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The Desiccated Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Review of ‘Solving modern problems with a stone-age brain:
Human evolution and the seven fundamental motives’
by Douglas T. Kenrick and David E. Lundberg-Kenrick

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I didn't know that chivalry still existed in our semi-savage country. – The Colonel to Rafael Acosta in Luis Buñuel's "The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie"

The Pleistocene is a time of myth and promise. The era is mythical because we don't really know how humans lived back then (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021); it is promising because we hope that if we knew how human psychology evolved at the time, we would have a better understanding of what ails us now. Narratives about the Pleistocene fall onto a spectrum ranging from a Hobbesian dystopia (lives were brutish and short) to a Rousseauian utopia (populated by noble savages). In *Solving modern problems with a stone-age brain*, Douglas Kenrick and David Lundberg-Kenrick of Arizona State University seek to hold a middle ground. They grant that civilizing processes have bestowed many benefits on contemporary humans, while worrying that these same processes have created a world to which our stone-age minds are no longer adapted. Some repairs and adjustments are needed.

Improvements can be made, the Kenricks argue, if we have a full understanding of the human motivational system. The central mission of their book is to provide a comprehensive model of human motivation based on the theoretical foundations provided by evolutionary psychology. The key idea is not that motivation stems from a set of needs, but instead arises from a recurring set of tasks that need to be solved over a lifetime (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundermark, 1995). To solve these tasks is to stay alive and to reproduce in a world of conspecifics who face the same tasks and who are equipped to, depending on the demands of the day, cooperate or compete. The challenges posed are thus primarily social. The critical evolutionary pressures impinging on the individual come from other individuals and the groups they form.

Enter the great Khan. Outside of Outer Mongolia and certain patches of Inner Mongolia, Genghis Khan has a bad reputation. The descendants of those whose countries he

burned remember him as a scourge. Philosophers of happiness conclude that Genghis cannot have been happy despite his military and sexual successes (Haybron, 2008). It just doesn't feel right! Yet, contemporary Mongolians revere Genghis as the founder and *Urvater* of their nation. They regard him as a demi-god. The task of psychology, one would imagine, is to understand and explain these discrepant perspectives, not to take sides in judgment. Genghis hands the Kenricks a puzzle. He sired many sons who expanded his empire. How then can he be viewed with disdain if he climbed to the top of the evolutionary pyramid of life's challenges?

The answer should be to abstain from judgment, a strategy the Kenricks themselves advocate because it runs the risk of the naturalistic fallacy (Moore, 1903). In its narrow form, this fallacy infers the normative from the descriptive. In its broad form, the fallacy enables condemnation. Yet, the Kenricks double down on moral judgment by holding up Osceola McCarty, a humble washerwoman, as a moral exemplar. Ms McCarty saved her meager income over many years and was able to fund academic scholarships for African American girls, an impressive achievement. Ms McCarty had no children of her own, and we are not told whether she had a rewarding partnership. We are left with the puzzle of whether the pyramid of evolutionary tasks is a good – in the sense of true – model of motivation or whether it provides moral standards by which to judge people. It can't be both.

This is the big crack running through "Solving modern problems." The Kenricks want to offer a hardnosed account of human motivation and they also want to show people how they can live happy lives without stepping outside of their motivational make-up. To achieve this dual goal, the biologically given must bend to the normatively desirable. The result is a bourgeois vision of the fulfilled person. This person survives in a hostile world, gets along

with his or her peers, finds friends who are willing to grant respect and prestige, finds a mate (or more), and raises a contented nuclear family embedded in a supportive extended family, while nasty outgroupers, plunderers, and parasites are held at bay. On the other side of the crack, however, we notice that “the bad guys” – as the Kenricks call them collectively – work with the same kind of motivational equipment as the happiness and peace maximizing bourgeoisie. What is more, morally appealing and morally appalling motives coexist within the individual, a circumstance a good theory of motivation should acknowledge.

Consider three goals that do not fit neatly into the normative motivational view: suicide, sex, and self-defense. The Kenricks dismiss motives of self-destruction. “The very idea of a death instinct is absurd because any such instinct would quickly be selected out of the gene pool” (p. 55). This claim sounds stronger than it is. A genetic predisposition for suicide appears to have found a way to transmit itself over generations (Lengvenyte, Conejero, Courtet, & Olié, 2019). Likewise, free solo climbing, a high-mortality sport, replenishes its deceased enthusiasts for good evolutionary reasons. The babes, as the Kenricks might say, adore the reckless guys. Here, of course, the goal is not to die, but to be in a situation in which one *might* die, and then be rewarded with sex and prestige.

Which brings us to sex (and gender). Although the Kenricks acknowledge the diversity of mating arrangements across human societies, they sing the praises of monogamy. As there are many structural and economic reasons favoring monogamy, there is no need to wish for monogamy because it is “nice.” Indeed, humans are notorious in their ambivalence toward this arrangement. Infidelity and polyamory may seem like bugs to the technocrat or sins to the moralist, but an evolutionist should regard them as features. Indeed, the Kenricks note the “dual-mating strategy” pursued by many humans of either sex. These humans want

to have it all. They want the special other to love them, but also many more to lie with them. Finding that, for structural reasons, many humans have less than complete success with this strategy, does not mean that it is not part of their motivational world. It is no secret to the biologist that a motivational system can evolve even if it does not satisfy all conflicting desires. A psychological theory should speak to how self-aware humans deal with the inevitable conflicts and frustrations among competing motives (Krueger, Grüning, & Sundar, 2022).

Praise of monogamy leads to praise of family, but it comes with an odd streak of misandry. In a society of “cooperative breeders” (p. 213), mothers do the heavy lifting, assisted by sisters and grandmothers, and perhaps by their own brothers. The fathers do not teach or provide, they “pitch in” (p. 216), and one senses reluctantly so. Grandfathers, having taught and provided as fathers, have become all but expendable. The father’s father, we are told, is the low man on the popularity totem pole. There may be empirical truth to these observations, but they are sexist nonetheless. Where are the father’s brothers and friends who, in many societies, teach young men how to avoid becoming “the bad guys” the Kenricks bemoan?

Then there is the need to self-defend, and, more broadly, the need to assert oneself and to dominate others. In the Kenrick pyramid, this need sits uncomfortably in the middle, right above “affiliation” and below “mate acquisition.” It is labeled “status/esteem,” which prioritizes the need to be loved while obscuring the need to compete, win, and vanquish, a need Genghis was familiar with. The Kenricks downplay this need, and when its existence cannot be denied, they attribute it to “the other,” that is, to testosterone-driven young men and white-collar scammers. In the ancestral environment, they report, humility and

wholesome social connectedness were mandatory of leaders, and so it should be today. Yet, among the famously pacific Bushmen, the successful hunter's humility is enforced by the group, it is not freely given (Suzman, 2017). Prestige may well be the straighter path to power than is dominance, but it begs the question of why dominance remains part of the motivational suite.

Dominance, self-assertion, and revenge are not unknown in the context of monogamous marriage. The Kenricks counsel de-escalation when conflicts arise. Hug your partner more, take their perspective, express more appreciation and gratitude. This advice is well taken in the interest of bourgeois peace, but it does not explain why destructive motives persist or, more disturbingly, why they are occasionally successful (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). In the marital context, conflict begets unhappiness, which in turn can lead to infidelity. The Kenricks assert that this is a “popular – and dangerous – myth” (p. 193). Citing a study by Previti and Amato (2004), they declare that “extramarital sex was a *predictor* of later divorce, independent of how happy the couple had been before the infidelity” (p. 194, italics in the original). Alas, this is not what Previti and Amato found. Instead, they “conclude that infidelity is both a cause and a consequence of relationship deterioration” (p. 217).

Prioritizing moral judgment and self-help advice, the Kenricks fail to do justice to the power of the evolutionary paradigm. They compartmentalize what is desirable as biologically prepared and “normal” from what is deviant and dangerous. The latter they consider anomalous and seek to explain it *ad hoc* by, for example, pathologizing it. This compartmentalization entails a fractured psyche and an inelegant theory. Notably, the theory fails to bring the grand narrative to a satisfying close. The big question is how it can be that

the human mind has evolved over the long haul of the Pleistocene, adapting itself to a presumably stable ancestral ecology, only to then alter this ecology in such a way that the mind's own evolved capacities are no longer up to the tasks of surviving and flourishing (Krueger, 2018).

On the face of it, this is an incompleteness issue. How it might be addressed is far from clear. Perhaps the distinction between the ancestral Pleistocene and the culture-bound Holocene is less relevant for the understanding of the human mind than we are often invited to assume. The Kenricks sometimes lean in this direction, suggesting that our fundamental life tasks are still the same, and that the changes are superficial. Alternatively, we have to look for a meta-evolutionary interpretation, a theory that allows feedback loops between adaptations that afford and constrain their own evolution in response to the environmental changes they themselves have brought about. This view is fundamentally strategic, and interpersonal interactions provide a paradigm for human-environment interaction. A strategic agent selects a course of action contingent on the anticipated response of a partner or opponent (Krueger, Heck, Evans, & DiDonato, 2020). A strategic species might alter its environment such that motives of cooperation will come to dominate motives of competition. Alas, this is speculation. As long as human selfishness is not erased, it should be taken seriously as part of our endowment.

On balance, *Solving modern problems* is an interesting book. It builds a bridge from traditional list-based conceptions of human motivation (Maslow, 1943; Murray, 1938) and contemporary dynamical models (Christakis, 2019). It may be said, however, that much as psychoanalysis has been maligned in academic discourse, Freud (1989/1930) was prescient in putting his finger on the inevitable frustrations of human motives. Evolutionary

psychology is called upon to enlighten us about how we can trade off competing desires, and how we can assert ourselves without being submissive or being reduced to hugs and kisses. When self-love becomes morally suspect and is no longer expressed forthrightly, it tends to leak out in ways authors may not intend or endorse in a cooler frame of mind (Krueger, 2021). The Kenricks offer a fair amount of self-revealing information, leaving the reader wondering whether the theory is meant to be corroborated by way of example or whether the authors are expressing a basic human need to be known. This need is legitimate, but its expression opens the door to being judged.

This final observation suggests a pair of potential addenda to the pyramid of motives: the desire to express oneself and be seen (Maslow had a keener awareness of this) and the desire to judge others. Both seem rather ubiquitous, and the latter is a greater source of aggravation than delight. Evolution has seen to it that humans are a judgmental species, with a moral sense having evolved to keep group members in line. For the next ‘cene it would be nice to have a species whose members manage to get along without the excesses of moralizing judgment.

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