

Book Review

Stalking the Good Life

A review of *Darwinian Happiness: Evolution as a Guide for Living and Understanding Human Behavior* by Bjørn Grinde. Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, 2002. ISBN 0878501592.

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In the late 19th century, William Morris despairing of the squalor and oppression of industrial Britain famously asked, “How do we live, then?” Today, as in that polluted and exploitive era, there is abundant evidence that it is time to reexamine, as Morris put it, “how we live and how we might live.” The human population explosion, global warming, deforestation, and the poisoning of the air, soil, and waters threaten the viability of all life on the planet within an unthinkable short period of time. Yet even as humankind and the planet slip over the brink of disaster, our brains have achieved an unprecedented landmark in consciousness. Evolutionary theory has developed to the point that a sufficiently practical understanding of ourselves and our fellow life-forms can be had. If we can grasp how our brains and behavior work, then surely we can alter our behavior and the course of history.

Bjørn Grinde puts this potential to work in *Darwinian Happiness: Evolution as a Guide for Living and Understanding Human Behavior*. In many respects the book follows the recently blazed path of “positive psychology,” which focuses on life-enhancing experience and conduct, but it is unique in its emphasis on using evolutionary knowledge to foster human happiness. For Grinde, “Darwinian happiness” is the degree to which we adjust our living conditions to fit our evolved neurological and physiological design, with the aim of maximizing rewards and minimizing distress.

To make connections between evolutionary science and the pursuit of happiness, Grinde offers a fresh and easy to understand picture of how humans are designed and how we got that way. Coverage of the organization and physiology of the brain, the immune system, the senses, the emotions, and social programming acquaint the reader with the hardware and software of human

pleasure and pain, and this information in itself is valuable for anyone who is striving for a better life. Grinde then expands on the “mismatch hypothesis” that many contemporary problems stem from the creation of living conditions that are alien to the conditions of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA) that shaped us. He observes astutely that not all mismatches result in stress and unhappiness, but the book’s focus is on those mismatches that do, which Grinde calls “Discords.”

Discords may be encountered throughout the lifespan and in all areas of life. Inadequate parenting is a Discord that can have tragic consequences for development and psychopathology. So is the punishment and psychiatric labeling of boys who express a strong drive for playing when their culture (mis)values sitting quietly and obediently. Over-cleanliness is a Discord that can weaken the immune system and set up a lifelong misery of asthma and allergies. Oppressive sexual mores can be Discords that stifle and distort natural impulses for kindness, intimacy, and sexual joy. The enormous number of possible mates available in mass society is a Discord that can wreak havoc with mate selection, resulting in high divorce rates, spouse abuse, and insecure attachment experiences for children. City living is a Discord with our tribal-scale past, and creates a host of pathologies of behavior and health. Grinde offers dozens of sound and practical remedies for the Discords of our time. Among other strategies, he recommends more play, more exercise, more learning, more touching, and more kindness and altruism.

But Grinde is perhaps too optimistic that existing cultural forms can save us from Discords. After all, it is the cultural world that is at odds with our evolved dispositions. For example, there is little doubt that many people find happiness in religious beliefs, but religion is the source of much unhappiness, as well. In part this is because religions tend to be organized and to arrange people in hierarchies, opening the way to exploitation and conflict. One need only consider the sex scandals involving the Roman Catholic priesthood in the U.S. to get a sense of how much unhappiness such arrangements can create. Organized religions also activate our natural tendencies to identify with the group. Unfortunately, ingroup identity almost inevitably leads to hostility toward outgroups, and history is bloody with religious wars and purges that have generated much pain and suffering. And it may be wondered whether at this precarious moment in history it is prudent to promote superstition, when clearheaded scientific understanding may give better results in coping with the problems at hand.

Grinde is also trusting of capitalism as a source of happiness because it provides a good fit with our natural selfishness. But along with the joys of accumulating wealth capitalism brings much human misery. The nature of work under capitalism is as much drudgery, humiliation, and insecurity as it is satisfying and self-actualizing. The capitalist principle of private property creates relationships between landlords and tenants that are blatantly exploitive and

demeaning, and the treacherously misnamed invention of credit cards has enslaved and ruined millions. Consumerism is a bottomless pit of self-indulgence and excessiveness that, rather than being fulfilling, leaves people craving for still more. All told, capitalism has made a tiny proportion of humankind wealthy and perhaps happy. But the happiness of the few is always at the expense of the many with whom they share the planet.

Grinde emphasizes the happiness that may be had by listening to (and making) music. But the reality in the technological era is that music making is relegated to specialists and mediated by machines. Listening to music means turning up the stereo, and the resulting din that is everywhere we go, including cars that go “boom,” is the source of a great deal of annoyance, distress, and conflict. I suspect that our brains’ pleasure centers are more attuned to the singing of birds, the burbling of streams, and the rustling of the wind than to contrived surround-sound music on demand, and this points up the general problem with the technological milieu: Because our technologies are unlike anything our ancestors would have encountered in the EEA, the cheap thrills they offer seduce us into following unhealthy routines that, frankly, defy all reason. As W. H. R. Rivers once observed, “The hyper-development of material culture has led to an atrophy of the thought processes . . . [and] post-logical mentality.” The pursuit of happiness has much to gain from honest circumspection about the tools that we use.

My sense is that available cultural forms have had their chance and they are not the place to look for sustainable human happiness. We cannot go back to a Paleolithic environment, as Grinde correctly points out, but we can live our lives closer to that environment and we can selectively edit out dysfunctional elements of our cultures. Among other things, a happy life would reject the practice of spending every waking hour encapsulated in dehumanizing technologies and mindlessly squandering finite resources, and it would embrace low-impact and harm-free lifestyles that are guided by the principle of stewardship for the planet. The net benefits of taking such measures would give us and our progeny at least a better chance at happiness, now and into the future.

For those who are ready to live “deliberately,” as Henry David Thoreau put it, *Darwinian Happiness* is a creative and informative work that gives much to think about. Readers will find many trustworthy strategies for changing their lives for the better, and the book serves as a solid point of departure for future thinking about how we live and how we might live.