

SEX,
MURDER,
AND THE
MEANING OF LIFE

A Psychologist Investigates How
Evolution, Cognition, and Complexity are
Revolutionizing Our View of Human Nature

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BASIC BOOKS

A Member of the Perseus Books Group

New York

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Designed by Brent Wilcox

ISBN: 978-0-465-02044-7

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Introduction

YOU, ME, CHARLES DARWIN, AND DR. SEUSS

You and I have probably never met, but you might be shocked to learn how well we know one another, and how intimately our lives are connected.

You might be especially surprised at this statement if you were to make a casual comparison of our lives. For example, maybe your grandparents are Italian or Iranian or Lithuanian, with absolutely no link to my shantytown Irish ancestors. Maybe all your relatives have been law-abiding accountants or police officers, unlike my father and brother, who both served time in Sing Sing, or my uncle, who was reputedly a mobster. Maybe you never had a stepfather, or if you did, maybe you never had the slightest thought about murdering him. Maybe you had a consistent and spotless academic record; whereas I was expelled from two high schools and almost tossed out of a community college before somehow flipping around to become a university professor who writes scientific articles about human behavior (a fact that still surprises even me, and would probably shock a few of the teachers who awarded me well-deserved failing grades). Maybe you never had the surprisingly uncomfortable experience of watching yourself as a talking head on scientific documentaries or on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, or if you had, maybe you discussed English literature in complete eloquent sentences with impeccable Oxford enunciation (unlike my, uh, New Yawk accent). And at the most trivial level, maybe the musical module in your

mind neatly encompasses the complete works of Brahms, Beethoven, and Stravinsky, whereas my musical mind is an eclectic hodgepodge of Dion and the Belmonts, the Electric Prunes, Sopwith Camel, Ali Farka Touré, and Panjabi MC.

Despite our differences in family background, education, occupation, and musical exposure, though, I'll stick by my claim that we are intimately connected. We share a common human nature. However unique your upbringing or mine might be, if we were magically switched, *Prince and the Pauper*-style, we would probably respond in surprisingly similar ways to one another's situations. In this book, I will explore revolutionary recent developments in evolutionary biology and cognitive science to clarify those connections.

You, me, Jennifer Lopez, and the old Mongolian fellow now walking down a back street in Ulaanbaatar are connected by more than just a common evolutionary past, though. Every day, your decisions and mine feed into a network of social influence that links us not only to our immediate neighbors but also to stockbrokers on Wall Street and to total strangers halfway around the world. Indeed, all human beings are interconnected in a complex web, like millions of ants in a giant colony. An emerging scientific revolution known as complexity theory neatly explains how all that works. Combined with the insights of evolutionary biology and cognitive science, as you will see, the science of complexity gives us a whole new understanding of what it means to be a member of the human race.

What This Book Is About, and the Cheat-Sheet Summary

Despite what you might have read in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*, first impressions can be misleading. If you do a blink-style speed-read of this book, you might think it is mostly about me. I do

in fact open each chapter with a personal experience: I started studying the downside of ogling beautiful women because I wasted a good portion of my student years doing just that. I began examining conspicuous consumption and irrational economic decision-making because I'd done plenty of both. And I started doing research on homicidal fantasies after having a few of my own. But if you keep reading, I am pretty sure you will discover that this book is really about you, your family, and your friends and about the important decisions you confront every day.

Likewise, if you read only the first few chapters, you might be misled into thinking this is just a book about the evolutionary psychology of sex, violence, and prejudice. In the later chapters, though, I will spell out how the self-centered psychology of sex, violence, and prejudice are intimately connected to the other-centered psychology of family values, religion, politics, and global economics.

Indeed, this is a book about the biggest question we can ask: What is the meaning of life? When we ask that question, we are sometimes asking how life, the universe, and everything fit together. By combining a few modern scientific insights into evolution, cognition, and complexity, we can now actually begin to answer that grand question. More often, though, what we want to know is, How can I live a more meaningful life? That is also a critically important question, one that leads many people to read self-help books, join religious groups, learn to meditate, or enter psychoanalysis. Academic intellectuals who think Big Thoughts about scientific integration usually avoid speculations about the how-to version of the meaning question. They leave that to the fuzzy-headed gurus who write pop psych books about Zen and the art of belly-button

contemplation. But I think the scientific lessons we have learned about the coherence of nature may have something very important to teach us about how to live a more meaningful life.

Although this is a book about big scientific ideas, it is also about the fun side of solving intellectual mysteries—a frolicking journey to visit the wild things inside the human mind and a jolly ride back in time for dinner. It is not a college textbook, and there will not be a quiz at the end. But for those who like to read the summary before reading the text, here are the five key elements of the story that would go onto the flash cards:

1. *Simple selfish rules.* By studying human behavior in an evolutionary context, we have discovered an array of simple and selfish rules underlying our everyday decisions. The old view was that those rules only applied to sex and aggression and that evolutionary analyses did not apply to more complex decisions. But I will discuss exciting new findings that tie the same set of rules to the whole range of human behaviors, including artistic creativity, economic consumption, religion, and politics, as well as the more nuts-and-bolts aspects of courtship and sex.
2. *Simple rules do not mean simple people.* Contrary to popular opinion, the evolved decision-making rules inside our brains are not rigid; instead, they are flexibly tuned to the environment. Work from my lab reveals that we are all multiple personalities; that is, each one of us can shift among several different subselves, each capable of adaptively changing the way we think and behave, to negotiate the qualitatively different threats and opportunities that pop up in seven key domains of social

life. As I describe in Chapter 6, I have dubbed those subselves the *team player* (concerned with the goal of making friends), the *go-getter* (concerned with getting ahead), the *night watchman* (concerned with protecting us from the bad guys), the *compulsive* (concerned with protecting us from disease), the *swinging single* (concerned with finding mates), the *good spouse* (concerned with the very different problem of keeping those mates), and the *parent* (concerned with taking care of our kin, especially any children we might have). These different subselves come on line at different times of our lives, and, as I will describe in Chapter 7, thinking about their links to fundamental goals led me to rebuild Abraham Maslow's classic pyramid of human motives.

3. *Simple does not mean irrational.* Although our default decision rules sometimes lead us to behave in ways that seem irrational, other recent work from our lab indicates that the simple rules themselves manifest what I call *Deep Rationality*. Underneath our apparently irrational judgments, we are a lot smarter than even the most rational economists ever dreamed. I describe this new approach to economic psychology in Chapter 9 ("Peacocks, Porsches, and Pablo Picasso") and Chapter 11 ("Deep Rationality and Evolutionary Economics")
4. *Selfish rules do not create selfish people.* Although they serve selfish ends, simple decision rules do not necessarily inspire us toward self-centered behavior. Instead, the rules inside our individual heads are exquisitely calibrated to help us fit in smoothly with other people. In the book's final pages, I

will describe how this new approach completely overturns people's stereotypical assumptions about the lessons of evolutionary psychology for our relationships with our friends, lovers, and family members. I will also talk about how this new view gave me a personal insight into the way to live a more meaningful life.

5. *Simple rules unfold into societal complexity.* Amazingly, all the complexities of human society—religious and political movements, economic markets, and more—emerge out of the dynamic interaction of the simple rules operating inside individual people's heads. I describe how all that works in Chapter 12 ("Bad Crowds, Chaotic Attractors, and Humans as Ants").

Procrastination 101

I first thought of writing a book of popular science more than thirty-five years ago. More than two decades passed before I started writing the volume now before you, for which I drafted a first chapter nine years ago. Partly the delay had to do with the demands of my work; it takes time to prepare lectures, apply for grants, design and conduct experiments, and publish papers on the results. But the truth is that I spent the better part of those three decades procrastinating.

In the long run, my procrastination has turned out to be a good thing. When I want to procrastinate, I don't just sit around watching reruns of old television shows; I sneak off to the bookstore, where I search for a book that has absolutely nothing to do with my current projects. Some of the books I've stumbled on were scientific ones, by brilliant researchers I've gotten to know, and sometimes work with, over those years, including John Alcock, David Buss,

Steven Pinker, Geoffrey Miller, and Sonja Lyubomirsky. You will see some of their ideas as my story unfolds.

Not all my procrastination is so virtuous, though. There is a second category of books I read when my goal is *pure* procrastination: autobiographies of people I had never heard of before. Some of my favorite such distractions have come from Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, and Robert Sapolsky's *A Primate's Memoir*. From them, I have gotten glimpses into corners of the world I have never been able to visit and lessons for my own life that I could not have learned otherwise. Besides that, my attraction to that kind of up-close account led me to tell this story in a more personal way, describing the links between scientific research and puzzling events in my own life, from minor irrationalities in economic decision-making to those homicidal fantasies and high school expulsions.

Finally, because I have two sons (one born at the beginning and another toward the end of the three decades I've been working on this book), I've also read aloud most of the collected works of Dr. Seuss, Douglas Adams, and Mark Twain. In what follows, I hope you will find a satisfying fusion of these different influences—a superficially personal adventure that overlays a deeper, more universally relevant argument. And I hope you will also discover that the particulars of this story include a general lesson or two that apply to your own adventure. Be forewarned: There is sex and violence in here, so even though this book has a happy ending, I do not recommend you read this one out loud to your kids.

Chapter 1

STANDING IN THE GUTTER

In 1975, the world was about to end. The Jehovah's Witnesses had predicted Armageddon, and signs of cataclysmic change were everywhere. The North Vietnamese army drove the last American soldiers out of Saigon, Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties in India, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army bombed the London Hilton. In the United States, members of a militant radical group who called themselves the "Weathermen" were bombing banks, corporation headquarters, and the State Department. A former U.S. attorney general and several leading White House officials were being hauled off to prison. There were two attempts to assassinate President Gerald Ford within seventeen days, one by a disciple of mass murderer Charles Manson. Elvis Presley, the only real king most Americans have ever recognized, was on a fast track to self-destruction. Oblivious to the coming end of the world and to the sound of falling kings and world leaders, unconcerned young people strutted lasciviously in polyester disco outfits to the sounds of KC and the Sunshine Band's "Get Down Tonight."

I was a bit out of touch with all that chaos, because I spent the best part of that momentous year nestled away in either the library or the psychology lab. But like a movie character who whistles heedlessly as a five-eyed space alien sneaks up behind him, I was about to be enveloped by ominous forces. The field of psychology was, along with the rest of the social sciences, about to be revolutionized—to have its foundational assumptions dynamited out from under it. Indeed, although the material world ultimately

survived 1975, the conceptual world of the traditional social sciences did not. Unbeknownst to me, I was about to fall in with a band of radical scientific insurgents.

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