those who do not. Success is achieving

one's goals and it can spawn from curiosity. Geniuses like Newton and Einstein had scientific success probably because they wanted to understand more about the universe, not because they wanted to get laid. Etcoff does not leave room for opposition and only builds up her side of the argument. This causes her to make "sweeping generalizations and very strong claims about human nature…[that] can be taken as crude caricatures of Darwinian analysis, the type that led S.J. Gould to label an earlier generation of sociobiological analysis [as] 'cardboard'" (Pawlett). Gould, among others, would label Etcoff as having a strong adaptationist bias, one that she does very little to avoid. He would argue that the human perception of beauty is a combination of cultural cues and instincts, with considerably less weight given to genetics.

Furthermore, Etcoff's analysis does nothing positive for our society. Instead of focusing on one's inner beauty, she indirectly encourages women to strive to be more physically attractive. By defining what men find pleasing in women, she fosters importance of image and emphasizes a part of our society that is already out of control. Is there any hope for those who are unattractive? How must they cope with the idea that their survival capability is inferior to others? Etcoff does not address these points and offers little in the way of a solution to overcome the inevitability of nature. She has taken an aspect of life and trivialized it, making beauty seem so mundane and paltry. No one can deny that beauty serves an integral purpose in our existence, but giving it biological origins undermines the respect it deserves. Etcoff's work is not a valid representation or accurate reflection of the broader science of evolutionary psychology, but rather a prime example of its misuse. In a sense, by exploiting this credible science, Etcoff has taken the beauty out of beauty

There are many more gray areas that make evolutionary psychology increasingly complicated and not easily welcomed. Many see it as a threat to their humanity, freedom, and

thought. Overtones of sexism, racism, and morality prevent the discussion of the new science from going mainstream. Many, like Gould, say no one can ever definitively prove evolutionary psychology to be true, but others like Pinker and Etcoff cannot help to keep searching for answers. The curiosity of our existence is too strong for evolutionary psychology to wither and die. This shift in thought will only become more prevalent in the future and provide us with information about our minds we never thought possible.

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