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The View From The President's Window

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On God, and Such

My three previous HBES Newsletter essays have predictably generated criticisms, a few transmitted to me. One person argued that more has been learned about behavioral development than I suggested. Certainly *Time's* (3 Feb 97) review, "How a child's brain develops," is encouraging to people as ignorant of this field as I. It also reveals the rudimentariness and difficulties of forays into ontogenies, whether they begin with the organism or the genes. As Lewontin (1997) noted, "... we do not yet have a single case of a prevention or cure arising from a knowledge of DNA sequences..." My use of the word "conservative," in an admonition about moral attitudes toward human phenotypic alternatives in the face of ontogenetic ignorance (I meant "caution" about interpreting such as handedness and sexual orientation, but I can see how a skeptic could have misunderstood), brought the suggestion that I might be exhorting people to "vote Republican from now on" (fortunately the writer later decided I probably didn't mean such). My recounting of material documented by Ute Deichmann (1996) regarding Konrad Lorenz's activities during WWII caused a complaint that I was unfairly attacking a dead man and that Deichmann, after all, didn't have to feed a family during WWII or get along without a research grant. It is a potent understatement to say this comment astonished me. But, because I have evidently trod on hallowed ground, I decided to go all the way, for my aim has long been to devise reasonable evolutionary hypotheses for those questions about life that seem most difficult for evolutionary theory. I regard this aim as consistent with Darwin's view that if evolution cannot explain difficult problems like complex organs, species differences, altruism, and eusociality it's an impotent theory. Hence, the concept of God here. As mentioned in an earlier essay, a reviewer of my 1987 book, *The Biology of Moral Systems*, thought it "embarrassing" that I had even brought up God (pp. 200-208), which seems to make this topic an appropriate vehicle for the aim just described.

It can be said that two causal processes in the universe account for complex phenomena, "complex" meaning highly improbable. The two processes are conscious design and selection. If selection is the cause of

conscious design, however, then as Bell (1997) has pointed out, there is but one such causal process. Conscious design is familiar to all humans because they engage in it continually. They only need to have its role called to their attention. Selection, however, is unfamiliar to most people and also difficult to understand. There are two reasons for phenomena (or processes) to be unfamiliar or poorly understood: either they are so trivial that no one has gone to the trouble to explain them or else they are truly difficult to understand (some phenomena are difficult to understand for reasons other than complexity -- such as size). People seem initially inclined to regard any poorly understood phenomenon as trivial, perhaps because we apparently have been getting along without understanding it. Selection, however, is poorly understood for several reasons. First, it is so unlike conscious design as to cast immediate doubt on its potency. Indeed, selection is so extremely bumbling as to seemingly deny it a role in producing complexity. Second, selection typically takes much longer than a human lifetime to produce anything truly complex; so such effects cannot be observed directly. Third, selection depends on inheritable changes in molecular structures that for most of our existence were outside the range of our senses. Fourth, selection has yielded processes, such as ontogeny, which are so far beyond our comprehension, even now, that to attempt explanation by selection stretches credulity. I suspect that many sophisticated biologists remain skeptical about selection, though perhaps without invoking divine conscious design, because of mysteries such as how ontogenies work.

Selection is bumbling and slow because the causes of the changes on which it depends (essentially, genetic mutations) are independent of the likelihood of the changes surviving. This absence of a feedback between need and novelty we usually refer to as "randomness." Because of the accuracy of temporally proximate indicators of recurrent environmental states, however, such feedback has been incorporated by selection into the lifetimes of organisms and is responsible for the imputation of teleology to ontogenies and learning. Through virtually continual building and testing of social and other scenarios in our brains, we humans have, on a broad scale, incorporated into even learned cultural changes the

feedback between need and novelty that does not exist between genetic mutations and their differential survival.

There is an interesting twist here, because biologists argue (correctly) that they use only known phenomena to explain life while creationists use otherwise unknown phenomena. Because conscious design is such a well known phenomenon, however, it may seem a small step to attribute it to someone or something other than ourselves. To understand selection well enough to consider it the explanation for apparent conscious design is at least difficult. Moreover, to accept the blind inefficient process of selection is to reject the familiar and seemingly superior process of conscious design. Finally, although, of the two sources of information available to us, we (scientists, at least) favor direct observation (test) over authority, we actually are forced to rely upon authority so much of the time that we accept it all too readily, expending our analytical energies primarily on deciding which authorities to accept.

An external source of conscious design, responsible for complexity, can also be used as a source of moral power, as for enforcing the wishes of individuals or collectives when conflicts of interest arise. Thus, in *Darwinism and Human Affairs* (1979), I suggested that the concept of God (as a source of authority) might at some time have been associated with connections between parental authority and deceased ancestors: "... the origins of divinity [might sometimes] lie in reverence toward deceased powerful ancestors and the effort by would-be leaders to use the presumed wishes and authority of such ancestors to promote order. Such efforts would depend on a person's success at convincing others of such ancestors' wishes or his ability to communicate with them" (revelation? prayer?). This set of notions, we can speculate, defines the essence of the useful concept of "soul" -- the mind, will, and conscience of every individual (or the aspects of such that in the eyes of all give the individual the right to be a component in human sociality) -- and, for those dead, whatever useful memory of such remains (or can be planted) in the minds of those living. The part of this issue that for general reasons cannot be resolved scientifically is whether or not these concepts reside anywhere except in the human mind and its products (spoken, written, designed).

With leadership and power go, I supposed, unusual reproductive opportunities. Because of the history of power differentials between men and women, I also said (p. 249) I didn't regard it as accident that God came to be regarded as a *Father* in Heaven. Later, in *The Biology of Moral Systems*, I tried to connect the concept of God to both moral exhortations and knowledge of cause-effect relations, these eventually associated with gods of larger units, such as tribes, not only as explainers (and causes) of poorly understood phenomena (including mortality), but also as sources of power, caretakers of the group, transmitters of group rules, and sources of rewards for following group rules and punishments for breaking group rules. Ignorance of cause-effect relations and moral behavior are group as well as individual problems, social

success and death-awareness pretty much individual ones. All of these individual and group problems can be transferred to a presumed all-knowing and all-powerful force by anyone who chooses.

It is surprising how easily so many traits, powers, and abilities can be combined in a divine and immortal entity, capable of dealing with all human problems. This ease of combination, together with the value of restraining individual interests in favor of collective interests, may be a reason religions based on divine beings have become such potent institutions in human society. The reason for the ease surely involves connections between moral and cause-effect questions that relate back to conflicts of interest and the search for power.

In the moral context God is typically portrayed as a supreme and all-knowing being. As children some of us were told that God (and Santa Claus and some others) can look into our souls and detect just how noble are even our innermost motivations. If we lie to serve our own ends or cheat, God knows it. He punishes people for doing wrong and rewards them for doing right, even if not until the hereafter. In *The Biology of Moral Systems* I discussed the reality of evolutionary rewards or punishments after death, via socially enforced indirect reciprocity that results in either positive or negative effects on still living relatives (p. 206).

For some people or purposes, however, God appears to be considered (consciously or not, secondarily or not) in a natural rather than a supernatural sense. One such sense is *Vox populi, vox Dei* (The voice of the people is the voice of God). In politics, this idea can be traced at least to ancient Britain, where it was commonplace early in the 8th century, and ironically was apparently used to create a replacement for efforts of rulers to connect their own wills with that of God: Alcuin to Charlemagne, ca. 798: "The people ought to be led by divine sanctions, not followed Nor should those be heeded who are always saying '*Vox populi, vox Dei,*' since the tumult of the crowd (*vulgi*) is always close to madness" (Cameron, pers. comm., 1995).

The collection of people with whom one must interact socially, as with an all-knowing God, has a strong chance of identifying moral and immoral acts, and even deciphering their motivations. This collection of associates -- historically, maybe 20-250 for an individual -- has a multitude of eyes and ears with which to see and hear anyone's social actions, and of brains with which to interpret: far more perceptiveness than a single potential deceiver, no matter how bright or clever. Detection of a single, deliberate, self-serving lie can destroy a perpetrator's reputation because the information is likely to spread quickly. Such a discovery is so devastating that closest relatives and best friends sometimes admonish a liar and keep the secret. If caught in a lie, one is branded as untrustworthy. An enormous amount of consistent truth-telling is necessary to overcome the label. Sufficient social opportunities may simply not arise; hence, perhaps, precipitous changes to "born again" postures by exposed

liars. The proportion of lies to truth in one's social actions matters little. No one can predict the next lie, and everyone has a right to expect lies to happen just when their consequences to the victims are most costly. That is when the willing liar gains most by deceit, and is most tempted.

Everyone lies (defects) sometimes, and few people would think of rearing a child under the continual admonition never to lie. The kind of lies rather than the rate of lying is crucial to reputation. Everyone knows "little white lies" are sometimes acceptable. God, in any sense, is presumed to understand when lack of truthfulness occurs for charitable reasons, such as not telling Aunt Ethel she looks dowdy in her new dress or Uncle Ed that he has hopelessly bad breath. Knowing how to operate in a society in which deliberate falsehoods are concealed requires a vastly more complicated intellect than in an utterly truthful society, such as a group of honeybee foragers informing one another about the distance, direction, and richness of different food sources used solely to rear a common group of juveniles whose variations in relatedness to the different workers are unknown to them. Even if we only learn about lying and its consequences from interactions within our families, we can realize the difficulty of lying deliberately in self-serving ways and getting away with it. This lesson everyone has to absorb to operate the conscious mind effectively in social situations, and maybe the non conscious as well.

In social and moral issues it might matter little which concept of God one has (an all-powerful conscious designer, including ancestors or others with immortal souls, or the moral collective of one's own society plus selection), or even whether one accepts the concept of God, so long as one follows the precepts that come out of either of the above situations. Of course, some people adjust their thoughts so that they self-deceive and have one motivation in their unconscious and another in their conscious. They say they are doing something because it's right when they really mean that they have been coerced or talked into it by someone(s) they respect or fear. They may say that God told them to do it, and even believe that sincerely. Not just God, but people too, can detect this kind of rationalization in others. People know they sometimes work to make their self-serving actions look self-sacrificial. They understand that some people talk themselves into believing their motivation is one thing when it has to be something else.

This entire situation exists for a reason I discussed in *Darwinism and Human Affairs* (p. 147). Sexual reproduction yields unique genotypes, so evolution produces individuals that view their own interests (which will reflect genetic interests, although this fact is not expected to be conscious) as more important than those of others. Selection thus favors individuals in sexual species functioning as unique sets of interests. Honeybee workers (and obligately monogamous parents isolated from their respective relatives) are a special and informative case: if relatedness of different juveniles through which collections of beneficent workers obligately realize their common

reproduction remains effectively identical within each generation to all the cooperating workers (because they have no mechanism for making distinctions), the workers, though genetically different, can only gain by behaving more or less like the cooperating genetically identical somatic cells of a metazoan's body, which nurture the sperm or egg cells under the restrictive reproductive laws of meiosis (Alexander 1991; Keller 1997).

It seems possible that religions have, in whatever fashion, contributed to the developmental programming of sociality in individuals such that they actually tend to perform according to their own (evolutionary) benefit. Thus, although not all egoistic or nepotistic behavior need be viewed as immoral, this benefit includes keeping social actions on target, so that others in the group (or the group as a whole) are also served. In other words, the tension between acting in one's own benefits within the group (thus against those of other group members) and in one's own benefit in ensuring that the group does not fail (thus also in the interests of competing others within the group), is adjusted by the interaction of the individual's perceptions and motivations regarding its own interests with those of moral authorities, presumably representing one or another collective.

Children seem constructed so as to generate their more or less unconsciously applied social actions appropriately to the situation in which they are reared -- that is, whether or not someone is continually teaching them about deception and manipulation. If so, then telling a child about how either God or evolution works on social behavior might convince the child that it is appropriate sometimes to be skeptical, or even cynical, in interpreting the behavior of others, but not stop him or her from becoming an evolutionarily appropriate kind of altruist. Even if children are told to lie, or that lying is best -- or not ever to lie -- they surely also become programmed by social rewards and punishments as well as by conscious and deliberate efforts to adjust their thinking. If everyday rewards and punishments -- and everyday understanding of the likelihood of being detected in deceptions -- are on target, a child will know how and when to lie and when not to. If not, the child probably will suffer a deficit with regard to such knowledge, regardless of what is taught directly and consciously.

Thinking about such topics carries promise that analysis consistent with the tenets of evolutionary biology is possible for one more set of the seemingly imponderable things humans do and think. There can also be a defusing of the adversarial stance that sometimes appears obligatory between the science of evolutionary biology and the tenets of religion. If God works, using any of the above interpretations, then the only contest about definitions involves authority rather than observation and experiment, meaning, mainly, whose authority and how do we know? Although one philosopher with whom I have discussed this proposition believes that moral questions should be solved using science, we actually use the authority of either the group or one or more powerful members. Even if we use science

to inform our moral decisions, do we actually have an alternative to some form of *Vox populi, vox Dei*? (A curious mixture of moral and scientific issues occurred when the American Anthropological Association at its annual meeting in 1984 voted that Derek Freeman's criticism of an icon, Margaret Mead, was *unscientific!* -- Freeman 1997).

The inter-group aspects of sociality and religion are the most difficult. When intra-group sociality is promoted to the exclusion of other groups -- whether by Bosnians, Rwandans, different groups in the Middle East, racists in the U.S., or any religious or anti-religious group that believes that only its particular adherents have a chance at God's rewards -- we have to be concerned. As an inductee in the Korean "Conflict" I marveled at the skill of low level military personnel in transforming people coming straight out of a democratic society into killing machines that follow orders almost without question. I was stunned when this programming expanded -- paralleling WW II -- to exhort us that enemies of the USA are not really human, including use of non human labels for them. I see it as a monumental problem that some such kinds of learning, and teaching, are so easy. I wonder if and how we can diminish the effects of long-term intergroup competition and strife on different human groups' views and treatments of one another by changing "The People" as *Vox Dei* to "All the People" (everywhere) and God (of whatever sort) to a single universal entity. Team competitions and all forms of exclusive humor seem to work contrary to this goal, yet also seem irrepressible and even, perhaps to nearly everyone, desirable.

Of course, when you or I claim to be universal altruists or universally unbiased benefit-givers, wholly committed to selfless giving to someone or some cause, we are subject to the skeptical view that we are really parading ourselves as good social partners and expecting broad returns with interest from reputation via what I have discussed since 1975 as indirect reciprocity (not necessarily contrary to group interests). Universal altruism -- God bless everyone everywhere equally -- is a wonderful idea, and there is obviously a feeling that if people would accept it the world would be a better place to live. Many religious and non-religious people, I believe, strive earnestly to make this desirable myth a reality. For today's world it is surely a better goal than any which restricts beneficence to a particular group or excludes another. We need to be sure, however, that we are not self-deceiving about our willingness to engage the universal aspect, and also deal with the consequences of such willingness not being shared universally (Alexander 1993). We need to be sure that, as a result of pleading based on erroneous (but in our view benevolent) interpretations, we do not create waves of cynicism ultimately yielding effects opposite to those we seek. Ironically, because of our history, it is possible to aspire to unity sincerely in ways that foster disunity. The news media demonstrate this each time they publish school children's test scores as racial averages and "lament" the difference. They thereby join the historical procession of

people who wittingly or unwittingly use statistical averages ("types") in ways that blight the lives of individuals.

We humans have passed through multiple stages with respect to the effectiveness of the concept of *Vox populi, vox Dei*. In societies of a few dozen or a few hundred people it works because everyone knows everyone (even if it was not a conscious or political idea until much later). With the advent of cities, sometimes of millions, anonymity allowed societal defections with lowered chances of detection and punishment. Hence, police forces and (with written language, therefore verifiable precedents, as an aid) formal laws specifying transgressions and their punishments; yet, importantly (I think), no parallel compensation for the correspondingly diminishing social rewards for non-defection (law-abiding behavior). Now we have entered into still another kind of circumstance, with the Internet and a dramatic diminution of responsibility for prevarication. Almost everyone "stands for" free speech, but, when the argument began, profoundly deleterious consequences for lying were in force. Lying on the Internet with impunity is real: screams for free speech there mean "responsibility-free" in a way never before possible on a broad scale. When government agencies regulate truth in advertising they take on a job prohibitively expensive for individual citizens, such as monitoring labels as to amounts of fat, calories, or salt in the contents of a tin can available for purchase in a grocery store. That's government regulation of what, on the Internet, is called "free speech." The alternative, which I certainly favor, is finding some other way to ascribe responsibility. To the extent that prevarication and error are truly cost-free, however, the discourse becomes worthless.

Without the conflicts of interest that occur among conspecifics, and the resultant necessity of developing effective systems of truth and deception among social associates, I doubt there would have been potent selection for the human kind of large brain and intelligence. Moreover, without intergroup competitiveness, there would have been no engine to drive continued elaboration of multiple levels of complex cooperative behavior among individuals having only partially overlapping interests within groups, so as to foster massively complex social deception. Like it or not, this combination of selective events appears responsible for the evolution of humanity -- including soccer, war, religion, art, deception, and the most elaborate of all systems of kinship and reciprocity.

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News Items

HBES Elections

Call For Nominations for Officers/Councillors

Napoleon A. Chagnon
Immediate Past President

It is my responsibility and pleasure, as Immediate Past President of HBES, to solicit nominations for candidates for Officers and Councillors in HBES and to then call for an election of candidates by members of HBES. Election results will be presented at the 1997 Annual Meetings of HBES in Tucson. First, send me your nominations by April 15. HBES will then present the slate of candidates in the form of a mailed ballot.

Offices to be filled include:

- A. President Elect, to replace Margo Wilson, who becomes President.
- B. Two Councillors, to replace David Buss and Jane Lancaster
- C. Student Councillor, to replace Deborah Lieberman

At the Tucson meetings, Richard D. Alexander's Presidency will terminate on the last day of the meetings and President Elect Margo Wilson will assume the Presidency. Alexander will become Immediate Past President and continue to remain on the Council for two years, replacing Chagnon, who will then become an ordinary member of HBES and ineligible to serve on the Council or as an Officer for the next two years.

Jane Lancaster and David Buss will leave the council and be replaced by the two newly elected Council Members. Neither Buss nor Lancaster are eligible for Council membership or HBES Officer for a period of two years after leaving the current council.

Patrick McKim will remain as Treasurer until the end of the 1999 HBES meetings. Kevin McDonald will remain as Secretary/Archivist until the end of the 2001 meetings.

William Irons and Lee Cronk will continue as Council Members until 1999, and Sarah Hrdy and Monique Borgerhoff Mulder until 2001.

Send your nominations to me by either e-mail or surface mail. Please put "NOMINATION" as the title of your e-mail transmission and identify yourself clearly in your transmission. Do so as soon as possible, ideally by April 15. I will tally the nominations and then present a slate of candidates determined by the numbers of votes for each candidate. Ballots will then be sent to you in ample time for you to cast your vote prior to the HBES meetings in Tucson. The final slate will consist of two or three candidates for President Elect, six candidates for the two Council positions, and two or three candidates for Student Councillor. Deborah Lieberman will solicit nominations for student councillor independently, by polling the student members. Separate ballots will be sent.

Address for nominations:

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HBES 1997 Conference

June 4-8, University of Arizona

The Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES) will hold its Ninth Annual Conference at the University of Arizona, Tucson, from June 4 (Weds, 5pm) through 8, (Sun, 6pm) 1997. The keynote speaker is Frans de Waal, and confirmed plenary speakers include John Alcock, Robert Boyd, Steven Gangestad, Lawrence Keeley, Neil Malamuth, Daniel Perusse, Lewis Petrinovich, and Barbara Smuts.

The business meeting will be held on Wednesday evening. The program of presentations will begin on Thursday morning. Participants interested in exploring Tucson may wish to arrive Wednesday morning for arranged trips to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, a world-renowned zoo and ecological exhibit. Tucson is located in the Sonoran desert. Daytime temperatures in