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The nature of the geek (2009)

— All right — all right — (he said; yielding for a moment, if only for the sake of nostalgia, to an argument made a thousand times in a haze of bong smoke in the dorm rooms of the late Sixties) — suppose I grant it: that a philosophy which attends only to futile speculation about the nature and origin of the universe is ultimately sterile, divorced from real life, from the vital issues of survival — speaks not to the human condition, tugs not on the tattered garment of Dasein, stains not its shorts with the fragrant Truth of Being — I can relate to that. I am prepared to say, Fuck these frivolities that distract us from the issues that should command our attention. — And ask instead about something really fundamental to the human condition: Who *is* the geek? And why can't he get laid?

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As usual in the analysis of human behavior, it is best to ignore everything that has ever been said about it and start over from first principles. — These come, of course, from evolutionary biology. — And therefore —

Theoreticians have debated the identity of the unit selected by evolution, whether (as traditionally conceived) the individual organism, groups of them, genes themselves, whatever.¹ But it seems obvious that selection goes on at many levels at once; intuition is thrown off by the familiar tendency to insist on rigid ontological distinctions — “no, *individuals* are the *real* entities”² — because the optimization problem in question applies to a function defined not on a

¹ See, for instance, Chapter 8 of Stephen Jay Gould's *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.]

² In another context this is Margaret Thatcher's famous insistence that “*society* does not exist.” How often have I wished this really were the case.

single space, but a product of them; which in practice can be very complicated.

Thus though if we analyze fitness as a function of the individual representative of a species alone, in relation to a fixed environment, it is mysterious how members of distinct species can become codependent: x is an A, y is a B, the fitness functions for x and y are independently evaluated, what relation can there be between ants and aphids, sharks and remoras, me and the immense population of bacteria with whom I cohabit?³ But what this argument misses is that the environment of the individual organism is not static but dynamic, and once life has established itself successfully — certainly after things begin eating one another — the first-order approximation is no longer valid, and the survival of the individual for the most part depends on its interactions with other living creatures. — Moreover it is easy to see that the real question here is not whether any particular individual survives, but whether the population of a species increases; and then more generally whether an ecological unit of mutually interdependent populations achieves a dynamic equilibrium that allows its constituent subpopulations to expand.

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The mutual dependence of even two species can be quite complex, as can be seen from the stock example of nonlinearity in the relations of populations of predator and prey, which can fluctuate unpredictably. And that analysis doesn't even take evolution into account: if predators get faster and stronger, they eliminate their food supply more rapidly; they will need to develop genes to restrain their behavior. (We have reached a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of this paradox at present: the human species has become so successful that it threatens to exterminate practically everything else on the planet.)

³ It is thought that the human microbiome may contain as many as ten times as many cells as belong to the body itself, incorporating 10,000 species.

Within a species, even in the simplest possible case — and even setting aside the obvious point that in sexual reproduction an individual requires *another* individual to be able to breed — it is clear that the chances of survival in a hostile environment for each of a pair of individuals are (usually)⁴ better if they cooperate than if they do not; the commonplace expression “to have another’s back” comes to mind. — Quite handy if you are surrounded by wolves.

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What is obvious about *Homo sapiens* specifically — traditional Darwinian wisdom notwithstanding — is that humans aren’t particularly large, fast, or strong; this is not what makes them the apex predators of the biosphere. Rather they are intelligent: they have large brains which can construct complex representations⁵ of the world around them; and also, critically, have developed language,⁶ a means of communication among them. — Why is that useful? — because the principle of the division of labor, which Adam Smith recognized as the foundation of economics, has a more general biological interpretation, and the capabilities of the individual are enormously amplified if he can coordinate his actions with other members of his species; there is a

⁴ Cue the game theorists.

⁵ “Representation” is taken in a very general sense; the sense in which, e.g., Jackson Pollock might have been considered to be painting landscapes.

⁶ “Language” is a trifle too narrow, symbolic communication would also encompass, e.g., mime and the sketching of maps, for that matter the silent cinema as theorized by Griffith and Eisenstein — one can easily tell oneself a little story about primitive hunters stalking a herd of antelope, coordinating their actions by signs and gestures without a common spoken language — indeed war parties advancing in silence still do something of the kind. — The basic principle is that not only can we form complex pictures of reality, we can convey them to one another. *A priori* this might not be necessary.

straightforward path of generalization from the wolf pack⁷ through Cro-Magnons hunting the woolly mammoth to the million-worker supply chain of Apple Computer.

What this means is that the unit of survival is not the individual *per se*, but something more like the hunting party plus support staff: the extended family, or tribe; or corporation, or city-state — some kind of social unit, historically grounded in a gene pool. And as communications improve (as they have done steadily for the past hundred thousand years) the units grow larger and more complex.

These are not exactly metaorganisms, but share some of the same characteristics: for instance the principle of division of labor applied to the colonies of cells that make up individual organisms results in cell differentiation, and something similar happens in human populations: there are mechanisms of specialization that produce different kinds of people, each has a sort of ecological niche that it fills, and the selection mechanisms that would otherwise eliminate individual varieties in favor of some generic optimum are at least partially suppressed. (You have to think there must be something like the genetic regulatory networks that switch genes on and off in functional groups, but an equivalent description of the mechanism is lacking.)

So Hobbes with his Leviathan was not exactly right, but he was not completely wrong, either.

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How does this apply to the original question? — Put simply, in some mythical state of nature we might imagine that the fitness of the

⁷ Incidentally the codependence of wolves with men which led to their domestication seems likely to have come about because of the similarity of their evolutionary strategies; and began, apparently, with the discovery that communication was possible not only within but between species, permitting a kind of merger of their packs. (There is even speculation that this discovery was the decisive advantage in the competition of Cro-Magnon with Neanderthal, though it is difficult to see how the hypothesis can be tested.)

individual male would depend upon his capabilities as a hunter: strength, speed, acuity of vision. But within the framework of society his fitness is determined by his ability to *get other people to hunt for him*. This makes all the difference in the world.

Once the parameters of the social matrix have been established — once Mrs. Thatcher has been refuted — the object is not so much to be strong and fast and good at killing antelope — though this is an important part of the theatrics; never mind that figuring out where and when to find the quarry and how to make the spears was undoubtedly the work of some feckless dweeb who will never be acknowledged (and will be fed with the dogs, on scraps and leavings) — the object is to *organize* the hunt, and take credit for it; to put your brand upon the proceedings, rent out the spears, and collect thirty-five percent while you sit on your ass in front of the home fire with Hammer cave girls picking the lice out of your scalp.

Fitness to survive is a function of the ability to exert power over one's environment. And this means something entirely different in a social context than it does in a mythical state of nature. It means being able to exert power over other people.

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So, like Butch Cassidy, we keep on thinking because that's what we're good at. But what do we think about?

Not (for the most part) about how to prove the Pythagorean theorem, or how to construct a system of levers/ropes/pulleys to drag a boat over a mountain (and then film it), or how to construct melodic lines in counterpoint. Our attention, rather, is fixed upon the most significant part of our environment, the greatest source of danger and opportunity, what has — save for the occasional tidal wave, earthquake, or bear attack — the largest causal impact upon our well-being. And of course that is other human beings.

Thus almost all of the time we aren't trying to survive in a hostile physical environment. We are trying to survive in an infinitely more hazardous human society.

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The failure to recognize this creates misconceptions about the nature and uses of intelligence. It is occasionally the fashion, for instance, to talk about so-called emotional intelligence: the ability to assess the moods and desires of other people, attune oneself to their rhythms, turn them to our advantage. — As if this were some trivial corollary of one's mental capacities. — But for almost all people, almost all of the time, this *is* intelligence; this is all their brains are for.

Thus the educational experience — going to school — is largely a process of socialization. For almost all students reading and writing and arithmetic are much less significant than learning to deal with one another: how to interact face to face, how to gain allies, form networks, navigate hierarchies, resolve conflicts in such a way as to maximize personal advantage.

Because it is not simply true that “the proper study of mankind is man”; the mass of mankind studies very little else.

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In the philosophical analysis of language, at least before the later Wittgenstein, it was taken for granted that the purpose of language was to state (scientific) facts, that the natural questions to ask about statements were semantic ones about truth and falsehood, that the natural measure of a sentence was *adequatio rei et intellectus*, and so on.

As with many philosophical theories, this missed the point entirely. People talk to *other* people; not simply to exchange information, but to

satisfy the instinctive need to form connections — to exchange gossip, tell stories — move, influence, direct.

And that means that the principal use of language is not to convey factual information — to describe, to catalogue, to explain — but to persuade, to manipulate. The principal use of language is to bullshit.

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Thus the classic self-improvement manual of the go-getter era — the veritable blueprint for success — was titled *How To Win Friends And Influence People*. (And not, for instance, *How To Invent Radio and Television* or *How To Create The Polio Vaccine*.)

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So to a reasonable first approximation we can imagine the human species as a sort of ball,⁸ in which most individuals lie in the interior, and have contact only with one another. But the ball, the species, does have to have a surface, an interface with the external world, more or less as an animal has to have a skin. The individuals who interact with reality directly, like epidermal cells, will be adapted to this task. They will be less adept at interacting with the interior, since that is not their function within the human ecology.

And who are these? of course, they are the geeks.

⁸ There are any number of problems with this picture, including oversimplifying the topology of the relevant space, high finite if not infinite dimension, connections between individuals and between individuals and the environment are dynamic not static — etc., etc. But as a thumbnail description it isn't bad.

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From *within* the sphere the natural assumption is that it has no boundary, that there is no exterior. In that case indeed the Gulf War did not take place.

But from *without* — well; the geek knows better.

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It follows practically by definition that geeks are socially awkward: more interested in what they are talking about than what they look like saying it, more concerned with what they're doing than what they're wearing — more committed to understanding how *things* work than how *people* work. Their attention is directed outward, not inward. They all have that thousand-yard stare. They are focussed on matters beyond the range of normal vision.

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Obviously everyone has some interfaces with reality: everyone has to learn to walk, to talk, to read a little, to drive well enough to navigate the freeway in traffic, to turn the laptop on and surf for porn. But there is a qualitative difference between someone who does so only *en passant*, as a means to some end defined solely by its social value, and someone who does so as an end in itself, to engage things on their own terms — someone who wants to know *why* and *how*; someone who wants to know *how things work*. — Not someone who only asks *what good is it?* or *what's in it for me?*

And thus there are the people who use the phones, and the people who create them; the people who look at pictures, and the people who paint them; the people who whistle tunes, and the people who write them.

Wells exaggerated slightly when he suggested these might as well be different species.⁹ Because they *can* interbreed. Though of course that isn't likely.

Because what is the basis for sexual attraction? Darwin argued that when females were able to choose, they were attracted to the most powerful males, those best suited to provide for children.

In a state of nature these might be the strongest and the fastest, but in a tribal context, they are the ones with wealth, power, property, authority, the ability to command. — Or — since age is also a relevant factor — the *potential* for attaining a position of wealth and power; for which the best indicator is an ability to stand out, to be the center of attention. — These are not the qualities of geeks. These are the qualities that facilitate functioning within the social matrix, not the qualities that enable one to see beyond it, and deal with reality. — Nobody wants to hear about reality; young women on the make least of all.

And that's why geeks can't get laid.

(Thank you, I'll be here all week.)

⁹ He also exaggerated when he characterized us as half-men confined to the catacombs. — Though, wait a minute: killing the upper classes for meat? he may have been onto something there.... .