

Evolutionary Psychology

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Book Review

A Selection of Darwinian Delicacies¹

A review of David P. Barash, *Natural Selections: Selfish Altruists, Honest Liars and other Realities of Evolution*. Bellevue Literary Press: New York, 2007, \$25.00, 192 pp. ISBN 978-1-934137-05-5.

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This slender volume contains 21 essays dealing with implications of evolutionary biology for the way we live our lives and think about ourselves. Each chapter is simultaneously entertaining and thought provoking.

Barash is a remarkably knowledgeable man, but he wears his erudition lightly. Drawing on a wide range of sources to illustrate the beauty and explanatory power of evolutionary thinking, Barash has Darwin and Hamilton rub shoulders with Nietzsche, Pascal, Shakespeare, and Aristotle, as deep science walks hand-in-hand with philosophy, literature, and popular culture. As is evident from the subtitle, Barash is fond of paradox. Not only do we find selfish altruists and honest liars here, but also an evolutionary homage to the arch-behaviorist B. F. Skinner, a deft treatment of evolutionary existentialism, and a fine account of the ugly underside of altruism.

One of the volume's central themes is the relentless tension between our evolved nature and the constraints imposed upon us by culture. "Two huge continents have drifted apart," he writes in the final chapter, aptly entitled "Evolution's Odd Couple," "and now these great tectonic plates, culture and biology, grind together."

The results...range from nearly trivial squeaks and wriggles, such as our troublesome sweet tooth or some of our sexual peccadilloes, to the most portentous quakes, including nuclear war, environmental abuse and overpopulation, while in between lie a host of middle-sized tremors such as personal alienation and family dysfunction. The conflict between culture and biology, the Siamese sack race between hare and tortoise, is an event of paradoxical proportions, ranging from the seismic to the microscopic, from whole societies (indeed, the whole planet and its past, present, and future) to individual people and their likes and dislikes. (p. 177)

¹ This review was solicited and handled by Editor Todd K. Shackelford.

Several things should be obvious from this excerpt. The first is that David Barash is a very fine writer. His literary style is fluid, confident, and studded with stunning metaphors and apposite examples. In fact, this book is worth reading for sheer aesthetic pleasure. Now, combine this with the author's philosophical sensibility – his steady focus on the really profound issues that bedevil the human project – and the resulting cocktail is irresistible. Also – and I found this most striking – Barash writes with great charm about some of the darkest, most problematic aspects of life, and the beauty of his writing makes the bitter tonic more palatable. The bracing, almost Freudian, sting of the writing is clear from the very first chapter, which deals with our persistent and foolish tendency to imagine that the cosmos revolves (metaphorically speaking) around *Homo sapiens*.

Barash's theoretical loyalties are clearly to good old-fashioned sociobiology, with gene-selection as the main engine of evolutionary change and the prime vehicle for theoretical explanation. But he is no blinkered true believer, devoutly and mindlessly reciting the evolutionary credo. His profound understanding of evolutionary science, his wide-ranging grasp of intellectual and cultural history, and his almost reflexive rejection of pat, dogmatic thinking shine through on almost every page.

In short, this book is a rare treat. Buy it, read it, and spread the word. It deserves a wide audience both among the evolutionary illuminati and those who have not yet come to appreciate the importance of Darwin's brainchild.