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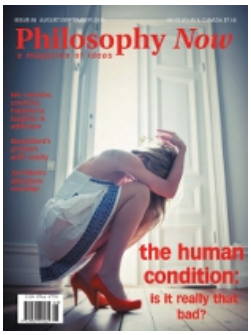

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On Xenophobia

Our philosophical science correspondent **Massimo Pigliucci**.

I am still new at this business of being a philosopher, and some of my new colleagues still look at me and see a bit more of a scientist than they can stomach. This of course makes for stimulating conversations, like one I had a few days ago with two colleagues and a number of undergraduate students during our 'Let's Talk Philosophy' lunch hour at the cafeteria.

The discussion touched on the concept of race – ever a sensitive one, especially in the Bronx borough of New York where I teach, which is predominantly black and hispanic, even though most of the teaching faculty are of the caucasian flavor. At issue was the question of why it seems to be next to inevitable that regardless of race or ethnicity, a good number of our fellow human beings display a certain degree of xenophobia. I ventured to suggest that part of the answer is probably to be found in our evolutionary past. For most of our history, 'outsiders', especially if they looked or behaved differently from our in-group, were far more likely to be a threat to our survival and possessions than interested in cultural exchanges for reciprocal edification. In other words, xenophobia possibly arose as an advantageous instinct that aided our survival.

This, predictably, was not well received by my less scientifically-inclined colleagues, who immediately pointed out the complex cultural dimensions of xenophobia – the manipulative use of the fear of 'the other' which has historically marked bigotry in both religious and secular societies. While this is true, and crucial to our understanding of complex human behavior such as xenophobia, it is a category mistake to contrast cultural and biological explanations of behavior.

Evolutionary biologists don't normally talk much about philosophy, but one of the key twentieth century figures in evolutionary biology, Ernst Mayr, embraced and elaborated upon the standard Aristotelian distinction between proximate and ultimate causes. An evolutionary explanation of a given behavior answers the question of what is the *ultimate* cause of that behavior (i.e. an explanation in terms of the purpose or function the behavior serves). In the present case, assuming certain (admittedly difficult to verify) facts about human evolution, it makes sense to think of an ingrained instinctive distrust of outsiders as originating to further our survival in an environment where outsiders had a nasty tendency to be aggressive.

But even if this account is true, we still need *proximate* explanations for both the basic behavior and the various complex forms it takes. (Proximate explanations are explanations in terms of immediate causes, such as, what psychological and cognitive basis does the behavior have?) Here is where culture plays a crucial determining role.

Let us consider a simpler but analogous situation. Few philosophers would doubt that being hungry is a fundamental biological adaptation which signals to the organism that it is time to gather food, or else. Yet this ultimate explanation for hunger tells us next to nothing about the elaborate ways in which we satisfy this need in modern societies: nothing in evolutionary theory can possibly predict cultural phenomena which include fast food restaurants, gourmet shops, cookbooks and cooking shows. It is culture that determines the bewildering variety of ways in which we satisfy hunger, and even turn it into a quest for aesthetic pleasure. But it is biology which anchors all of this into a very basic need that we must satisfy if we want to live at all.

It seems to me that a similar combination of biological/cultural ultimate/proximate explanations nicely fits the bill as far as xenophobia is concerned. The key point is that, contrary to what both scientists and humanists all too often seem to think, biological and cultural accounts of human behavior are not only not at odds, but in fact complement each other, both being necessary for a more rounded understanding of the human condition.

That said, I want to stress the importance of the cultural dimension. As both examples should clearly hint, culture has to do with by far the more complex aspects of human behavior. This means that evolutionary science tells us very little that is actually relevant to modern societies, except for where some general human traits originally come from. Since even most biologists today balk at straightforward biological determinism, this means that biology also has little to contribute to the amelioration of problems such as xenophobia or obesity (to take another food-related aspect of our behavior).

However, it is important for students of philosophy to appreciate the biological roots of human problems so that fuzzy notions about human exceptionalism within the animal world can be countered. Yes, modern xenophobia is the product of complex cultural phenomena; but at its roots it is a simple biological survival mechanism, and as such, probably very difficult to eradicate completely.

Massimo Pigliucci is Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk *(University of Chicago Press, 2010). His philosophical musings can be found at* www.platofootnote.org.