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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Age of Darwin

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Jerusalem

Standing on a hill in East Jerusalem, amid the clash of religious and political orthodoxies, stands a musty old museum devoted to human progress. When you walk into the Rockefeller Museum with its old-fashioned display cases crowded with ancient pottery shards and oil lamps, you can begin by looking at the stone tools of early man. Then you proceed room by room through the invention of agriculture and cities, winding up finally with the statues and reliquaries of the medieval era.

What you're really looking at is a philosophy of history. The museum was set up in 1938, when scholars still spoke confidently of mankind's upward march from primitive culture to higher civilization. History is portrayed here as a great, unified story, with crucial pivot moments when humanity leapt forward — when people first buried their dead, when they moved from animistic faiths to polytheism, when they learned to cultivate reason and philosophy.

These days, historians hate those kinds of unifying grand narratives, and the idea that history is a march of progress upward to the present. Yet I have to confess, I loved the Rockefeller Museum. Though it's dense and dry, it rekindled the University of Chicago flame that lingers in every graduate's soul and got me thinking all sorts of Big Thoughts. I also had the sensation — which I used to get during those sweeping old Western Civ courses — of seeing my own time from the outside, from the vantage point of some ancient spot.

And it occurred to me that while we postmoderns say we detest all-explaining narratives, in fact a newish grand narrative has crept upon us willy-nilly and is now all around. Once the Bible shaped all conversation, then Marx, then Freud, but today Darwin is everywhere.

Scarcely a month goes by when Time or Newsweek doesn't have a cover article on how our genes shape everything from our exercise habits to our moods. Science sections are filled with articles on how brain structure influences things like lust and learning. Neuroscientists debate the existence of God on the best-seller lists, while evolutionary theory reshapes psychology, dieting and literary criticism. Confident and exhilarated, evolutionary theorists believe they have a universal framework to explain human behavior.

Creationists reject the whole business, but they're like the Greeks who still worshiped Athena while Plato and Aristotle practiced philosophy. The people who set the cultural tone today have coalesced around a shared understanding of humanity and its history that would have astonished people in earlier epochs.

According to this view, human beings, like all other creatures, are machines for passing along genetic code. We are driven primarily by a desire to perpetuate ourselves and our species.

The logic of evolution explains why people vie for status, form groups, fall in love and cherish their young. It holds that most everything that exists does so for a purpose. If some trait, like emotion, can cause big problems, then it must also provide bigger benefits, because nature will not expend energy on things that don't enhance the chance of survival.

Human beings, in our current understanding, are jerry-built creatures, in which new, sophisticated faculties are piled on top of primitive earlier ones. Our genes were formed during the vast stretches when people were hunters and gatherers, and we are now only semi-adapted to the age of nuclear weapons and fast food. Furthermore, reason is not separate from emotion and the soul cannot be detached from the electrical and chemical pulses of the body. There isn't even a single seat of authority in the brain. The mind emerges (somehow) from a complex light show of neural firings without a center or executive. We are tools of mental processes we are not even aware of.

The cosmologies of the societies represented in the Rockefeller Museum looked up toward the transcendent. Their descendants still fight over sacred spots like the Holy of Holies a short walk away. But the evolutionary society is built low to the ground. God may exist and may have set the process in motion, but he's not active. Evolution doesn't really lead to anything outside itself. Individuals are predisposed not by innate sinfulness or virtue, but by the epigenetic rules encoded in their cells.

Looking at contemporary America from here in Jerusalem and from the ancient past, it's clear we're not a postmodern society anymore. We have a grand narrative that explains behavior and gives shape to history. We have a central cosmology to embrace, argue with or unconsciously submit to.

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