



Free Will and Human Nature: Should We Be Worried?

Evolutionary Psychology has a bigger problem with free will than it acknowledges, argues *Brian Garvey*

Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, published in 1975, dealt with group behaviour within species—co-operation, competition, hierarchy formation, and so forth.^[1] It focused principally on eusocial insects, such as ants, and primates, and told a story about how this behaviour evolves from a gene's eye view, of the kind familiar from the work of Richard Dawkins, Robert Trivers, and others. This might have caused barely a flicker of controversy had it not been for the final chapter, wherein Wilson speculated on potential implications of his theories for humans. Although he was rather vague and circumspect, strident objections erupted almost immediately. And thus began the human nature wars, which have raged ever since.^[2]

One of the most frequent complaints against Wilson was that he gave people excuses for bad behaviour. Stephen Rose, reviewing Wilson's *On Human Nature*,^[3] wrote:

[...] for Wilson human males have a genetic tendency towards polygyny, females towards constancy (don't blame your mates for sleeping around, ladies, it's not their fault they are genetically programmed).

This accusation has subsequently been levelled against the schools of thought that may be said to have taken their cue from Wilson—notably Evolutionary Psychology. But for the accusation to stick, it's not enough that Wilson, or the Evolutionary Psychologists, give evolutionary explanations for certain types of behaviour. They can only be giving excuses to (for example) men who are serial philanderers if their theories imply that men find it very difficult or impossible to stop themselves from serially philandering.

Evolutionary Psychologists are also frequently accused of presenting speculation as if it were fact. If we put this together with the previous complaint, we get: Evolutionary Psychologists are giving us, without good evidence, a story that gives excuses to bad people. On the other hand, if their theories are well-founded after all, there is a different reason to be worried. We generally like to feel that people can be held responsible for their actions, and indeed that we are in control of ourselves. It would be bad news if a well-founded scientific theory told us that they can't, or that we aren't, or at least that we are to a significantly lesser extent than we had thought.

So does Evolutionary Psychology really imply that we have less control over our own actions than we might have thought? Janet Radcliffe-Richards argues that it doesn't, and argues this by appealing to *compatibilism* about free will.^[4] Compatibilism is the doctrine that free will can still exist, and that we can still be in control of our actions and morally responsible, even if determinism is true. It is not part of my purpose here to decide whether compatibilism is true or not. Rather, what I argue is: (1) even if compatibilism is true we still might not have free will; (2) there are certain things that, on either compatibilist or incompatibilist views, would count as reductions or negations of free will; and (3) Evolutionary Psychology, at least in its most prominent version, makes claims that if true would mean that we have significantly less self-control and responsibility than we might have thought.

The first point is quite easy to establish. Compatibilism just means that free will, self-control and responsibility are *compatible* with determinism. It does not imply that in every possible deterministic scenario we have free will, self-control and responsibility. Compatibilists would not dispute that if, for example, our behaviour was disconnected from our brains and controlled by some diabolical genius, we would not have free will. Hence, in order to establish that we have free will, it is not enough to establish the truth of compatibilism. We would also have to establish that whatever conditions are needed for free will are actually met. This need becomes particularly pressing when we are faced with new considerations that seem, on the face of it, to be relevant—as is the case with Evolutionary Psychology. I do not attempt here to provide a full account of the conditions for free will. Rather, I am attempting the more modest task of showing some of the conditions that, if met, would mean that we have less of it than we might have thought.

On the second point, everyone, compatibilist or incompatibilist, agrees that being tied up or imprisoned reduces or negates our freedom. Some might quibble about whether these conditions really affect our free *will*; they might argue that we can continue to *will* things just as we could before. But if the really important issues are responsibility and self-control, then most people would agree that being tied up or imprisoned means that there

are things that we can't do, meaning that we can't be responsible for not doing them or have control over whether we do them.

But there are other kinds of conditions that, again I think most people would agree, have a similar effect. A person in the grip of a severe addiction or phobia will—and this seems to be part of the definition of these conditions—find it extremely hard to do certain things or stop themselves from doing certain things. One might insist that they are still *able* to do the things, or to refrain from doing the things, and that their condition only makes it harder, not impossible. But if we see things in slightly less all-or-nothing terms, it seems reasonable to say that a person with an addiction or a phobia ought to be cut some slack, because they are less able to control certain actions and should be held less responsible for those actions. One might, consistent with this, hold that an addicted person is to blame for becoming addicted in the first place. I won't try to adjudicate that issue here. What if it turned out, though, that there are people who have dispositions that develop in a way that's outside their control, and that are similar enough to addictions that they can be said to curtail responsibility and self-control in the same way? This possibility, I suggest, may justify the worry about Evolutionary Psychology having negative implications for responsibility and self-control.

Finally, on the third point, a defining feature of the most prominent school of Evolutionary Psychology—the school represented by Cosmides and Tooby, Steven Pinker, David Buss and others^[6]—is the *massive modularity thesis*. This is the thesis that the mind is wholly or at least very largely composed of special-purpose mechanisms that operate more-or-less autonomously and automatically, as opposed to being a general-purpose reasoning or learning machine. In support of this view, they appeal to (i) examples of divisions of function—for example, it is possible to lose the ability to recognise faces while remaining otherwise visually unimpaired; (ii) an analogy with physical anatomy, with the division of the body into well-defined and separate organs; and (iii) a general evolutionary argument that natural selection builds solutions to specific problems as they arise and doesn't plan for the future. The important point here is that modules produce their outputs automatically and in a way that's oblivious to other information that the mind possesses. This is why optical illusions persist even when we know they are illusions: the visual system produces outputs automatically and doesn't have access to all the information that other parts of the mind has. Evolutionary Psychologists argue that motivations similarly arise automatically and without regard for other relevant information. For example, Donald Symons says:

Human behavior is flexible, of course, but this flexibility is of means, not ends, and the basic experiential goals that motivate human behavior are both inflexible and specific.^[6]

On this account, then, we have desires that arise automatically, and that are inflexible in the sense that they continue to be motivators even if our better judgement tells us not to follow their promptings. This seems to make us helpless before them in the same way that an addict is helpless before their addiction. It is not *impossible* to resist the desires, but their persistent nature will make it hard for us to resist them, and consequently reduce our responsibility and self-control in just the way that addictions and phobias do.

Evolutionary Psychologists sometimes try to allay such concerns by arguing that we have an override mechanism. But they give no explanation of how such a mechanism would work, or indeed of how it fits with their massive modularity view of the mind. In the absence of such an explanation, there are two alternatives facing Evolutionary Psychology: either they have an account of motivation that undermines the idea that we have full responsibility and self-control, or they have a seriously incomplete account of motivation, and hence of the mind generally.

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^[1] E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology* (Belknap, 1975).

^[2] For a lively account of the human nature wars, which shows just how heated they got, see U. Segerstråle, *Defenders of the Truth: The Sociobiology Debate* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

^[3] S. Rose, 'Pre-Copernican Sociobiology?', *New Scientist*, 1978, **80**, pp. 45–6 [a review of E. O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*].

^[4] J. Radcliffe-Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin* (Routledge, 2000).

^[5] J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby (eds), *The Adapted Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1992) [this book set out the founding principles of this version of Evolutionary Psychology]; S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (Penguin, 1997) [this is an accessible introduction to the field]; D. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (Pearson, 2011, 4th edition) [this is in the style of a textbook].

^[6] D. Symons, 'On the Use and Misuse of Darwinism in the Study of Human Behavior', in J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby (eds), *The Adapted Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 138–9.