

History of Affect

John Protevi / LSU French Studies / www.protevi.com/john / protevi@lsu.edu.

Draft of 6 October 2008 / Not for citation in any publication

Developmental Systems Theory or DST (Lewontin, *Triple Helix*; Oyama, *Ontogeny of Information*; Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*) gets us into extrasomatic inheritance (whatever is reliably reproduced in next life cycle). Thus with humans we're into realm of bio-cultural evolution, with all its complexity (Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*). In terms of affective cognition the units of bio-cultural evolution are sets of cultural practices, thought in terms of their ability to produce affective structures (tendencies to react to categories of events) by tinkering with neuro-endocrine developmental processes.

Now almost all of us reliably develop a set of basic emotions (rage, sadness, joy, fear, distaste) we share with a good number of reasonably complex mammals (Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*). We also have prosocial emotions (fairness, gratitude, punishment – shame and guilt are controversial cases) we share with primates, given certain basic and very wide-spread socializing inputs (De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*; Joyce, *Evolution of Morality*). In many sets of cultural practices, these prosocial emotions are partial and local (Hume's starting point in talking about the "moral sentiments"). Some cultural practices can try to expand the reach of prosocial emotions to all humans or even all sentient creatures (with all sorts of stops in between).

Why is the partiality of prosocial emotions a "default setting" for sets of bio-cultural practices? One hypothesis (De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*; Bowles and Gintis, "Origins of Human Cooperation") is that war has been a selection pressure in bio-cultural evolution, producing very strong in-group vs out-group distinctions and very strong rewards / punishments for in-group conformity.

There is a big controversy about the history of warfare in anthropology (Otterbein vs Sponsel). Some critics will say that the alleged universality of warfare among contemporary tribes (and this is a very loose layperson's use of that term) doesn't provide a window onto the environment of evolutionary selection because a lot of that contemporary warfare follows Western contact which changed the conditions (e.g., by creating territorial restrictions). I take those critiques seriously, and I also certainly don't mean to support any "killer ape" hypothesis about the alleged inevitability of war: that's way too close to original sin for my tastes. The question would be how much war was needed to form an effective selection pressure for strong in-group identification and hence partiality of pro-social emotions? NB: Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*, 209-210, argue that between group imitation can also be a factor in spreading cultural variants. They cite the example of early Christianity. The selection pressure there was the high rate of epidemics in the Roman Empire. So war need not be the only selection pressure, nor does group destruction and assimilation of losers have to be the only means of transmitting cultural variants.

If war was a selection pressure, though, we have to consider the history of warfare. With tribal warfare, you get loose groups of warriors with charismatic leaders (Clastres, *Society Against the State*). Virtually all the males of the tribe take part in this type of warfare; IOW, there is no professional warrior class / caste.

This tribal egalitarianism changes with agriculture and class society (despite all the difficulties, I still think we have to consider what Engels says in *Origin of the Family ...*). Consider thus the situation in Homer: we see big split btw affective structures of the warriors (bravery) and peasants (docility) who support them (and the artisans who supply the arms and the bards who sing their praises and who thus reinforce the affective structures of the warriors: the feeling that your name will live on if you perform

bravely is very important). (And of course we haven't even mentioned gendering practices.) Thus here the selection pressure is for sets of bio-cultural practices producing specialized affective structures relative to position in society, that is, relative to their contribution to the effectiveness of wars fought by that society.

All this shifts with the triumph of hoplite warfare. Compare Aristotle's golden mean of courage with what the Homeric warriors meant by courage. For Aristotle, it's staying in the phalanx with your mates: charging ahead rashly is as much a fault as cowardly retreat. But for the Homeric heroes, charging ahead rashly is all there is. (Consider also the famous debates about Spartan women vs Athenian women!)

All this means we can't assume an abstract affective cognitive subject but have to investigate the history of affect. But, the objection might go, don't we risk leaving philosophy and entering historical anthropology? Answer: we only "leave" philosophy to enter history if we've surreptitiously defined philosophy ahead of time as ahistorical. Well, then, don't we leave philosophy and enter psychology? Only if you've defined philosophy as concerned solely with universal structures of "human" affective cognition. But that's the argument: the abstraction needed to reach the "human" is at heart anti-biological. Our biology makes humans essentially open to their cultural imprinting. But just saying that is typological thinking, concerned with "the" human: we need to bring concrete biological thought into philosophy: it's the variations in a population which are real: the type is an abstraction. Thus as often is the case, we repeat an old philosophical debate: nominalism and realism of concepts.