

How an evolutionary perspective can help the world

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Humans are genetically a relatively homogenous species. On the other hand, in no other species is the brain so open for modulation by environmental factors: We adapt and we adopt cultural traits. Consequently, in order to understand why some societies score better on tests for standards of living, we need to look at cultural traits. Moreover, in order to improve a society, we need to exploit the inherent flexibility of the human brain. The question is, “How can a biologically based evolutionary perspective help us?”

The short answer is that by understanding our innate nature, we stand better equipped to predict what impact various directed efforts and environmental factors will have. I believe a pendulum offers a useful analogy to human plasticity. There are vague limits as to how far away from the “default setting” of the human genotype one is likely to move a population. It is, for example, possible to expand our capacity for empathy and subdue the tendency for aggression; this, however, requires a concerted effort. We need to pull the “pendulum” against gravity in order to reach a state of elevated gregariousness. An understanding of human nature offers a handle that helps us do so.

First, we should agree on in which direction it is desirable to move. For this purpose, I prefer measures that emphasize quality of life – primarily in terms of health and happiness – rather than economic success. On the other hand, if a country fails in regard to having a viable economy, it is difficult to retain happiness. Fortunately, it seems as if happiness is economically sustainable because happy people, although perhaps less ambitious, have better mental and physical health and are more willing to work for the common good.

Evolution designed humans for a life in a certain type of environment. Although this environment can only be vaguely outlined, and a broad range of settings will do fine, some of the changes introduced by industrialized societies cause problems. The diseases of civilization, including common mental disorders, are presumably a consequence of unwholesome changes. The term *mismatch* has been used for any modification when comparing the archaic human environment and the present conditions; I use the term *discords* for the mismatches that can have detrimental effects. When instigating changes, one ought to be careful not to introduce factors that, although potentially beneficial for one purpose, are discords in the sense that they also contribute to undesirable effects. Understanding human nature, and the environment that shaped it, help us avoid this trap.

In short, I believe the biological perspective is paramount when it comes to facilitating intentional change.

Norway has introduced certain cultural features of positive value such as equality, respect for others, and freedom of thought. Moreover, the country has found ways to install the relevant attitudes through, for example, kindergartens, schools, and mass media. However, the biological perspective has not been exploited, and based on the prevalence of mental problems, the country has considerable potential for improvement.