

## EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AS THE CONTEMPORARY MYTH

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**Abstract:** Science or myth? This question contains the basic problem, arising from the analysis of evolutionary psychology. The problem in question refers to the status of the interpretations of reality promoted by the evolutionists, in particular in reference to the human being. This article is an attempt to present an argument for the following thesis: firstly, that there are no scientific criteria for evaluating hypotheses in evolutionary psychology; and secondly that the theses of the discipline contain certain cultural contents – which until present times were carried by myth.

This article is an attempt to present an argument for the following thesis: firstly, that there are no scientific criteria for evaluating hypotheses in evolutionary psychology; and secondly that the theses of the discipline contain certain cultural contents – which until present times were carried by myth. The views of Robert Wright will be emphasized. This selection may invite the objection that although Wright is one of the forerunners of the sociobiological approach, his ideas are no longer fully up to date. However, there are two arguments supporting this choice. Firstly, one may identify the interpretative model of the sociobiological trend on the basis of his works. Secondly, his books are still influential among readers, at least in Poland, especially in relation to issues to do with the higher mental functions. It is important to mention such works as: *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* or *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*.

The argument will begin with a short characterization of the evolutionary concept of the human being against the background of other anthropological positions.

Various answers have been provided in the history of human thought to the question concerning human nature and with respect to the interpretation of human behavior. A presentation of this wide spectrum of opinions would greatly exceed the framework of this study. However, it is worth while to at least indicate some co-existing traditions of interpretation of the human phenomenon, so that they might serve as a background for a presentation the concept of homo sapiens insofar as it has a place at the basis of evolutionary psychology.

Philosophical conceptions of human nature include pluralistic conceptions. These conceptions, the history of which begins with the ancient gno-sis<sup>10</sup>, reach their peak in Cartesian dualism<sup>11</sup>. We should also mention the various monistic approaches, in their different materialistic or spiritualistic modifications. Holistic conceptions of the human being also play a significant role. The theories of P. Teilhard de Chardine are one of the examples of a multi-plane interpretation<sup>12</sup>. There are also some Polish versions of the holistic approach to reality, e.g. the panpsychosomatism of Gawecki<sup>13</sup>.

Throughout the ages psychological conceptions have also arisen which assume different visions of the human being. For example, the view that man is totally determined by psycho-physical factors has been propagated. Determinism was fully adopted in e.g. classic psychoanalysis and in behaviorism. Psychology also includes nondeterministic conceptions, such as e.g. the logotherapy of V.E. Frankl. In logotherapy, the world of objective values internalized by the patient is a non-deterministic factor. The world of values, when discovered, becomes a person's sense of life. Because of such a discovery the individual is capable of transcending himself/herself<sup>14</sup>.

The human being may also be described in a social perspective. In this context, on the one hand, man appears in all his racial and cultural variability, and on the other hand as the one can be described as an individual<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> See: H. Jonas, *Religia gnozy*, Kraków 1994, 343; K. Rudolph, *Gnoza*, Kraków 1995, 59-60

<sup>11</sup> See: R. Descartes, *Medytacje o pierwszej filozofii*, Kraków 1958.

<sup>12</sup> See: Teilhard de Chardin, *Fenomen człowieka*, Warszawa 1993.

<sup>13</sup> See: D. Ługowska, *Rzeczywistość w panpsychosomatycznym obrazie świata prof. B. J. Gaweckiego*, *Studia Teologiczne* 13(1995), 357-361.

<sup>14</sup> See: V. E. Frankl, *Homo patiens*, Warszawa 1984, por.: V. E. Frankl, *Nieuświadomiony Bóg*, Warszawa 1978.

<sup>15</sup> See: R. Wright, *Moralne zwierze. Dlaczego jesteśmy tacy, a nie inni: psychologia ewolucyjna a życie codzienne*, Warszawa 2004.

One may widen the list of features assigned to human nature and point to numerous conceptions, in which the human being is described in many ways. But, as already mentioned, it is not our intention to present all these opinions in full detail or to attempt to systematize them. The aforementioned concepts have been selected randomly in some sense. Referring to them only serves the purpose of presenting them against the background of the socio-biological standpoint.

And so, in the wide spectrum of descriptions of the human being and interpretations of his behavior, evolutionary psychology does not seem to be a particularly original conception – it is one of the versions of reductionism. It is that reductionism which reduces the human being, together with all that determines the essence of his humanity, exclusively to the game of genes. To emphasize the nature of the theses of evolutionary psychology, an example will be presented from R. Wright's *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*.

For the evolutionist, love between individuals of opposite sex is the best example of the inter-species struggle for existence. The woman seeks a partner who will ensure the survival of her offspring – i.e. in the European cultural context, a well situated person. And the man seeks a partner who is sexually attractive, because this aspect of the woman is, according to R. Wright, the most the most adaptive, in an evolutionary sense. Although the man is predisposed to polygamy, and the woman to monogamy – in consideration of her contribution to the survival of the offspring, and also for adaptive reasons, in our culture the monogamous pattern became established. It happened this way because offspring brought up in a stable, permanent family have a better chance to survive and a better opportunity to live a high quality life, than those raised in an incomplete family. A mother's and father's love means nothing more than the protection of their gene pool. Alternately, children's love for their parents is a less preferred path of evolution. The offspring has only a part of the gene pool of a given parent, the other half being the genes of the other parent. Each part contains the full genetic information of both ancestors. In consequence, an offspring has the whole of their parents' genetic pool, thus the parents' „love” is much stronger than the „love” of their children. Brotherhood is characterized, on the one hand, by a struggle, of a kind, for goods related to parental care, and on the other – with protection of the common gene pool. And friendship becomes a sort of transaction in which survival in the struggle for existence is the merchandise. The interpretation of conscience is also interesting. According to the evolutionists, conscience is the sublimated remainder of

a reaction to the absence of altruism. Seen from a phylogenetic perspective, this reaction is the remainder of an evolutionary period in which pro-social activity was the adaptive activity. Life in a tribe required such skills. This component survived in the human psyche until today because the process of cultural change proved to be much faster than the process of biological evolution. Therefore, it seems that our conscience, sensitive to ethical and esthetic values is just a simple game of genes. Hence, on this view, every sign of higher emotionality is considered to be a form of the instinct of self-preservation.

In the contemporary works of sociobiologists these conclusions are not so readily made. However, R. Wright's way of thinking about the human being is characteristic of the socio-biological perspective.

A question arises: to what extent do the aforementioned hypotheses find their confirmation in empirical studies? Not all of them have reached the stage of operationalization and empirical verification, but research has been conducted seeking for the relationships between the behavioral signs of higher emotionality and genetic factors.

Let us proceed then to the results of the research referring to the basic structure of the human being from the view of psychology – the personality structure. The results of the research presented below constitute an attempt to answer the question regarding the extent to which the personality structure is hereditary. The tests which L.R. Goldberg performed on twins, by means of personality questionnaires in which the participants described themselves, proved that the heredity of personality features oscillates between 30% to 50%. A smaller percentage of convergence was found in the case of tests made on adopted children – their features correlated to a smaller extent with their parents' features. The highest percentage of convergence was reached in case of the heredity of neurotic features and extraversion: 40% to 50%<sup>16</sup>. In the case of so called romantic relationships, N. G. Waller and P. R. Shaker took into consideration the following variables: closeness and passion. In consequence, the correlations between the forms of romantic love and genetics have not been proven. The average correlations for monozygotic twins in six scales, e.g. friendship, passion, amounted to 0.26, and in the case of dizygotic twins 0.25. This measure of interrelation may be interpreted as correlation resulting from the common family background

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<sup>16</sup> L. R. Goldberg, *An alternative description of personality: The big five factor structure*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 59(1990), 1216-1229.

and not from the genetic factors<sup>17</sup>. In reference to the relation between parents and children, the tests performed also show various impacts of genetics on their relationships. So, for example, in the studies of D. C. Rowe, the impact of the parents' genes was observed in examination of the twins' bodies<sup>18</sup>. And the research on twins conducted by R. Plomina<sup>19</sup> indicates that there is a significant genetic impact on the types of contact occurring between parents, children, and friends. It should be emphasized that studies have also been made regarding the conditioning of sexual orientation with respect to the genetic constitution, as well as research on the relations between genetics and the sense of value, attitudes, interests, etc.

According to the aforementioned examples, the results of these studies are ambiguous. Therefore, one may assume that although the biological constitution of the human being with its genetic pool is a very important component in determining human characteristics, there is no doubt that the emphasis on total determination, in particular of the higher emotions, by the genetic sphere is an incorrect extrapolation.

However, it is difficult, while reading such works, to avoid the conclusion that the evolutionary hypotheses have their reflection in reality, to some extent. Isn't it the case that, according to popular belief, one should care more for blood relatives than for strangers? Don't we prefer, in our personal relationships, those who can ensure us a better quality of life – or even allow for survival? Isn't it the case that the evolutionary psychologists simply point to the brutal reality of our species, or maybe rather to the reality of contemporary culture? Therefore, what aspect of reality is disclosed by the theses of evolutionary psychology?

Probably, the theses discussed are not hypotheses made within the scope of the empirical sciences in the version presented by psychology and sociology. It should be noted, though, that human knowledge also covers other methods of reality „investigation”. For example, the area of the so called wise knowledge that exceeds the contemporary empirical-rational paradigm of science. And so, the attempt may be made to analyze the reality inter-

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<sup>17</sup> N. G. Waller, P. R. Shaver, *The importance of nongenetic influence on romantic love styles: A twin-family study*, *Psychological Science* 5(1994), 268-274.

<sup>18</sup> D. C. Rowe, *Environmental and genetic influence on dimensions of perceived parenting: A twin study*, *Developmental Psychology* 17(1981), 203–208; D. C. Rowe, *A biometrical analysis of perceptions of family environment: A study of twin and singleton sibling relationships*, *Child Development* 54(1983), 416-423.

<sup>19</sup> R. Plomin, *Genetics and experience: The interplay between nature and nurture*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

pretation suggested by the sociobiologists on the plane of such knowledge. Cultural anthropology points to the fact that contents regarding the basic structure of reality, both material and social, were and are transferred in the form of myths. In this sense, the picture of man created by the evolutionary psychologists should be treated as a mythic communication based on the attempt to read the social structures of the contemporary world.

In its primitive understanding, myth is the communication of truths about existing reality<sup>20</sup>. It is a tale, which in its content reaches to the ontic level<sup>21</sup>. It discloses a world structure not subject to empirical-rational perception<sup>22</sup>. According to the concept of C.G. Jung, the myth is closely related to the symbol as the means of conveying the mythic message. The symbol contains an archetypal message<sup>23</sup> i.e. one which reaches to the basic empirically non-verifiable structure of reality. Therefore, the basic element of myth is the symbol.

In case of the symbol, the relationship between the signifier and signified is of an epiphanic nature, thus a manifestation through the signifier and in the signified of something inexpressible. [...] A symbolic picture is the transformation of a specified image by a once and for all abstract significance. The symbol is therefore an image causing the occurrence of a secret signification, it is the epiphany of the secret<sup>24</sup>.

Therefore, the symbol is what shows the real situation, or the existing object hidden by the secret. The task of symbols is to cause an encounter with meaning – the content that they represent<sup>25</sup>. Such a message also has the specific feature, that through it the content is accepted more deeply – it reaches the level of the unconscious. This happens because symbols carry the archetypal contents characterizing a given culture – that is, speaking G.C. Jung's language, they symbolize the content of the collective unconsciousness. For certain researchers:

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<sup>20</sup> B. Malinowski, *Mit w psychice człowieka pierwotnego*, w: *Antropologia słowa*, red.: G. Godlewski, Warszawa 2004, 229.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Eliade, *Czas święty i mity*, w: *Antropologia kultury*, red.: A. Mencwel, Warszawa 2005, 108.

<sup>22</sup> B. Olszewska – Dyoniziak, *Człowiek – Kultura – Osobowość. Wstęp do klasycznej antropologii kulturowej*, Wrocław 2003, 138.

<sup>23</sup> See J. Jacobi, *Psychologia C. G. Junga*, Warszawa 1993, 181-193.

<sup>24</sup> W. J. Burszta, *Antropologia kulturowa*, Poznań 1998, 117.

<sup>25</sup> A. Salas, *Biblia dziś. Tematy wprowadzające*, tłum. hiszp. E. Krzemińska, Częstochowa 1996, 47.

Investigation of symbols means the research into «the heart» of culture, because symbols embody the entire system of images and meanings, by which the people provide a record of their knowledge about life and their attitude toward it<sup>26</sup>.

And so if we assume that the content of the theses of evolutionary psychology constitutes the archetype of knowledge concerning life for contemporary man, then we could attempt on this basis to diagnose the present culture. This leads to a pessimistic diagnosis in consideration of the dissemination of the „sociobiological mentality”.

One of the aforementioned theses of evolutionary psychology says that altruism is of an adaptive nature –where in a given society it is fashionable to act in this way. It is not conservative when the majority of the given group does not observe its rules. According to the aforementioned rule, contemporary culture, at least one of the symbols of which involves the myth of the genetic conditioning of altruistic behavior and of the deepest human motivations, may be diagnosed as focused only on survival. The perspective of the development of such a culture is disturbing. If there is no objective external reason for its existence (survival is internal) degeneration will occur sooner or later. In the case of the individual, the objective system of values transcending the individual in the process of internalization becomes the sense of life, i.e. the drive for further personality development. For the culture, the external system of objective values becomes the guarantor of its durability. Focus only on survival causes the regression of culture. Therefore, if we really treat evolutionary psychology – sociobiology as a myth of the contemporary world, our culture, which is focused on consumption of material, mental, and spiritual goods for the purpose of survival, does not promise further development. The motive of value implementation should be different, transcending our needs.

However, it seems that this contemporary myth only refers to the surface of what is still alive and dynamic in our social reality. Another „myth”, at the foundations of the European Judean-Christian culture is composed of the content of the Bible. In the Holy Bible we find the following:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> W. J. Burszta, *Antropologia ...*, dz. cyt., 119.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 14: 12-14.

Here, it is resurrection that stands above the first and the second biological laws – the eternal happiness. In view of death, such value, may be truth, honor, or a good name – the achievement of the completeness of humanity. There are many examples of the overriding of the aforementioned laws in the name of the higher values in the history of humanity.

Therefore, which of the archetypal communications – that related to evolutionary psychology, or the aforementioned Biblical message, reflects the actual condition of our culture? Which of the aforementioned models dominates in the contemporary world is the issue in need of decision. The demarcation line between a civilization of struggle for existence and a civilization of love lies in the conscience of each human being.

Going back to the basic issue of this paper, the question about the status of evolutionary psychology – sociobiology, it should be admitted that the theses of the evolutionists definitely carry important information about reality, especially about the surface image of contemporary culture. However, at their base they are of a symbolic – mythical nature, and are not fully empirically confirmed hypotheses concerning the species homo sapiens. This trend may be treated as a cultural phenomenon, which cannot be left unmentioned irrespective of the occasional primitiveness of its theses.

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