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Review of *The Human Instinct: How We Evolved to Have Reason, Consciousness and Free Will.* by Kenneth R. Miller

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One criticism we do have is that, as Drinan asserts, poverty, race, family history of incarceration, and exposure to violence increase a child's likelihood of criminal justice system involvement. In this regard, Drinan mentions possible policy reform for juvenile justice, but falls short of pointing out that society as a whole also has a responsibility to address these large social issues, which could significantly decrease the chances of children's involvement with the criminal justice system. Nonetheless, this book is highly recommended for readers who are interested in an accessible yet comprehensive book about the juvenile justice system in the U.S.

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Kenneth R. Miller, *The Human Instinct: How We Evolved to Have Reason, Consciousness and Free Will*. Simon and Schuster (2018). 294 pages. $26.00 (hardcover).

Kenneth R. Miller, longtime professor of biology at Brown University, is probably best known to readers of this journal for his role as expert witness in high profile court cases that took place in the 1990s concerning the teaching of Intelligent Design theory as a balance to the teaching of evolutionary theory in the public schools. One of the main tactics of the proponents of Intelligent Design (most effective in jury trials) was to repeat the claim that evolution is "only a theory," drawing on common language use of that word to mean something like a highly speculative idea.

Miller's testimony was aimed at educating judges and jurors on the professional meaning of the word *theory* when used by scientists and other specialists. Though in such trials, Miller's expertise was employed against the teaching of Intelligent Design (ID), Miller came away from the experience with some sense of respect for certain aspects of what he saw in the supporters of ID. The point of respect was not for their central claims, for which Miller does not see a place in the teaching of science. The point of respect, rather, was for what Miller came to understand as their sincerity in asserting that human life

contains inherently a deep sense of meaning, awesomeness and value they think is stripped away by the fundamentally materialistic assumptions of evolutionary theory.

Miller was concerned and distressed that people would encounter the story of our evolutionary origins as destructive of their sense of awe and wonder, for this runs directly counter to Miller's own experience as a biological scientist. Since that time, Miller has endeavored to better communicate to students and readers the strong sense of awe and wonder he finds in scientific investigations of life and how that picture meshes with the scientific picture of the universe more generally. This book is in many ways his *Summa* for that endeavor, written for a wide audience.

Back when theology was the *Queen of the Sciences*, the universe was depicted as a series of concentric circles, with earth at the center of the universe and human beings as the apex of life on earth. It is easy to write a history of modern science as one of debunking and disposing of that theological picture. We learned that, far from being the center of the universe, earth was not even the center of its own solar system, which itself occupied a rather random and insignificant corner in a galaxy that itself was but one among, in Carl Sagan's fond phrase, billions and billions.

Darwin's dangerous idea of evolution by natural selection, especially as it fed into the so-called grand synthesis of natural selection and genetics, further debunked and decentered human beings from their self-appointed throne as the Crown of Creation. For this reason as much as anything else, it became the target of discontent. Miller is generous in his evaluation of those on the Intelligent Design side of the debate (some would say too generous.) Unlike many others on his side of the debate, he does not encounter the anti-evolutionary impulses of these people as stemming from simple ignorance of science, misguided loyalties to religion or other institutions, and certainly not to outright malevolence. He credits the deeply humanistic urge that leaves people dissatisfied with an outcome that, to their way of thinking, makes human values, morals and ethics seem like nothing more than arbitrary preferences, to be adjudicated mainly by raw power dynamics on every level. Miller sees his task here as demonstrating that one can be fully committed to the science of evolutionary biology, even while upholding the sanctity of our highest values, mores and ethics in human society.

Much of this book is taken up with popularized lectures in biology, in which Miller clarifies for the reader what is meant in the specialized context of academic discussion by key terms and concepts, as well as the history of those terms and concepts in the course of the last 150 years or so of scientific discovery. Here Miller does a fine job not only of educating the reader, but also conveying his own sense of the transcending mysteries of his subject. It is clear that much of the same "religious" sense that some gain from contemplation of God, or an Intelligent Designer, Miller obtains from contemplation of the wonders of life as seen through the lenses of biological science. These chapters are certainly worth reading for any educated person who is interested in keeping abreast of developments in biology and related sciences. It is not these chapters, however, that earn a review for this book in this particular journal, which is concerned with public social policy.

For readers of this journal, direct interests are perked in the later chapters, as Miller begins to outline his understanding of the "hidden meaning" contained in the story of evolution. While I would prefer to do otherwise, I know there is no way to present Miller's thesis in short book review form without running it over roughshod and draining it of its beauty, nuance and even romance. With that *caveat* in mind, therefore, following is the gist of what I understand Miller to be saying.

The evolutionary process is totalistic, certainly for life on this planet and, as far as we can tell, for life anywhere else in this universe. Attempts to locate sources for life "outside" of the evolutionary process are at best redundant. They add nothing to our knowledge base. This is true even for the more chastened ID proponents, who confine their efforts mainly to highly advanced and specific steps in the evolutionary process, such as the advent of human consciousness. Miller is sympathetic with their motivations, but in the end finds their actual results to be very inferior to those who look at the same evidence following the more standard Darwinian frame of reference.

Where Miller really moves the discussion forward is in his suggestion that while the origins of human consciousness are best understood as situated completely within the evolutionary process, nonetheless we are left with the fact that in human consciousness, the evolutionary process has produced something very unique and astounding, namely, an entity that is able

to comprehend and describe the very forces through which it emerged. This, in turn, and for the first and only time so far as we know, has equipped our species, at least potentially, with the tools it needs to free itself from simple undirected and passive undergoing of the evolutionary process. We are able, if we so choose, to take in hand our knowledge of the forces that work on us through the evolutionary process and employ those forces to move our species actively toward ends that we desire.

In a very real sense, if I understand him correctly, Miller is describing here a sort of "second leap forward" in evolution. The first leap forward came when human ability to think abstractly freed us from strictly passive adaptation to the existing environment (by imagining environments that do not occur naturally—say, a controlled fire within a cave—and then acting to create such environments). As I read Miller, he is suggesting that by understanding the basic forces working on us in the evolutionary process, we stand at the gates of a similar leap forward, another great step in harnessing those forces for human betterment.

Miller's view is very much in line with the Enlightenment vision that by careful application of acquired knowledge, our species has at least the possibility of creating true progress and social advancement. This is the aspect of Miller's book that is interesting for readers of this journal, who have been bombarded for the past few decades by neoliberal exaltation of market forces, and subsequent devaluation of intentional social intervention policies, as the only true key to human betterment. If we think of market forces as a stand-in for survival-of-the-fittest evolutionary forces (and we need *a lot more investigation* into how those two ideologies have fed on each other mutually in recent time) then Miller's book gives us good suggestions for how we might again connect the idea of true human progress with active intervention in places now largely left to work themselves out through market forces.

All of this said, I cannot leave this review without the self-indulgence of expressing my own hesitations about some of Miller's conclusions. The first hesitation is philosophical, namely, the idea that having knowledge of the process that have produced us somehow gives us power over that process itself. Philip K. Dick and others have examined this proposition in ways much more engaging than I can here. Suffice to say that the Freudian idea that insight equals remedy is an iffy sort of

proposition, and is fundamentally grounded in the concept of a *free will* that itself stands outside of the evolutionary process. Is it not the case, then, that Miller has not so much *solved* the dilemma of requiring some kind of force or power outside of the evolutionary process to maintain his humanism as it is that he has simply *relocated* that power from God or and Intelligent Designer to human free will?

My second hesitation is that Miller's approach may be susceptible to the same flaw from which much of Enlightenment-based social thought suffers, namely, that it too easily assumes we know a lot more than we actually know. Therefore, we fill in the gaps of our knowledge, if we see them at all, with what later come to be seen as the ruling prejudices and commonplaces of the time. The deconstructionist criticism of Enlightenment thinking may be smugly overblown in its own right, yet it did point to a problem we of the educated classes have had, namely, a sort of willfully blind imperialism in the way we assume that the norms of our class and culture represent universal truths. I am not sure Miller's approach to what sets our species apart takes that danger adequately to heart. I hope I am wrong, however.

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