

1 Eugene Halton¹

2 **38 The Degenerate Monkey**

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4
5 One of these days, perhaps, there will come a writer of opinions less humdrum than those of
6 Dr. (Alfred Russel) Wallace, and less in awe of the learned and official world . . . who will
7 argue, like a new Bernard Mandeville, that man is but a degenerate monkey, with a paranoic
8 talent for self-satisfaction, no matter what scrapes he may get himself into, calling them
9 ‘civilization,’ and who, in place of the unerring instincts of other races, has an unhappy
10 faculty for occupying himself with words and abstractions, and for going wrong in a
11 hundred ways before he is driven, willy-nilly, into the right one. (CN 3: 17–18, 1901).

12 This one sentence, packed into Peirce’s 1901 review of Alfred Russel Wallace’s
13 book *Studies, Scientific and Social*, a two volume work totaling over 1000 pages,
14 was not stated as an explicit expression of Peirce’s own philosophy. But I would
15 like to extrapolate from what I take to be a compacted but sophisticated philo-
16 sophical anthropology, one that connects to Peirce’s wider philosophy and to a
17 viable way of understanding the human creature today. I suggest that Peirce was
18 a kind of new Bernard Mandeville with a twist, that twist being his depiction of
19 the degenerate monkey.

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21 **One of these days, perhaps, there will come a writer of opinions less**
22 **humdrum than those of Dr. Wallace, and less in awe of the learned and**
23 **official world . . . who will argue, like a new Bernard Mandeville, that . . .**

24 In the sentences preceding the above quotation, Peirce wrote of Wallace that:
25 “. . . he pronounces monkeys to be rather low down in the scale of quadrupedal
26 life, both physically and mentally. He still acknowledges that man is the crown
27 of the animal kingdom in both respects”. Peirce removes that crown in his
28 understanding of the human creature.²

29 In his *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*, which was first
30 published in 1714, Bernard Mandeville skewered human pomp with his view
31 that: “The moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon
32 pride”. Mandeville believed that the moral virtues conceal a basic selfishness
33 that humans share with other animals. Indeed, they provide the very means to
34 deny that nature. Cooperative human goodness, similar to Hobbes, is an artifice
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36 ¹ University of Notre Dame, USA.

37 ² Humans are then not the crown above the “monkey” below, contra Wallace, but by the
38 standard of maturity are even lower by virtue of being physically neotenous, physiologically
39 less matured developmentally. In the place of a “crown”, Peirce celebrates the human capacity
40 to blunder more than other animals, as I develop later in the piece.

1 imposed upon primal self-interest. Social cooperation is conceived nominalisti-
 2 cally as a conventional invention introduced in the development of societies,
 3 rather than an essence of human nature. Thus private vices may become public
 4 benefits: “Private Vices by the dextrous Management of a skilful Politician may
 5 be turned into Publick Benefits” (Mandeville 1989: 371).

6 Such a nominalist outlook seems at a remove from Peirce’s realist and
 7 naturalist views of signs and sociality.³ Instead, it was Mandeville’s puncturing of
 8 that human posturing called “being civilized” that I take Peirce to be alluding to.

9 In his lecture on “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life”, the first of his eight
 10 Cambridge lectures of 1898, Peirce notes that:

11 The mental qualities we most admire in all human beings except our several selves are the
 12 maiden’s delicacy, the mother’s devotion, manly courage, and other inheritances that have
 13 come to us from the biped who did not yet speak; while the characters that are most
 14 contemptible take their origin in reasoning. The very fact that everybody so ridiculously
 15 overrates his own reasoning is sufficient to show how superficial the faculty is. For you
 16 do not hear the courageous man vaunt his own courage, or the modest woman boast of
 17 her modesty, or the really loyal plume themselves on their honesty. What they *are* vain
 18 about is always some *insignificant* gift of beauty or of skill. It is the instincts, the senti-
 19 ments, that make the substance of the soul. Cognition is only its surface, its locus of
 20 contact with what is external to it. (EPII: 31).

21 Here Peirce inverts the sources of the virtues from Mandeville’s outlook. Where
 22 Mandeville saw the virtues as an artifice repressing the self-interests of human
 23 nature, Peirce sees the most admirable human qualities as stemming from our
 24 ancestral past, “from the biped who did not yet speak”. Motherly devotion and
 25 manly courage are instinctive social sentiments. We might say today that such
 26 qualities trace back even beyond the biped who did not speak to include a
 27 broader range of primate and even mammalian ancestors. Primatologist Franz de
 28 Waal (2010) has written about the capacities for empathy in chimps and bonobos,
 29 and neuropsychologist Jaap Panksepp (Panksepp and Biven 2012) has argued for
 30 subcortical mammalian neurocircuits for caring (or nurturance) and playfulness,
 31 among others, revealing a longer neuroevolutionary history for human emotions
 32 than simply hominid.

33 But of our vaunted capacity for rational cognition, Peirce claims that it is
 34 superficial in comparison with the social sentiments. Comparing it with the
 35 bees, he writes:

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 38 **3** Social cooperation occurs through the medium of signs. Sociality does not have the same
 39 meaning as sociability. Peirce claims that reality is social, and that the social is natural.
 40 He claims that signs are intrinsically social. This allows that the public may be real, which
 Mandeville’s view seems to deny.

Reason is of its very essence egotistical. In many matters it acts the fly on the wheel. Do not doubt that the bee thinks it has a good reason for making the end of its cell as it does. But I should be very much surprised to learn that its reason has solved that problem of isoperimetry that its instinct has solved. Men many times fancy that they act from reason when, in point of fact, the reasons they attribute to themselves are nothing but excuses which unconscious instinct invents to satisfy the teasing ‘why’s’ of the ego. The extent of this self-delusion is such as to render philosophical rationalism a farce. Reason, then, appeals to sentiment in the last resort. Sentiment, for its part, feels itself to be the man. (EPII: 32).

The idea that human beings are rational beings would seem to be amended in Peirce to something like, if I may play with the well-known Shakespeare quotation used elsewhere by Peirce:

Man is by habit a self-deluding rationalizer, an angry ape,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he’s most assured,
His mature sentiments. Or more, that ...

~~... man is but a degenerate monkey.~~

...man is but a degenerate monkey

Peirce’s characterization of humanity as “but a degenerate monkey” beautifully puts what Alfred Russel Wallace thought to be the crown of creation in its place.

Peirce advocated technical scientific terminology that was specialized and univocal. His term “degenerate monkey” is neither specialized nor univocal. But I find it an apt expression to characterize humanity, if one allows the humor that is also part of being human to realize that Peirce knew the difference between a monkey and the lesser and greater apes. But his term puts the human primate in its place, especially in the double meaning of the word “degenerate”. Its everyday meaning is obvious, but there is also Peirce the mathematician using the term “degenerate”. I take it to refer to the genetic falling away from a pure form characterized by human neoteny, such that humans do not mature as quickly as other primates and great apes.⁴

Indeed, humans are born “prematurely” relative to other primates, due in large part to our big-brained heads. Where chimps are born with roughly 45 per cent of final brain size, humans are born with only roughly 25 per cent (Iriki &

⁴ I am not claiming that Peirce was addressing degeneracy in the current use of the term in contemporary evolutionary theory. Peirce (EPII: 268) says that he “borrowed” the term from geometers and the geometry of conics, but he applies it elsewhere to phenomena such as degenerate Secondness and types of sign degeneracy which have nothing to do with conics. The Concise Encyclopedia of Mathematics states: “In mathematics, a degenerate case is a limiting case in which a class of object changes its nature so as to belong to another, usually simpler, class” (Weisstein 2003: 689).

1 Taoka 2012). Hence ex utero humans engage in more brain building that occurs
 2 in utero for other primates. In this sense we are less-developed primates at birth,
 3 but more developmentally biosocial, because more of the human brain building
 4 is occurring in a socializing milieu. Progressively cooperative practices, including
 5 parenting and food gathering involving immatures as well as adults, mark the
 6 emergence of the human socializing milieu.

7 From birth, the human newborn baby comes equipped to communicate with
 8 its mother in precise dialogical gestural repartee, not because it is “rational”,
 9 because the synaptic connections of the prefrontal cortex have yet to be made,
 10 but because the subcortical infant brain comes equipped to engage interactively
 11 within hours of birth, as Meltzoff and Moore (1977) and Trevarthen (1980), have
 12 shown. Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (1999: 4) have demonstrated
 13 the complex “communicative musicality” of weeks old infants, capable of correctly
 14 phrasing their part in bantering repartee with the mother. This tactile and vocaliz-
 15 ing “musicking” between infant and devoted mother/caretaker is a conversation
 16 of gestures through which, over early development, symbolic communicative
 17 capacities will be able to emerge.

18

19 **... with a paranoid talent for self-satisfaction, no matter what scrapes he**
 20 **may get himself into, calling them ‘civilization’**

21 Civilization is usually taken to be an achievement of progress, yet Peirce’s charac-
 22 terization of it as the “scrapes” that the degenerate monkey gets into, as a result
 23 of its “paranoid talent for self-satisfaction”, seems anything but that. Peirce was
 24 a profound student of history, well aware of the excesses that entered into civili-
 25 zation, as well as of its blessings. But it wasn’t until a half century later that
 26 we began to understand the huge costs that figured into the rise of agriculture,
 27 settlement, and civilization. The domestication of plants and animals, and settle-
 28 ment, culminating in cities and civilization, marked a profound transformation
 29 of humanity, physically and mentally.

30 About 11.000 years ago, as archaeologist Dr. Ofer Bar-Yosef, whose team dis-
 31 covered the earliest cultivated figs from around that time, noted, “. . . there was a
 32 critical switch in the human mind – from exploiting the earth as it is, to actively
 33 changing the environment to suit our needs. People decided to intervene in
 34 nature and supply their own food rather than relying on what was provided by
 35 the gods” (cited in Wilford, 2006: Online newspaper).

36 Recent accounts of civilization show the massive costs of changing the envi-
 37 ronment to suit our needs. The blessings of agriculture may have also been a
 38 curse whose consequences continue to mount. The fact is that nutrition deterio-
 39 rated severely for the bulk of people in civilizations throughout the world,
 40 including the new world, and average heights dropped 4 to 6 inches (Eaton,

1 Shostack & Konner 1988). Populations increased. Mass-killing warfare by spe-
 2 cialized warriors was invented, social inequality became far more pronounced,
 3 and was institutionalized under the invention of divine kingship and associated
 4 elites. In many ways life under civilization became short, nasty, and brutish,
 5 contra Hobbes, even while it attributed its own shortcomings onto its foraging
 6 ancestors. The removal of mind from a transaction with living habitat to domes-
 7 ticated landscape, walled cityscape, and texts marked a profound historical
 8 transformation: a sacralization of the human, in the forms of gods, kings, and
 9 saviors, and a desacralization of the wild habitat (Halton: in press).

10 If humans were possessed of the unerring instincts of other races, this dis-
 11 connect from wild habitat attunement may not have been a problem. But ...

12
 13 **... and who, in place of the unerring instincts of other races, has an**
 14 **unhappy faculty for occupying himself with words and abstractions, and**
 15 **for going wrong in a hundred ways before he is driven, willy-nilly, into**
 16 **the right one.**

17 In the year after Peirce's review of Wallace was published, he wrote again on the
 18 theme of neoteny⁵ and the relation of fallibility and plasticity:

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 20 The Rational mind is the Progressive mind, and as such, by its very capacity for growth,
 21 seems more infantile than the Instinctive mind . . . One of the most remarkable distinctions
 22 between the Instinctive mind of animals and the Rational mind of man is that animals
 23 rarely make mistakes, while the human mind almost invariably blunders at first, and
 24 repeatedly, where it is really exercised in the manner that is distinctive of it. If you look
 25 upon this as a defect, you ought to find an Instinctive mind higher than a Rational one,
 26 and probably, if you cross-examine yourself, you will find you do. The greatness of the
 27 human mind lies in its ability to discover truth notwithstanding its not having Instincts
 28 strong enough to exempt it from error. [This is the marvel and admirable in it; and this
 29 essentially supposes a generous portion of the capacity for blundering". (Peirce's marginal
 30 insert)] (CP 7.380).

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 32 _____
 33 ⁵ Peirce is describing the phenomenon of neoteny, though not using the term, as becomes
 34 clearer in the continuation of this quotation, CP 7.381, which appears below on the next page,
 35 where he discusses, "the prolonged childhood of men. . ." The term neoteny, coined in 1884 by
 36 Julius Kollman, had not yet entered into wide use, though the idea describing the phenomenon
 37 had begun to be discussed, such as that by Havelock Ellis in 1894. Montagu notes in his 1983
 38 work on neoteny that, "During the first decade of the twentieth century fetal traits as a source
 39 of adult features in humans were recognized by a number of biologists" (1989: 212). The term
 40 neoteny only entered into English usage in 1901, the year of Peirce's entry, though some discus-
 sion using the term had begun in Europe, such as Danish zoologist J.E.V. Boas's writing in 1896.
 Peirce, characteristically, was picking up on the emerging discussions of the idea.

1 A generous “capacity for blundering” seems quite the opposite of the term for
 2 anatomically modern humans, *homo sapiens sapiens*, the wise human. Perhaps
 3 if Peirce had had his way, we would be using instead the term *homo errans*, the
 4 blundering human. Yet Peirce views the degenerate monkey’s capacity for blunder-
 5 ing as a marvel to be admired, and when one remembers that he is also the
 6 founder of fallibilism, one understands why. This “more infantile” rational
 7 mind is not set adrift in its blunderings, but has a plasticity that is yet informed
 8 by “instinctive mind”. It is the mind embodied especially in the newer prefrontal
 9 cortex and its connections, but those connections remain potentially informed
 10 by robust sensings of instinctive mind from down below, and from without. For
 11 the degenerate monkey evolved as what native Americans call “children of the
 12 earth”, attuned to the circumambient instinctive intelligence of the wild others it
 13 hunted and gathered.

14 The term “children of the earth” is an apt description of the degenerate
 15 monkey and its newly sprung neotenous mind, its vaunted rationality being still
 16 the child in the community of human passions. As Peirce put it:

17 The conception of the Rational Mind as an Unmatured Instinctive Mind which takes
 18 another development precisely because of its childlike character is confirmed, not only by
 19 the prolonged childhood of men, but also by the fact that all systems of rational perform-
 20 ances have had instinct for their first germ. Not only has instinct been the first germ, but
 21 every step in the development of those systems of performances comes from instinct. It
 22 is precisely because this Instinct is a weak, uncertain Instinct that it becomes infinitely
 23 plastic, and never reaches an ultimate state beyond which it cannot progress. (CP 7.381).

24 Peirce’s account of the blundering rational mind as an “Unmatured Instinctive
 25 Mind” puts rationality in its place in the community of passions, while yet
 26 allowing its plasticity the genius of abductive inference, the capacity for informed
 27 guessing through broadened sensing from instinctive mind percolating through
 28 immature rational mind: Our weakness from instinctive determination as also
 29 our strength in sensed instinctive promptings.

30 A few paragraphs further in this discussion Peirce asks, “What the first reli-
 31 gion was like one would give something to know” (CP 7.384). The distinguishing
 32 of the foraging legacy from agricultural settlement was a finding made only
 33 decades later, yet today we might answer Peirce using Paul Shepard’s term,
 34 “the sacred game”, as the source of the emergence and reality of religion.

35 Humans emerged in reverential attunement to the wild circumambient life
 36 they tracked, gathered, mimicked, dreamed, danced, and ate. It was in this rela-
 37 tion to living habitat, the living earth itself, that the human mind bodied forth.
 38 For there was mature instinctive genius to be learned. Peirce: “Look at the little
 39 birds, of which all species are so nearly identical in their physique, and yet what
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1 various forms of genius do they not display in modeling their nests? This would
 2 be impossible unless the ideas that are naturally predominant in their minds
 3 were true. It would be too contrary to analogy to suppose that similar gifts
 4 were wanting in man” (CP 5.604). By close attunement to the genius of the nests
 5 of birds and other creatures, humans could learn how to create shelters. By
 6 close attunements to the songs of birds, humans could discover the music that
 7 was already in the air, a practical music signaling movement in the habitat for
 8 over a kilometer away, while also a real art to be internalized, and perhaps a real
 9 syntax to be mimicked and sung, and then eventually put into words.

10 Hence the degenerate monkey emerged immersed in the sacred game. But
 11 in thinking itself clever, in thinking from its immaturity that it could domesticate
 12 and control the game by creating a dematured, domesticated version that would
 13 allow it to grow exponentially, it may have begun the process of fatally discon-
 14 necting itself from the very sources of its maturity.

15 What civilization means has moved from the measure of progress to the
 16 measure of a globe gone awry. 90 percent of the great sea predators are gone,
 17 while humans have expanded to over 7 billion people. Global warming estimates
 18 are self-correcting ever upward. Industrial agricultural practices, such as the over-
 19 use of antibiotics, threaten human life. We know that industrial civilization is not
 20 sustainable as practiced today. Already, the year after Peirce’s review appeared,
 21 historian Henry Adams expressed in a letter to his brother Brooks on August 10,
 22 1902, that: “My belief is that science is to wreck us, and that we are like monkeys
 23 monkeying with a loaded shell; we don’t in the least know or care where our
 24 practically infinite energies come from or will bring us to” (1938: 391–392).⁶

25 Science and technology, as conceived in nominalistic civilization today, that
 26 is, in the image of the schizoid machine, may be manifestations of humanity’s
 27 final scrape, its suicidal infantilization. Yet science, as Peirce conceives it, as a
 28 living pursuit, may suggest a way of reconnecting to the genius of nature in
 29 modern form (Halton 2005). Science itself has limits in being primarily theoretical
 30 for Peirce, and perhaps that suggests the limited role for the unmaturing rational
 31 mind as requiring a learning habitat in the context of its more matured senti-
 32 ments, consistent with Peirce’s philosophy of critical common-sensism. Who
 33 knows but that a more humble conception of humanity, not as the crown of
 34 creation, but as the degenerate monkey, whose maturity hinges on attunement
 35 to, respect and even reverence for the living earth and its limits, might not
 36 suggest a model of sustainable civilization?

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 38 **6** I am not claiming that Adams’ position represents Peirce, only that it was made a year after
 39 Peirce’s review. Peirce may have been a champion of science in general, but he was a critic of
 40 nominalism and of nominalistically conceived science. Peirce provides a way to reconstruct
 nominalistic science so that its “monkeying” around will not “wreck us”.

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