

Is Egalitarianism Part of Human Nature?

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A Review of Christopher Boehm's *Hierarchy in the Forest – the Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1999, xi+292 pages, ISBN 0-674-39031-8)

Are human beings by nature nice? If so, then society is responsible for the nastiness we exhibit. Alternatively, perhaps human beings are by nature nasty. If so, then society is responsible for whatever niceness we manage to acquire. Either we are born nice and society corrupts our noble nature, or we are born nasty and society saves us from bestiality. The question is which.

In this important new book, the anthropologist and primatologist Christopher Boehm rejects both of these monolithic, but influential, views of human nature. Boehm's idea is that human nature is fundamentally ambivalent and contradictory – our impulses are a mixture of selfishness *and* altruism, of nastiness *and* niceness. The idea that nature contributes just one of these, with nurture contributing the other, should, Boehm thinks, be deposited on the rubbish heap of history.

The nature/nurture dichotomy is outmoded – this is more a presupposition of Boehm's book than a point he feels the need to labor. *Hierarchy in the Forest* is about human nature, but Boehm approaches this topic without essentialist preconceptions. The heart of his argument is *historical*. Boehm's hypothesis is that a fundamental event in our ancestral past was the evolution of egalitarian political arrangements. The ancestors we share with chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas had a rigid dominance hierarchy; after our lineage split off from theirs, and by about 100,000 years ago, human groups were egalitarian, at least in the way that males treated each other; within the family, males may have lorded it over females, but outside the family, males treated other males as equals among equals. The gross inequality among males that subsequently developed in many more recent human societies was a departure from this ancestral condition.

Judging from contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, Boehm infers that the egalitarian groups in our ancestral past featured individual autonomy, a leveling of economic inequality, generosity, and decision making by consensus, with leaders executing the general will, not imposing their will on others. The rank and file, consisting of both men and women, held leaders in check by a series of sanctions of increasing seriousness. There was gossip, ridicule, ostracism, and, finally, execution. If contemporary egalitarian groups are any guide, the more extreme measures on this list were rarely employed, the threat of counter-measures usually being a sufficient deterrent. Still, there is and was feuding within groups and fighting between groups; the latter sometimes took the form of brief skirmishes, but at other times the murder of one group by another was systematic and total. Egalitarianism promotes and is fostered by group-identification, but the resulting cooperation of group members with each other involves

being nice to group members and *not* being nice (indeed, at times being positively nasty) to members of other groups. When our ancestors treated others as equals among equals, these others were members of their own group; egalitarianism was tribal, not universalistic.

How does Boehm defend his historical hypothesis, that egalitarianism was a novelty that appeared in human evolution? He draws this inference about the past from two sets of observations concerning the present. Contemporary chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas have hierarchical social arrangements, while contemporary nomadic hunter-gatherer societies are egalitarian. The fact that present day apes are hierarchical suggests that the most recent common ancestor we share with them was probably hierarchical. And the fact that contemporary nomadic hunter-gatherer societies are very distantly related to each other suggests that the egalitarianism they all exhibit was probably also a characteristic of early human groups. This type of “triangulating argument” is standard in evolutionary biology. Even though not all birds fly, we can infer, by a similar line of reasoning, that flight was a novelty that appeared in the early days of avian evolution.

If these early human societies were egalitarian, what is the explanation of this feature? This question can be posed at two levels. One can ask what psychological mechanisms made social groups egalitarian. And one can ask what evolutionary processes led egalitarianism to emerge. This distinction -- between *proximate* and *distal* explanations -- is standard in evolutionary biology. Why do sunflowers turn towards the sun? This could be a question about the proximate mechanisms inside individual sunflowers, or it could be a request for information about why phototropism (and its attendant proximate mechanisms) evolved.

Boehm discusses why early hunter-gatherer groups were egalitarian mainly by addressing the first question, the one about proximate mechanisms. His idea is not that human beings suddenly developed a saintly and selfless dedication to others. Rather, his Hobbesian hypothesis is that our ancestors wanted to dominate others, but also wanted not to be dominated themselves. Why should this pair of desires give rise to egalitarianism? The reason is that language, enhanced cognitive abilities, and weaponry shifted the balance of power in favor of the rank and file. They were able to band together to put would-be despotic upstarts in their place. A strong ape can dominate his weaker group-mates, but a strong man is less able to do so, if his group-mates have the will to resist, a cooperative plan to coordinate their resistance, and weapons. Egalitarianism emerged and was preserved because of power *conflicts*, not because of the *absence* of conflict. This last point explains a puzzling feature of the book’s title. How can the existence of egalitarianism involve a hierarchy? The answer is that egalitarianism, for Boehm, is an “inverted” hierarchy – a “reverse dominance hierarchy.” There are power inequalities among individuals, but coalitions of the less powerful set limits on the vaulting ambition of those with more power.

Boehm has less to say about the evolutionary forces that led egalitarianism to emerge. One possibility is the mechanism of *group selection*. Did groups in which egalitarianism and mutual aid were the order of the day survive better and found more daughter groups than groups in which the strong dominated the weak? Another possibility is an explanation in terms of individual advantage – perhaps egalitarianism was a consequence of individuals’ maximizing

their fitness. Individuals in the rank and file saw that they would be better off if they formed coalitions that enforce equality. A third possibility is that group- and individual-selection both helped egalitarianism to evolve. Boehm does not say much about these evolutionary issues. What he does argue at some length is that group selection became an important force in human evolution *after* egalitarianism was established. At this later stage, egalitarian groups competed with each other, with the result that altruism and morality developed in human societies.

Boehm's book therefore can be located within an on-going controversy in evolutionary biology. In the 1960's, biologists almost universally rejected the idea that adaptations evolve because they benefit the group; this idea was thought to be not just factually mistaken, but wrong-headed, unscientific, a product of wishful thinking. The notion that group adaptation is a colossal blunder was popularized by Richard Dawkins in his well-known book, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976). Dawkins summarized the consensus then in place that adaptations evolve because they benefit genes, not because they benefit groups. This point of view still has considerable influence, but beginning in the 1970's, there has been a renaissance of group-selection thinking, more visible in North America than in the UK. David Sloan Wilson and I summarize and defend this new position, which we call *multi-level selection theory*, in our book *Unto Others – the Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1998). Our idea is not that *all* traits evolve *solely* by the process of group selection, but that the evolution of *some* traits is *influenced* by group selection. The goal of multi-level selection theory is not to replace genic selectionism with another monolithic theory. Multi-level selection theory is pluralistic.

Although Boehm does not say much about why egalitarianism evolved, I want to suggest that the answer is not to be found in the idea of individual selection. It may be true that individuals in the rank and file do better when there is egalitarianism than they do when there is domination from above, but that is not to the point. The relevant fact to consider is that the rank and file face a *free-rider problem*. What is to prevent one individual in the rank and file from gaining the benefits of there being a coalition without paying the cost of working on its behalf? The free rider says, "let *others* challenge and tame power-hungry leaders. If they succeed, I benefit without paying the cost. And if they do not, I lose nothing." Individual selection favors these free-riders over the other members of the rank and file who take the risks of enforcing egalitarianism. Group selection is needed to explain the evolution of such coalitions.

It might be replied that coalitions can solve the free-rider problem by punishing free-riders. This is the suggestion that the rule followed by members of the coalition has two parts – "punish would-be despots *and* punish those who do not help punish would-be despots." This solves the problem of those free-riders who do not help reign in despots; they now have a selfish incentive to do so. However, a new free-rider problem arises in its stead. What is to prevent someone from declining to punish those who fail to punish would-be despots? The two-fold commandment that I formulated does not impose a sanction on these free-riders, so a third clause needs to be added. But once it is added, a further sort of free-rider problem pops into existence. This argument may seem like a logical trick, but, in fact, it points to something fundamental about cooperation. Coalitions provide public goods (the suppression of despots) and people who helps create a public good (for example, by punishing despots or by punishing

those who fail to punish despots) themselves provide public goods. The free-rider problem is *inherent* in the phenomenon of public goods. It cannot be solved purely in terms of individual advantage. This is why, in an evolutionary context, group selection must be invoked.

Given how controversial the idea of group selection remains, it is understandable that Boehm chose not to embrace the idea of group selection in explaining the emergence of egalitarianism. It isn't that he explicitly endorses the individualistic alternative. Rather, the matter is left somewhat up in the air. I therefore offer these remarks about egalitarianism as a friendly amendment.

Marx once warned that the concept of human nature is often misused; the mistake is to think that an historically contingent feature of a contemporary society constitutes the way human societies have always been, and must always remain. Boehm's book puts flesh on this abstract admonition. The reader learns about power relationships in a variety of societies, including nomadic and sedentary hunter-gatherers, tribes, big-man societies, chiefdoms, and kingdoms. Boehm also provides a detailed portrait of the different forms of group life exhibited by our closest primate relatives. Although Boehm's goal is to identify features of human nature, he pays considerable attention to the facts of variation.

Boehm's book is "biological" in the broadest sense, but is it an example of "biological determinism?" That is, does Boehm assume that human mind, culture, and behavior are determined by the genes we have? Well, the word "determined" is too strong; Boehm does not deny the truism that all traits -- of human beings and of other species as well -- are joint consequences of genes and environment. Genes don't *determine* traits; at the most, they *influence* them. So let us rephrase the question -- does Boehm tell his story in such a way that genes are assigned a causal role in the explanation of mind, culture, and behavior?

Boehm does think that the transition from hierarchy to egalitarianism in early human evolution involved genetic changes. Egalitarianism emerged, according to Boehm, in part because of human being's new-found linguistic and cognitive abilities, and these latter involved genetic changes. However, the genes that evolved did not force all subsequent human societies to remain egalitarian. Boehm's subject is the emergence of egalitarianism, not egalitarianism's subsequent displacement, but it is useful to consider that second event to clarify the role that genes play in the story he tells. The reason contemporary hunter-gatherer societies are egalitarian while other contemporary societies are despotic is not that the people in the two groups have different genes. Boehm's picture is that the novel genes that evolved early in our lineage are found in all contemporary groups, whether they are egalitarian or despotic. But this means that these genes cannot have the deterministic consequence that all human groups will be egalitarian. These genes make egalitarianism *possible*, not *inevitable*. They replaced a set of older genes, found in the ancestors we share with apes, that excluded egalitarianism as a genuine possibility. Boehm's inquiry into human nature concerns what is possible for human beings. Our genes influence what is possible for us. But genes don't force human societies to be despotic or egalitarian.

Just as Boehm does not discuss why egalitarianism in early human societies gave way to

so much despotism, he also does not have much to say about how contemporary societies might move in the direction of greater egalitarianism. Must we return to the small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers to do this? And how can we reduce inequalities between the sexes? Boehm does report that the degree to which males dominate females varies considerably among contemporary hunter-gatherer groups, and there is at least one such society in which males and females are equals, the Agta people in the Philippines. Agta women hunt dangerous animals and this may help explain their equal standing; meat sharing is standard in hunter-gatherer groups and successful hunters enjoy prestige and political ascendancy. It would have been interesting had Boehm addressed questions about what is possible in the human future, but it would be wrong to complain that Boehm should have written a different book. Boehm's achievement is already considerable – by connecting detailed anthropological and primatological evidence, he develops a new picture of our ancestral past, and of our biological potential.

I imagine that many readers of this journal are allergic to the idea that evolution has anything interesting to say about human mind and culture. This allergy may be due to the impression that biological accounts inevitably defend the idea that inequality and exploitation are “in our genes,” an unalterable given. But the impression is mistaken. True, some biologists have taken this line. But what some biologists have done heretofore does not settle forever what biology as a discipline must be like. For those wishing to overcome their allergies, Boehm's book provides a useful (as well as enjoyable) therapy.