

Emotional Problems of Evolutionary Psychology

JONATHAN MATHYS

EXPLANATIONS of human morality and behavior based upon the findings of evolutionary psychology have had a certain vogue of late. Books promoting evolutionary explanations of human nature by scientists such as E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins as well as popularizers like Robert Wright and Matt Ridley have become bestsellers. In one sense, this is nothing new. In another, it is profoundly so, for authors such as Wilson, Dawkins, and Wright have proclaimed that the time is ripe to place the very foundations of the human sciences on solidly biological grounds. Sociology, political science, ethics, and anthropology are all to receive the obligatory prefix ‘evolutionary’ in the new dispensation.¹ I will refer to the thesis that the human sciences ought to be founded entirely on the neo-Darwinian synthesis favored by such writers as Wilson and Dawkins as ‘ultra-Darwinism’. The ‘ultra’ here is merited, for this is a move disputed even within the various fields of biology and zoology that Dawkins and Wilson call home. Other noted evolutionary theorists, such as Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, consider this extension of Darwinism into the realm of the human sciences to be illegitimate, and in fact based on poor science. In this paper, I will endeavor to show that in one realm at least, that of the understanding of human emotion, these theories are quite mistaken. It will be shown that their (mis)understanding of human emotions is based upon an inadequate grasp of the rela-

¹ Hereafter evolutionary psychology will be referred to as ‘evo-psych’, for short. Similarly, evolu-

tionship between emotion and human language.

I

My discussion will depend upon two points. The first is an account of the role of emotions in human life and their relation to language that is incompatible with an objectivist model of the world grounded in a representational, consciousness-based epistemology. Such an epistemology is precisely that which informs much of the background in the writings of socio-biologists and evo-psychologists. It is the picture of the disengaged, rational subject that is implicit in the beliefs of most scientists about scientific practice that underwrites this objectivist stance towards the emotions.

The second point is the observation that in their writings, Dawkins, Wright, and company generally rely upon instrumental views of language, in which words are merely tools for the organization of experience and communication. Communication, in its turn, is seen as a form of causal interaction, and usually winds up being a form of manipulation. This raises problems about “translating” the results of evo-psych and socio-biology out of what Dawkins calls the gene language and into ordinary language. Charles Taylor would call this the transition between the language of explanation, in our theorizing, and the language of deliberation, in which we conduct our lives.² That this is at all a problem is not seen by ultra-Darwinians because of the first point; that is, the epistemology that underlies their views. First, I will sketch out the instrumental view of language and its understanding of the world, and then I will show how a proper understanding of human emotions and their relation to language, reveals the inadequacy of the instrumental view. Following this I will show in some detail that the results of this mean trouble for ultra-Darwinian views.

On an instrumentalist reading of language, words (for old-fashioned British empiricists) or sentences/propositions/statements (for Austrian-inspired logical positivists), are signs for or descriptions of either natural objects or mental objects. As such, the adequacy of their correlation with or rendering of their objects is an empirical matter, and can be,

in a useful way, verified by experimental methods. For my purposes, natural objects can mean events, phenomena, things—anything generally taken to exist “outside” of the mind of a conscious subject. Mental objects are obviously anything that exists “inside” such a mind as an object of reflection.³

Instrumental theories of language may be seen as a subset of a wider family of views that may be called designative. According to these theories, the fundamental activity of language is designation, or labelling objects in the world with names, like slapping that “Marge’s china” or “Joe’s clothes” sticker on a cardboard box before moving. According to this, “We give the meaning of a sign or a word by pointing to the things or relations that they can be used to refer to or talk about.”⁴ For the instrumentalist, language is a tool for the use of its users, whether for communication, entertainment, manipulation of people and environments, or increased capacity for cognition and reflection. Following this metaphor, it is something that can be reshaped more or less at will, and redesigned for the purposes at hand.

If language serves primarily as a tool used for designating objects and marking relations between those objects, over time words or expressions may arise that are unnecessary or entirely mistaken in terms of the relations and objects they mark out in the world. We may make words and invent relations that have no corresponding objects. If we assume that language is primarily designative, we may also unwittingly assume that where there is a word, there is an object. On this view, the figurative power of language is easily employed in the creation of illusions, and apt to lead men astray in their thinking, rather than provide access to otherwise hidden facets of reality. Looked at like this, language is seductive in the way that beauty or political power are seductive. It promises a great deal for very little effort, and cashes in on the manipulative power of fantasy. Hence Locke’s remarkable denunciation of rhetoric and figures of speech in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he uses a figure of speech (a “prevailing beauty” of “the fair sex”) to deride the use of figures of speech (“eloquence”):

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the

tionary psychologist will become ‘evo-psychologist’, etc.

art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats.... Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.⁵

As Paul de Man somewhat wickedly notes, “nothing could be more eloquent than this denunciation of eloquence.”⁶ Locke is attacking at least two different things in this passage: metaphor, “artificial and figurative application of words,” and rhetoric, (the use of figuration “to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment”). While the main force of his assault seems to be clearly directed against rhetoric, or “eloquence,” it is also clear that the potential danger of “eloquence” depends upon the infinite capacity of language to generate new figures, new sentences, new ways of speaking. The very existence of language is an invitation to violate Ockham’s prescription against the needless multiplication of “entities” (names, kennings, metaphors, things). What motivates such strongly felt condemnation of what other philosophers have called appreciatively “the gift of metaphor”?⁷ In part, it is likely motivated by the fear of losing control, of being dominated unknowingly by something we see as being in our service.⁸

Being controlled by what should be an instrument is a degrading condition. There is thus an ethical force to the injunctions of instrumentalists

² Taylor, *Sources* 57–60.

³ The generic name for mental objects in the empiricist tradition, beginning with Locke, is ‘idea’.

⁴ Taylor, “Language” 218.

⁵ Bk. 3, ch. 10.

⁶ De Man 15. De Man’s article is fascinating and thought-provoking, and I am indebted to it for pointing out this delightful passage from Locke. However, I think that here, as elsewhere, de Man overstates his case (perhaps more rhetorically than philosophically?).

⁷ See Arendt 76.

⁸ As Taylor points out, “Language for the theory of these centuries is an instrument of control in the assemblage of ideas which is thought or mental discourse,” and if we cannot be sure of a transparent relationship between word and thing, “where we think we are assembling our ideas to match

not to let oneself be duped or misled by language into a distorted view of a language-independent reality. In addition, instrumentalists may feel that taking language too seriously as anything but a tool also leads to delusions about reality that have disastrous practical and moral consequences. Hence we find Dawkins claiming, "Human suffering has been caused because too many of us cannot grasp that words are only tools for our use."⁹

The instrumentalist view suits an attempt at giving an objective description of the world, and it depends upon the independence of objects from ourselves, and the independence of our language from both those objects and ourselves. On the instrumental view, we may manipulate and transform our language without altering anything essential about ourselves or about our world. An auto mechanic minus his wrench is still the same mechanic. A human without his customary language is still the same human.

II

This view runs aground when dealing with phenomena that bear unavoidably non-objective properties, unless it simply assumes that all phenomena, period, are really constituted by properties readily characterized as objective. Emotions are such non-objective phenomena, and they bear subject-referring properties. They are expressive phenomena, and pose seemingly insuperable problems for an attempt to find objective, instrumental designations for them. My understanding in this area stems directly from Charles Taylor's work, and for reasons of space I will here simply present five claims that characterize what can be called an expressivist framework as opposed to the designativist-instrumentalist view:

- A. Some of our emotions involve import-ascriptions.
- B. Some of these imports are subject-referring.
- C. Our subject-referring feelings are the basis of our understanding of what it is to be human.

D. These feelings are constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them.

E. These articulations, which we can think of as interpretations, require language.¹⁰

To say that some of our emotions involve import-ascriptions is to say that they attribute meaning in a situation. They reveal a facet of that situation that would otherwise be inaccessible, say, that it is frightening. Yet the emotion of fright also bears within itself a reference to a subject for which the situation has the meaning of being frightful. To describe a situation as frightful is to describe oneself as being afraid, if one is or were to be in that situation.

A consequence of this is that situation-description in feeling-language is also self-description. That the denial of this statement leads to absurdities is shown by considering the following example. Imagine a man who tells you of being assaulted by a group of robbers while walking in the forest at night with his friends. He says to you, "It was a terrifying situation, but I wasn't frightened at all." This statement would be met with incredulity, or would beg elaboration. Either the man means that most people would find such a situation terrifying, though he does not, or that he realizes in hindsight that he normally would have, or even should have, felt terror at the situation, though he didn't for some unusual reason. To describe a situation as terrifying is not simply to state that it made one feel terrified, but that it is a situation that normally gives rise to feelings of terror in normally constituted human beings. Someone who said, "I was lying around on my couch today, reading the cartoons," and then added, "I was absolutely terrified," would prompt the inquiry, "Why?" Such a feeling, completely inappropriate or disproportionate to its situation, would seem irrational, and if it were a frequent occurrence would rightly be seen as pathological evidence of a psychological disorder.

Evo-psychologists, and most ultra-Darwinians, however, hold that emotions must be objective, physical objects like any other if they are to be susceptible to a scientific, Darwinian explanation. Our word 'fear' must

the real, we will in fact be building castles of illusion, or composing absurdities." Most significant-

just be a label applied to some physiological phenomenon, perhaps a whole spectrum of physiological phenomena that have some common element, e.g., the dispersal of high levels of a certain chemical or hormone throughout the brain or nervous system. The physical sensation *F*, that we designate with the word 'fear', is in principle independent of the language we use to describe it or understand it. *F* would be the same for any human being in any culture, regardless of the language he might use to articulate the experience of *F*. Thus, possessing an ultra-Darwinian understanding of *F* should not in any essential way transform the experience of *F*. It should not matter whether one calls *F* 'fear' or '*temor*' or '*crainte*' or '*Furcht*' or understands it as 'a sense of threat' or 'symptom of anxiety disorder' or 'high relative presence of *F*-inducing chemical in the brain.'

Yet the testimony of the evo-psychologists themselves seems to controvert this, for they clearly realize, when speaking in non-theoretical contexts, that changes of interpretation involve changes of significance, and that some phenomena are constituted by our interpretations of their significance. Wright, for instance, tells us of the neo-Darwinian paradigm that "once truly grasped it can entirely alter one's perception of social reality."¹¹ Clearly, if this is true about something as nebulous and broad as one's perception of social reality, it is even truer about something vastly more focused, concrete, and situated, like specific emotions.

But doesn't altering one's perception of an emotion in a significant way alter the emotion itself? The success of psychotherapy, the power of religious conversion, the efficacy of meditative training, among other things, all depend upon this fact. Altering understanding of experiences, reinterpreting them, and thus transforming the emotions associated with them involves language that is quite rightly and precisely called "figurative." This language figures, sculpts, shapes, gives body to, as it were, human experience. I was not surprised to find Wright claiming, "Metaphors help us come to moral terms with Darwin."¹² Dawkins, however, is blithely unaware of this power of language. In a remarkably unself-aware passage he writes, "for brevity, we shall again use the convention of thinking of the individual as though it had a conscious purpose. As before, we shall hold in the back of our mind that this is just a figure of

speech. A body is really a machine blindly programmed by its selfish genes.”¹³ This passage only makes sense if Dawkins is allowed to legislate what counts as figurative language by personal fiat. On the instrumentalist view this is precisely what is allowed.¹⁴ However, without an instrumentalist understanding, what is remarkable about the passage is that Dawkins merely substitutes one figure of speech for another, e.g., “individual is ‘blind machine’” for “individual is ‘conscious purpose’.” This makes a world of difference, and I mean that quite literally.

III

If the expressivist account of emotions is true, sociobiology and evo-psych share a peculiar characteristic: if they become widely accepted, their objects of inquiry will vanish. This is a dramatic way of saying that the theories in question, if accepted, would alter the very objects they are trying to explain, and that since this alteration is not provided for by the theory, the original targets of the explanation would no longer be available, leaving the theory in a strange predicament. Indignation, shame, trepidation, bemusedness, or any other of the subtle situation-revealing, quintessentially human emotions, along with the subject-referring properties that correspond to them, would be subject to a thorough-going and

ly, “Our instruments will have taken over, and instead of controlling we shall be controlled” (Taylor, “Language” 226). This would be humiliating and unworthy of the dignity of a rational being capable of achieving, with the proper stance, objectivity and independence.

⁹ Dawkins 18.

¹⁰ For a fuller exposition and defense of these claims the reader may refer to Taylor’s own writings, especially to his article “Self-Interpreting Animals,” from which these five claims are taken.

¹¹ Wright 4.

¹² Wright 26. Examples include “mental organs,” “an arms race of love” (Wright 26), a child as “precious” gene machine (36), and “We’re all puppets” (37). Nevertheless, Wright admits that “the question may be whether, after the new Darwinism takes root, the word ‘moral’ can be anything but a joke” (326). Isn’t this too, though, another splendid metaphor? What is moral is, metaphorically, a joke. I do indeed find this an amusing metaphor. Incidentally, if morality were indeed a joke (and what a marvellous joke!) neo-Darwinism would still not help us come to terms with it.

¹³ Dawkins 142.

¹⁴ The simplest standard for whether or not a given expression is figurative is the current state of ordinary language, not science. Though I don’t have the space to argue this at length, I will give two examples. The hard-nosed scientist wants to claim that “the sun rises in the east” is figurative because it doesn’t match current scientific theory, which presumably attains knowledge of objec-

radical reinterpretation along neo-Darwinian lines. A new understanding of these emotions, especially such a radically out-of-the-ordinary type of understanding—one might say, undermining—as the neo-Darwinian is, would transform our experience of them. Thus, the emotions that evo-psych purports to explain would be dramatically modified if an evo-psych perspective was accepted by a given agent. That agent would no longer be subject to the same emotions; i.e., the emotions that she experienced before learning about their evo-psych explanation. Indeed, how could worry about one's adopted child, or one's siblings remain the same after discovering that this emotion generally functions according to genetic hard-wiring, to use a metaphor often employed by evo-psych theorists that is drawn from computer science? Wouldn't it be transformed to "worry," an epiphenomenon of certain physiological processes controlled by one's genotype and its interaction with its environment? The experience of "worry" would be qualitatively different than the evo-psych-innocent experience of worry.

Evo-psychologists are here changing the subject. They aren't talking about what we ordinarily mean by emotions. Instead, they are talking about some physical phenomenon on which we slap the linguistic label 'emotions', whereas in the language we use in life, the very way we describe and interpret an emotion is part of that emotion's constitution. This is part of the experience of searching for just the right way to say what we are feeling. We often don't understand this until we figure out a way to say it, an adequate way of wording it, of embodying it more fully in language. This is also why others can genuinely help us to understand our own emotions, something impossible to make sense of on the usual, consciousness-based, representational epistemologies centered around the isolated, reflective individual.

Robert Wright, the only psychologist among the authors considered here, shows a deeper awareness of the fuzziness and difficulty involved in dealing with the human psyche (although he does, on the whole, believe that evo-psych can successfully dispel the fuzz). Wright notes that evo-psych focuses, "not on the emotion itself, but on the evolutionary logic it embodies."¹⁵ In doing this, evo-psych finds that emotions like parental love, hatred of outsiders, and concern for siblings are in fact "transmutations" of cost-benefit or game-theoretical analysis into feelings.¹⁶ It concludes that "feelings...were designed as logic executors."¹⁷ Thus, in "the

war of the sexes,” feelings such as indignation and outrage are in fact weapons in a struggle to maximize the survival of genetic information carried in the sex cells (sperm and eggs) of men and women. Wright rightly notes, “Once you start seeing everyday feelings and thoughts as genetic weapons, marital spats take on new meaning.”¹⁸ What Wright and other evolutionary psychologists are proposing in such re-descriptions of “everyday feelings” is precisely a transformative reinterpretation of them. That they are in fact transformed is evinced by Wright’s acknowledgment of the new meaning he sees in marital spats. Let us get even more concrete.

IV

Wright gives the example of a man who, during his honeymoon, informed his bride that he didn’t want an “old-fashioned wife” (meaning a prudish, non-sexually assertive one) but now some years later wonders loudly whether she couldn’t cook once in a while (now that the value of sexual assertiveness has worn off, perhaps because two kids have been born and she’s going through menopause). Evolutionary psychologists suggest that the emotions that are cued by such changes in the situation of a relationship are susceptible to an evolutionary explanation. The feelings are rough and ready responses that, on this account, lead to actions or behavior-patterns that have been selected because in the environment of evolutionary adaptation—our distant past—they have led to increased transmission of the agent’s genes to the next generation. In the lingo, they have been “selected for.”

Let us examine two possible explanations of the husband’s anger. We’ll call him Joe. The first explanation: Perhaps after many years of sex-

tive fact. The shock-jock poet speaks of the beginning of a river as its “salivating orifice.” The average person would feel that the poet had sinned against ordinary language by not speaking of the river’s “mouth,” whereas the scientist had sinned against common knowledge about the sun. This feeling would remain even if the scientist calmly explained modern astronomy to the average person. Nor would the scientist stop saying that the sun rises in the east when speaking in everyday contexts. The poet, however, would have a rough time of it if he insisted on inventing offensive but literal equivalents to dead metaphors in ordinary, non-poetical contexts.

¹⁵ Wright 59.

¹⁶ For instance, during a discussion of the evolution of monogamy, Wright writes: “As the human brain got bigger, it probably depended more on early cultural programming. Children with two parents may have had an educational edge over children with only one. Characteristically, natu-

ually fulfilling marriage, and after the birth of two kids and the burden of the added responsibilities that child-raising involves, Joe starts to see that some of the traits of the “old-fashioned wife” stereotype that he scorned in youth are quite valuable. His wife, Liz, however, has always resisted doing any cooking, firstly, because she never learned how, and secondly, because she associates it with the oppression of women and sees it as beneath her dignity as a liberated woman. While he appreciates his wife’s lack of sexual submissiveness, it is getting difficult for him to do all the cooking for the entire family. While Joe made sacrifices in seeking an assertive, self-respecting, but adventurous wife, he would like it if Liz made some concessions to the hated housewife ideal, however small. He is emotionally and physically fatigued. The second explanation: Clearly a wife who desires a great deal of sex is genetically valuable, as she is more likely to bear a great number of children who will carry Joe’s genes. However, now that two children have been born and her reproductive potential is rapidly dwindling, Joe’s “feelings” have started to shift in regards to Liz’s ample sex drive *vis-a-vis* her meager cooking drive.¹⁹ In his new middle-age environment, Liz’s meager cooking drive looks, or rather feels, to Joe like much more of a genetic liability. This manifests itself in his frustration and anger about her not cooking, perhaps also in a corresponding decrease of sexual desire for her. The underlying (genetic) threat, as Wright reads it, is that if Liz doesn’t help out more with the cooking—make her behavior more adaptive—Joe will go hunting for a fitter caretaker for his children, or just leave.²⁰

So we have an explanation of Joe’s anger employing “everyday” language; that is, we tell a story about emotions and why we have them. This is called by some, perhaps condescendingly, “folk psychology.” It is clear that in this case explanation and interpretation are more or less the same process. In the second case, though, things are different. We have an expla-

ral selection appears to have taken this cost-benefit calculus and transmuted it into a feeling—in particular, the sensation of love” (59). We may ask here, is love identical to “the sensation of love”? On a naturalistic outlook, it would be difficult to answer in the negative. Perhaps love is the sensation of love plus a group of actions recognized as conferring greater probability of survival on the beloved? This might be an “elegant” naturalist/behaviorist formula.

¹⁷ Wright 190.

¹⁸ Wright 89.

¹⁹ Of course, there is no cooking drive, but this is the type of shorthand that Dawkins, Wilson,

nation of Joe's anger, or rather, his "anger," as an emotional mechanism for the execution of an evolutionary adaptation. The adaptation is a "mental organ" that detects situations in which the sex-drive to cooking-drive ratio is out of whack and is a genetic liability. It copes with this exigency by sending out an emotion, "anger," to motivate its host organism, Joe, to either modify the situation, or get out. But are these the same object? Are they the same emotion when removed from these two very different theoretical narratives? Is the expressivist feeling, *anger-that-your-wife-won't-cook-because-you-realize-now-that-sex-isn't-everything*, the same as the evo-psychological logic executor, *anger-that-your-wife-won't-cook-because-she's-post-menopausal-and-thus-more-genetically-valuable-if-she-feeds-you-and-your-children-than-as-an-object-of-desire*? At this point, I hope that the reader would readily answer this in the negative.

By way of summing up, remember Dawkins's metaphor: He tells us that some image is just a metaphorical way of putting things in (conventional, subjective) "human language" and then gives us a metaphor to tell us how things really are, i.e., in the (objective) "gene language"; for instance, "Bodies are really just survival machines for their genes." The idea that a body is a survival machine for genes is certainly metaphorical as the language currently stands. It may in time become a dead metaphor; that is, one which has a more or less literal function and meaning, as when we speak of the mouth of a river, or the face of a mountain. As it is now, however, Dawkins's metaphor is a proposed transition away from ordinary language: it is a transformative reinterpretation of our experience and its embodiment in our language, and a grand one at that. It must stand or fall as such a proposed transition. And so must ultra-Darwinist articulations of our emotional life.

Wright, et al., use as a convention of simplicity. Wilson and Wright and their ilk generally view emotions, passions, desires, the entire constellation of affective phenomena, as the mediators between genes and behavior. So women might be expected to have an instinct (notoriously) for nurturing their children. In many environments this will manifest itself in various ways: tending to wounds, making clothes for them, etc. Cooking for them might be one of these manifestations. Women will be motivated by various emotions—concern, love, warmth, worry, consternation—and these emotions will be essentially the ways the genes direct behavior in the proper survival-relevant directions.

²⁰ Wright 89. In many cases it makes perfect evolutionary sense for a husband to abandon his children to his wife, especially if she is beginning menopause. The wife will then have no chance

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

of reproducing again. Her genetic fate is thus tied up with the children. The husband, however, can just have more children, perhaps with younger, more fertile women. The wife will be highly motivated to take care of his previous children anyway, so, genetically speaking, why not? But why is this not generally the case when women reach menopause? This is another reason why many have questioned the essentially Malthusian premise that all living organisms strive to reproduce as much as possible. This is quite flatly untrue in human societies, and it is certainly untrue in regards to the "fittest," "strongest," or what have you. Rich, affluent societies almost always have relatively modest, if not positively maladaptive, reproductive rates. Why aren't the most "successful" humans breeding more?

JONATHAN MATHYS

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

References

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. Vol. 1. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: University Press, 1989.
- De Man, Paul. "The Epistemology of Metaphor." *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 13-50.
- Taylor, Charles. "Language and Human Nature." *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*. Cambridge: University Press, 1985.
- . *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Wright, Robert. *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.