



Book Review

The Eternal Child: An Explosive New Theory of Human Origins and Behaviour by Clive Bromhall, Ebury Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Steve Moxon

The Eternal Child: An Explosive New Theory of Human Origins and Behaviour by Oxford-educated zoologist Clive Bromhall presents the case for the importance of neoteny in human evolution. The role of paedomorphosis in the development of a host of physical attributes is made comprehensively, and the neglected role of big cat predation in human evolution is usefully highlighted. However, even a popular science book should not cause the reader to frown regularly at its failure to even mention, let alone consider, fairly obvious alternative explanations for what is presented as unassailable evidence in support of an all-encompassing theory. Clive Bromhall writes here less like a scientist than like a journalist with a big idea. Unfortunately, in this reviewer's estimation, it is a flawed one: an attempted blend of evolutionary theory as the basis for psychology and implausible Freudian psychobabble.

Bromhall's zoology doctorate would seem to qualify him well for his current career making natural history documentaries, but his lack of background in psychology is evident in *The*

Eternal Child. Nothing seems awry for a large portion of the book. Promisingly, it begins with an excellent, well written, and eye-opening account of putative human paedomorphic characteristics and how they have never been otherwise convincingly explained as separate adaptations. The idea that neoteny (also called paedomorphosis) has had an impact on human evolution is hardly new, but most people will be taken aback at how pervasive it seems to have been – at least in Bromhall's account. Bromhall develops the argument that after climate change towards aridity several million years ago forced a descent of our ancestor from the trees, big cat predation was the driving force of hominid evolution, with males required to co-operate as the only feasible defence for a species with neither the ability to move at speed nor bodily toughness or weaponry. A more recent, further climate change in the same direction reduced food supply and pushed evolution still further by requiring male co-operative hunting. The adaptive features required were behavioural, and the simplest way for this to evolve was to cut out fully mature male status competition and its

maintenance by arresting development in late adolescence. The physical baggage would then come along just for the ride, inverting the older usual thinking of neoteny as being primarily involved in the development of physical changes, with the behavioural concomitants being Gouldian 'spandrels'.

This looks like worthwhile hypothesising, and it is backed up by impressive comparisons all the way from the domestication of wolves to the characteristics of social insects. However, Bromhall then moves to advocacy of a notion derived from Freudian psychoanalysis that we are trapped in a 'mother fixated' childhood in which sexual relationships are attempts to return to mother. Descriptions of alternative explanations and hypotheses are notably absent here, although these are not difficult to find in the literature. David Brin (in his web essay: [*Neoteny and Two-way Sexual Selection In Human Evolution*](#)), for example, speculates that the required behavioural change that neoteny brought about was not reduction in male-male competition indirectly leading to protection of women but, directly, simply care for women. Whereas Brin speculates that human sexual dimorphism by means of relative female paedomorphosis was sexually selected to take advantage of pre-existing behaviour elicited by children; Bromhall goes off on a psychoanalytical magical mystery tour that is difficult to reconcile with evolutionary theory. Bromhall has failed to spot that the polar opposite of his view is more plausible. The game is not more about mother protecting children and then, by extension, adults. It is about protection for mothers.

Bromhall tackles sexual dimorphism in its various facets, leading to an explanation of monogamy. Re-reading, I find the notes with exclamation marks I had made in the margins became more frequent. A major point that Bromhall misses throughout, and one that would not be missed by anyone with a good grounding in evolutionary biology, is that behavioural repertoires can be co-opted into other domains (Gould's 'exaptation' if you prefer), with the re-

sult that it makes no sense to think of them as being in any way tied to the original object of the behaviour. Bromhall seems not to realise that this would render his paedomorphosis theory redundant, and that with either exaptation or paedomorphosis his psychoanalytic interpretation is misplaced.

Spelling out the mother-fixation notion highlights its fallaciousness. "a female must provide as many visual and behavioural cues of motherhood as possible. They must, in other words, possess a strong inclination to treat adult males as though they were their own young". No. 'Good mother' cues would be selected by the male because of the benefit conferred on their offspring, not on himself. Resemblance of some mother-child behavioural repertoires to those of lovers seems like a case of exaptation, but any scattergun maternal behaviour presumably would be acceptable to men for the potential opportunity to initiate sexual behaviour. Men do not behave in a helpless and demanding fashion to women; they care for, protect and provision, and desire to physically envelop and penetrate them. Hardly how most men feel about (and less still act toward) their mother.

Breasts to Bromhall are the quintessential male-attracting female feature. Permanent breasts are unique to humans and arouse men because they shout 'Mama!' - they look as though they are producing milk -- and have evolved by runaway sexual selection to be overblown signals. This is "the one and only credible answer to the question of why males find breasts attractive". No it is not. Brin posits that men were attracted to human females whatever their age, but that breasts (and relatively small waists) evolved to signal post-puberty and to trigger the male's sexual interest. In this way maladaptive non-productive sexual activity with children was avoided.

Psychoanalysis is cited approvingly: "Sigmund Freud, for all the work that he did to reveal how our infantile experiences mould our adult lives, made one significant mistake." Only one?! Has Bromhall not come across the ava-

lanche of scholarly books over the past one or two decades that have completely discredited Freud? A disciple, Nancy Chodorow, is quoted: "As a result of being parented by a woman, both sexes are looking for a return to this emotional and physical union." No they most certainly are not. They leave the home behind entirely to seek a compromise with a member of the opposite sex so as to reproduce. Bromhall needs to read Judith Rich Harris and to get to grips with evolutionary theory.

Bromhall's next foray into the borderlands of science concerns the infamous Mother Goddess myth that all societies were supposedly female-fixated in prehistory. Evidence? The overwhelming predominance of female images in prehistoric art. This argument is so risible I will not take space to refute it, but a good starting point for those who are interested in this literature is Lauren E. Talalay's [review](#) of *The Living Goddesses* by Marija Gimbutas.

Redeeming himself for a spell, Bromhall does a good job on increased brain size and the head/womb neck problem and how there is confusion about these issues. Then we are back in pedomorphosis-explains-all territory with homosexuality and religion. Bromhall shows he does not understand the purpose of childhood self-segregation by sex - he suggests coalition to stand up to older people, and avoidance of incest! The idea that homosexuals are frozen in the same-sex friendship stage has some awkward facts to get round. Why is it that male homosexuals have female friends? And why, during the 'same-sex' childhood phase do children from an early age have sexual feelings towards the opposite sex? Bromhall speculates that we believe in God because we need to cede responsibility to a higher ranking authority; and this is why the church is full of homosexuals. The innovative explanations of our capacity for religious behaviour offered in recent years by evolutionary biologists and cognitive anthropologists, many of which have been reviewed in these pages, do not feature.

I did not think there was anyone left who

really thought that incest would be rife if there were not taboos against it, but Bromhall is that person. He gets Freud to come to his aid: "such an inhibition 'is not to be found in the psychology of the individual'... The occurrence of such taboos clearly contradict the view that members of our species have a universal aversion towards having sex with relatives - or at least those who we are brought up with." Ask those studying children reared in kibbutzim for evidence to the contrary.

Paedophilia receives quite a good discussion, and the important point is made that while only an estimated 3% of the male population has an exclusive same-sex sexual orientation this rises to 33% for paedophiles. Of course, enter pedomorphosis; but you could explain all the facts about paedophilia by dysfunctions of sexual orientation and/or triggers for adult sexual arousal (mentioned above) - specific accidental gene-environment interactions within the womb.

Getting back to theorising about human evolution more generally and with the accent on morphological rather than behavioural change - Mongoloid races are explained in terms of being the most extreme pedomorphic humans. Diversity of peoples is seen as owing to different degrees of environmental stress following the fanning out from Africa. The more people needed to hunt meat for winter survival the greater they had to neotenise so as to be more co-operative. These are old ideas associated with "race realists" such as Richard Lynn and J. Philippe Rushton - see, for example, [Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A life History Perspective](#), 2nd abridged version, Transaction Publishers, 2000; for a critique and an account of the history of these ideas see 'The Higher Latitudes' in [The Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science](#) by Marek Kohn, Vintage, 1995.

The penultimate section is a dubious venture into personality theory. This is a typing according to four degrees of behavioural neoteny: 'alphanotype', 'betaotype', 'neotype' and 'ultratype'. As if psychology was in need of yet another all-

embracing personality type theory.

Finally, Bromhall's discusses his worry that infantilisation will lead to us losing the urge to have children. Well, how would the most basic understanding of evolution theory answer this proposition? In any case, paedomorphosis can act differentially on different aspects of development. Bromhall argues that homosexuals are especially infantised, but then goes on to detail the prodigious sexual activity of gays. The urge to reproduce, which is indirect through sex,

completely escapes paedomorphosis in their case.

Notwithstanding serious problems, *The Eternal Child: An Explosive New Theory of Human Origins and Behaviour* by Clive Bromhall does a valuable service in drawing attention to the idea of human behavioural paedomorphosis as well as the more usually discussed morphological neoteny.

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