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GUEST COLUMNIST

Why Darwinism Isn't Depressing

By **ROBERT WRIGHT**

Scientists have discovered that love is truth.

Granted, no scientist has put it quite like that. In fact, when scientists talk about love — the neurochemistry, the evolutionary origins — they make it sound unlovely.

More broadly, our growing grasp of the biology behind our thoughts and feelings has some people downhearted. One commentator recently acknowledged the ascendancy of the Darwinian paradigm with a sigh: “Evolution doesn't really lead to anything outside itself.”

Cheer up! Despair is a plausible response to news that our loftiest feelings boil down to genetic self-interest, but genetic self-interest actually turns out to be our salvation. The selfishness of our genes gave us the illuminating power of love and put us on the path to a kind of transcendence.

Before hiking to the peak, let's pause for some sobering concessions. Yes, love is physically mediated, a product of biochemistry. (Why this would surprise anyone familiar with alcohol and coffee is something that has long baffled scientists.) And, yes, the biochemistry was built by natural selection. Like it or not, we are survival machines.

But survival machines are unfairly maligned. The name suggests, well, machines devoted to their survival. In truth, though, natural selection builds machines devoted ultimately to the survival of their genes, not themselves.

Hence love. A love-impelled grandparent sacrifices her life to save a child's life. Too bad for the grandparent, but mission accomplished for the love genes: they've kept copies of themselves alive in a vibrant vehicle that was otherwise doomed, and all they've lost is a vehicle that, frankly, didn't have the world's most auspicious odometer anyway. Love of offspring (and siblings) is your genes' way of getting you to serve their agenda.

Feel manipulated? Don't worry — we get the last laugh.

Genes are just dopey little particles, devoid of consciousness. We, in contrast, can perceive the world. And how! Thanks to love, we see beyond our selves and into the selves around us.

A thought experiment: Suppose you are a parent and you (a) watch someone else's toddler misbehave and then (b) watch your own toddler do the same. Your predicted reactions, respectively, are: (a) “What a brat!” and (b) “That's what happens when she skips her nap.”

Now (b) is often a correct explanation, whereas (a) — the “brat” reaction — isn't even an explanation. Thus does love lead to truth. So, too, when a parent sees her child show off and senses that the grandstanding is grounded in insecurity. That's an often valid explanation — unlike, say, “My neighbor's kid is such a showoff” — and brings

insight into human nature.

Yes, yes, love can warp your perception, too. Still, there is an apprehension of the other — an empathetic understanding — that is at least humanly possible, and it would never have gotten off the ground had love not emerged on this planet as a direct result of Darwinian logic.

Some people, on hearing this, remain stubbornly ungrateful. They hate the arbitrariness of it all. You mean I love my child just because she's got my genes? So my "appreciation" of her "specialness" is an illusion?

Exactly! If you'd married someone else, there would be a different child you considered special — and if you then spotted the child that is now yours on the street, you'd consider her a brat. (And, frankly ... but I digress.)

O.K., so your child isn't special. This doesn't have to mean she's not worthy of your love. It could mean instead that other people's kids are worthy of your love. But it has to mean one or the other. And — especially given that love can bring truth — isn't it better to expand love's scope than to narrow it?

I'm a realist. I don't expect you to get all mushy about the kid next door. But if you carry into your everyday encounters an awareness that empathetic understanding makes sense, that's progress.

Transcending the arbitrary narrowness of our empathy isn't guaranteed by nature. (Why do you think they call it transcendence?) But nature has given us the tools — not just the empathy, but the brains to figure out how evolution works, and thus to see that the narrowness is arbitrary.

So evolution has led to something outside itself — to the brink of a larger, more widely illuminating love, maybe even to a glimpse of moral truth. What's not to like?

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