

MICHAEL GIFFIN

Evolution, Hyper-Novelty and Cultural Noise

Each day, before saying Morning Prayer, I log on to see what my favourite evolutionary biologists Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying are up to at the Dark Horse Podcast. If this seems odd—we are supposed to be enemies, and I should be praying not surfing the web—I see us as strange bedfellows. I am attracted to Bret and Heather for many reasons. One is my sense that their way of doing evolutionary biology is losing its cultural hegemony in the twenty-first century, for similar reasons that Christianity lost its cultural hegemony in the twentieth, so I am sympathetic towards their cause.

Another is my sense that Western science faces the same threats as Western religion. Christianity is struggling to maintain its credal beliefs in a culture that identifies as rational but is not. Science is struggling to explain what is happening in the human niche, much for the same reason. Dialogue about this is difficult, because dialogue seldom moves beyond interlocutors second-guessing each other, and manufactured antagonism is more newsworthy than meaningful discussion.

Before dialogue begins, it should be admitted that evolutionary biology is the history of life on earth. There are in fact vast scientific gaps between the Big Bang, proposed a century ago by Georges Lemaître—paradoxically, a diocesan Catholic priest—and the creation of the biosphere on which life depends. Add to that the vast scientific gaps between the creation of the biosphere and the beginning of life within it. Because the Big Bang did not create everything necessary for life, it is now theorised that a succession of lesser bangs must have occurred. Given these vast gaps in knowledge, is alienating the Bible from science appropriate?

A Hunter-Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century: Evolution and the Challenges of Modern Life
by Heather Heying & Bret Weinstein
Random House, 2021, 352 pages, about \$50

Bret and Heather began the Dark Horse Podcast after their departure from Evergreen State College in 2017. Bret objected to a dangerous precedent—banning white people from the traditional campus Day of Absence—and mobs of deranged student activists made death threats. As a result, they realised their evolutionary lens had to be rebranded to maintain its explanatory force. Until then, their lens described evolution ecologically; how organisms adapted to nature, construed as the forces of climate, predators and parasites over millions of years. After Evergreen, they realised their lens had to account for the dire and unhealthy pace of social constructionism. Change is happening faster than humans can adapt. Humans have become their own dominant competitor within their evolutionary niche.

In Bret and Heather's new book—*A Hunter-Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century*—they explore the tensions between their evolutionary lens and what they call the hyper-novel challenges of the present century. As evolutionary biologists they “have done empirical work on sexual selection and the evolution of trade-offs, senescence, and morality”. They believe humans are unique within their niche, as evolved biological sexes, as man and woman. Whenever I am tempted to view them through the prism of Romantic Nature-Philosophy, their commitment to first principles prevents them from “falling prey to the naturalistic fallacy”, the idea that “what is” in nature is “what ought to be”.

According to the evidence of evolution, maleness and femaleness predate modern humans by millions of years. Binary sexual characteristics were hard-wired before the primates split into dry-nosed and wet-nosed groups. They are not social constructs of patriarchy, to be deconstructed by Critical Theory. They represent dominance hierarchies older than society itself. Bret and Heather believe “humans are extraordinarily well adapted to, and equipped for, change”. Nevertheless, change is happening at a pace too rapid for brains, bodies

and societies to adapt. Most worrying, “some of the most fundamental truths—like the fact of two sexes—are increasingly dismissed as lies”.

In committing themselves to heteronormativity, Bret and Heather are at odds with the American Medical Association, which recently recommended against recording “male” or “female” on birth certificates. It believes the practice harms LGBT+ persons because these labels are arbitrary—based solely on observations of external genitalia—and the new-born’s future gender identity may differ from the sex assigned at birth. According to the AMA, the current practice perpetuates the view that sex is binary, immutable, and fails to recognise the medical spectrum of gender identity. Here the AMA is bending the scientific method to cater to the socio-political demands of gender ideologues. Biological sex is not assigned at birth. It is an objective scientific fact of conception. Further, it is wrong to include intersex persons in the LGBT+ initialism, they are a distinct sub-population with their own needs. There is in fact no such thing as an LGBT+ person or a community of such persons. The initialism was invented for ideological not scientific purposes.

Science occurs along a spectrum, sound on one end, unsound on the other. We live in an age where facts are scientific if they serve the narrative of whatever ideology is currently hegemonic and unscientific if they do not. One of the delusions of our age is the belief that sex and gender are functionally independent, from each other and from evolutionary biology too. Scientists now reinforce this delusion, because it bankrolls their research, controls government and education, and drives public policy. This is the backstory of the AMA recommendation against recording sex on birth certificates.

In their book, Bret and Heather discuss a common misunderstanding of our age, that because men and women work side by side, and are equal under the law, they are the same. To ignore their differences, to demand they be the same, is sexism of another kind. We were sexual beings long before we were human, and our desire to reproduce is hard-wired. It is a fool’s game to pretend, as our culture now pretends, “that sex equals gender, or that gender has no relationship to sex, or that either sex or gender is not wholly evolutionary”. Sexual differences can be valued without embracing the naturalistic fallacy.

Men and women have three possible reproductive strategies to choose from: first, “partner up and invest long term, reproductively, socially, and emotionally”; second, “force reproduction on an unwill-

ing partner”; third, “force nobody, but also invest little beyond short-term sexual activity”. The first is best for men, women, children and society. The second is morally reprehensible and, historically, available to men rather than women. The third is now widely embraced by women in an age of sexual liberation, birth control and abortion on demand.

Yet sexual liberation has consequences—emotional, societal and evolutionary—the cost of which must be borne, ultimately, by some individuals or groups. Cheap sex has not empowered women in their negotiations with men. The non-judgmental, value-free welfare state was established to protect women, but its benefits are mixed; many women are disempowered, and what results is a class of self-perpetuating social disadvantage. Without monogamy, Bret and Heather believe sexuality is reduced to “females burdened with the entire chore of reproduction, and undiscerning males always on the make”.

In a world of cheap sex, men lose the incentive to pursue their best selves, and become ambivalent about meaningful commitment, while women, freed from reproductive constraints, are released into a world of adolescent sexuality, an endless game of shallow partnerships. Two categories of men benefit from this arrangement: the wealthy and the powerful, who can afford multiple partners, and those who delight in “pretending to be interested in commitment in order to bed women in whom they then invest nothing”. Some men in both categories “also propose a sexual quid pro quo with women trying to advance their careers, a position that women can find impossible to recover from without damage”. According to Bret and Heather, “we have replaced a deeply flawed system of mating and dating with one perfectly positioned to transfer all the spoils to kings and cads”.

This attitude is more pragmatic than moralistic, although it does imply a morality. While Bret and Heather identify with the Left rather than the Right, progressives rather than conservatives, they know their evolutionary lens remains firmly upstream from everything else. There is a necessary corrective, when the cultural pursuit of hyper-novelty ignores the hard-wiring of human evolution. When a hyper-novelty appears in a population, it is usually attached to a narrative of freedom and emancipation. A useful parallel is the talking snake in Genesis, who tells Eve nothing will happen if she eats the forbidden fruit, except she will know everything, like God, which is always tempting.

Bret and Heather invoke an important parable about this: Chesterton’s fence, which urges caution when making changes to systems not fully understood. If there are fences preventing a population

from adapting to a hyper-novelty—like ignoring distinctions between sex and gender, or heterosexuality and homosexuality, or biological men and biological women—the fences should not be removed until their function is understood. Barriers to adopting hyper-novelty tend to be blamed on the prejudices of those who are cautious about them, or who object to them, like conservatives. But not all prejudices are wrong. Some are true. It is the task of reason to judge between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices, but rationality is no longer judge in a civilisation that has become irrational and has relativised all distinctions between true and false.

Bret has interviewed Douglas Murray, author of *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (2019), who wants to know whether a gay gene exists. If it does, homosexuality becomes a hard-wired fact of evolution, and the fence between heterosexuality and homosexuality can be removed with a clear conscience. Yet the genome has already been mapped, and there is no gay gene, but the fence has been removed anyway. Is enough known about why the fence exists to remove it? What are the consequences of removing it?

Bret and Heather believe there is much to say about homosexuality, which they do not discuss, apart from a “short tease”: lesbians and gay men are both attracted to individuals of the same sex, yet the differences between them, in terms of their evolutionary origins and how their relationships tend to play out, are both large and consistent with the differences between women and men described by their evolutionary lens. Female homosexuality cannot be separated from female evolution (being a woman, having a female sexuality). Male homosexuality cannot be separated from male evolution (being a man, having a male sexuality). Despite these adaptations, “heterosexuality remains the norm”.

Bret and Heather believe heterosexual monogamy is the best mating system. This is as close as they get to saying heterosexuality is normal, in a way that studiously avoids either the naturalistic fallacy or the appeal-to-nature fallacy while still acknowledging the importance of the fence separating heterosexuality from homosexuality. All concepts of normal, irrespective of how they are derived, are anathema to those who see humans as blank slates, as raw material independent of biology. Anything less than believing humans can become whatever

they want to become—free from biology—is now understood as conservative or religious prejudice.

Society has always treated male and female homosexuals differently, as Murray suggests: “For all sorts of historical and social reasons, lesbianism has rarely been viewed as a fundamental attack on the social order as male homosexuality has been.” After the sexual revolution, the social order changed. All sexual behaviour was normalised, for the sake of human authenticity and as part of the human-rights push. Murray says, in making its peace with homosexuality, society has determined that there are no differences between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and that homosexuals can pretend to conceive and raise children in the same way as heterosexuals. In this new social order—highly ideological, heavily policed, and totally reliant on Critical Theory—there is a new, authorised, hygienic version of the gay story, and all unauthorised, unhygienic versions of the story are censored.

For example, under public health legislation, sexually transmissible infections are notifiable conditions. When these routinely collected data are reported, they always tell the same story: men who have sex with men suffer significantly higher rates of gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV infection. Although these data are now excised from the hygienic version of the gay story, they do raise an intriguing question: What would the same-sex-marriage debate

have looked like without treatments for the consequences of male-to-male sex?

The normalisation of homosexuality is what Bret and Heather call a hyper-novelty. It is one thing to avoid the naturalistic fallacy and the appeal-to-nature fallacy. It is another thing entirely to proceed with normalisation as if heterosexuality does not matter. Murray highlights a paradox about this. At the same time gay rights activists were trying to convince the world that homosexuality was a born-this-way hardware issue, the opposite was happening to women. A theoretical claim was made in the 1990s, and two decades later it was embedded in law, and suddenly everyone was meant to believe that sex was not biologically fixed but merely a matter of “reiterative social performances”. This undermined the feminist cause:

It left feminism with almost no defences against men arguing they could become women.

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But the whole attempt to turn hardware into software has caused—and continues to cause—more pain than almost any other issue for men and women alike. It is the foundation of the current [cultural] madness. For it asks us all to believe women are different from the beings they have always been. It suggests everything women and men saw—and knew—until yesterday was a mirage and our inherited knowledge about our differences (and how to get along) is all invalid knowledge ... we are being not just asked, but expected, to radically alter our lives and societies on the basis of claims our instincts all tell us cannot possibly be true.

Bret and Heather agree with Murray about the threats posed by hyper-novelty, particularly when cultural elites start demanding adaptations that are unethical or for which no cultural consensus exists. They monitor their language when expressing themselves, though, and we should understand how and why. It is difficult to speak about instincts, or what being a man or a woman means, or how homosexuals go about procreating and parenting in the same way as heterosexuals, or how men can become women, without touching upon the naturalistic fallacy or the appeal-to-nature fallacy in some form.

Those who want to appear scientific studiously avoid conflating biology and nature for strategic reasons, as doing so risks confusing “what is” with “what ought to be”. Nevertheless, biology and nature have been conflated for most of human history, so divorcing them is confusing and often dangerous. Knowledge of nature exists in a liminal space between scientific and other kinds of knowledge, including the knowledge embodied in the philosophical and religious theories of Natural Law.

Once a consensus had been reached, that the Big Bang Theory was true, it became obvious the universe had a beginning, and the idea of a creator was again possible. Once it was understood that the Big Bang did not create the biosphere necessary for life—a succession of lesser bangs was needed for that—the idea of a design also became possible. Once that happened, the idea of the design having a *telos*, a function or purpose, also became possible. Science cannot explain these possibilities. They remain beyond its explanatory power.

When Bret and Heather say “heterosexuality remains the norm” or suggest that heterosexual monogamy is the best mating system, they do so from the perspective of evolutionary biology. The knowledge they present about this is self-evidently

true—to them and those who think like them—but it is now regarded as lies by those who control the humanities, the social sciences, and increasingly the natural sciences too. Now that gender ideology is hegemonic, protected by public policy, enforced by legislation, aided and abetted by the media, one cannot publish what was once an accepted fact about sexual differences in biology—for example, that men are on average physically stronger than women—without being censored.

Bret and Heather are impressive models of their maleness and femaleness. Bret is a biological man with a highly competent male brain and Heather is a biological woman with a highly competent female brain. Watching them working together as a complementary professional couple, as well as husband and wife, is truly inspiring. They are highly aware of their complementarity. Their relationship is anchored in this awareness. In a recent podcast, they alluded to behind-the-scenes conflict, which was nothing more than the traditional clash between the male brain and the female brain, on which cultural creation depends, and all great art too. This clash was once the creative spark driving the plots of stage and screen—tragic and comic—before the West consecrated itself to intersectionality.

The contemporary West finds itself consumed by opposing social justice narratives. One of these demands the removal of any and all barriers to woman’s self-actualisation, including equality of outcome as well as opportunity. Another demands the denial of biological reality, by allowing biological men to be legally recognised as biological women. These tensions are deranging. If we have become a society adapted to and driven by woman’s needs and desires, at the same time we have lost a cultural sense of what woman is.

In 2018, a lobby group in England, Standing for Women, paid £700 for a billboard to advertise a dictionary definition:

Woman
wʊmən
noun
adult human female.

A transgender activist had it removed, and arranged for Standing for Women to be branded a hate group.

The most insidious aspect of gender ideology is its tendency to invoke the exception to demonstrate the rule, and by every measure gender dysphoria is an exception. According to the data, without ideologically-driven and state-sponsored clinical interventions, over 80 per cent of minors with gender dysphoria will grow out of it and become adjusted

to their biological sex. Most dysphoric boys will become gay men. Girls may become lesbian, or may not, since many of them are simply what were once known as tomboys. According to Abigail Schrier's *Irreversible Damage* (2020), adolescent girls presenting with gender dysphoria really suffer from social contagion. Like anorexia nervosa, this is a recent phenomenon, a trend, a hyper-novelty, an example of immature female self-actualisation gone wrong.

Every culture throughout history has allowed for gender fluidity of some kind, usually but not exclusively among effeminate males. Schrier wonders why, in the twenty-first century, the demography of gender dysphoria shifted from boys to girls. Is this simply a manifestation of equal opportunity for women? Why is a social contagion now presented to impressionable children as a human right? Why are parents unable to protect their children from indoctrination? If it focuses on "what is", and avoids "what ought to be", why is science now driven by gender ideology?

"Every age before this one has performed or permitted acts that to us are morally stupefying," Murray writes, before posing the question: "What might we be doing that will be regarded by succeeding generations in the same way we now look down on the slave trade or using Victorian children as chimney sweeps?" The list includes pretending there is no difference between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, blocking puberty in adolescents, removing healthy body parts on demand, allowing biological males to be legally recognised as biological females, and using the exception to demonstrate the rule.

Too many of Chesterton's fences are being removed without understanding what they are for. This is happening partly because it can—advances in technology allow it—and partly because there is no consensus about the consequences. The narratives about why the fences should be removed are as absurd as they are predictable. The fences are only there, the removalists argue, because we live in racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic societies, so removing them is simply an act of social justice, a means of creating a culture sensitive to human rights.

Murray suggests a paradox about this. The most advanced cultures, in terms of human rights, are now presented as among the worst:

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claims of human rights violations happen in exactly inverse proportion to the numbers of human rights violations in a country. You do not hear of such violations in unfree countries. Only a very free society would permit—and even encourage—such endless claims about its own iniquities. Likewise, somebody can only present a liberal arts college in America or a dining experience in Portland as verging on the fascist if the people complaining are as far away from fascism as it is possible to be.

Murray believes we ignore the Marxist substructure of this cultural derangement to our peril. Further, "it is not clear that majority populations will continue to accept the claims they are being told to accept and continue to be cowed by the names that are thrown at them if they do not".

What happened to Bret at Evergreen illustrates this. Initially, the Day of Absence was intended to highlight underappreciated roles, but it became one group encouraging another group to go away. What had begun as a call to consciousness was now a show of force—bullying—which Bret regarded as "an act of oppression in and of itself". While he is anti-racist, and committed to colour-blind freedom of speech, he was accused of racism because he is white. When he tried to engage students in a civilised discussion about the distinction between debate and

dialectic—what higher education is for—they went on the rampage. It is difficult to downplay the danger such behaviour poses to an entire civilisation.

As Bret and Heather pointed out in a recent podcast, written into the West's DNA is the idea that the concept of free speech includes the free exchange of ideas. It is therefore of great concern that Big Tech is controlling our behaviour by creating an environment which effectively censors any speech it disagrees with by not allowing it to be heard. If most consumers have yet to realise it, this algorithm-controlled environment prevents the free exchange of ideas, creating a world of compelled listening, as damaging to human freedom as compelled speech. Cultures insulated from other people's prejudices are not robust and do not thrive.

Why does a Bible-believing celibate like me watch Bret and Heather every morning before praying? Because they help me think things through, rationally, and they give me hope in disorienting times. I appreciate their complementarity. If their

desire to avoid the naturalistic fallacy prevents them from believing they were made for each other (“what ought to be”), it does allow them to believe their relationship works (“what is”). I also appreciate that they celebrate Hannukah, the Festival of Lights, and light the menorah annually. This is as close to Judaism as their book gets.

It is intriguing that Bret and Heather quote Joseph Campbell’s observation that “mythology is a function of biology”, literally false but metaphorically true. Bret has interviewed Richard Dawkins, who categorically refuses to entertain the possibility that the religious instinct might be an evolutionary adaptation. Their own attitude towards religion is different. They see it as “an encapsulation of past wisdom, wrapped in an intuitive, instructive, and difficult to escape package”.

This seems to be their way of reconciling the myth-to-religion thesis of comparative mythology/religion with their evolutionary lens. The problem here is that neither Judaism nor Christianity falls within the myth-to-religion thesis. Christianity originates in Judaism but Judaism did not origi-

nate in myth. The Hebrew scriptures are a divinely breathed record of God’s dealings with his people, and the truth claims of Christianity are predicated on the truth claims of Second Temple Judaism. That subject cannot be studied, meaningfully, without first studying Second Temple Judaism.

Bret has interviewed Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychology professor who also famously objected to compelled speech. Peterson has become a phenomenon, a screen on which so much is projected, simultaneously admired and reviled for asking questions the evolutionary lens has not answered, like how the brain creates consciousness. Neither science nor psychology explains the gaps between the Big Bang, the creation of the biosphere, and the beginning of life within it. Only the Bible does that.

*Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. His latest books, **Religion in the English Novel: From Jane Austen to Margaret Atwood** and **Jane Austen: The Woman on the £10 Note**, are available from Amazon.*

No Atonement

He wondered why atonement didn’t work.
 He logged the efforts of each dramatised
 legation, but she remained anaesthetised
 to his entreaties. He wondered. Should he shirk,
 bunk off classes in the hard calculus
 he’d set himself, where every injury
 was weighed, quit, surpassed, more than offset? Each
 and every gift he gave her, all the fuss
 dissolved in recollection, never matched
 what sat between them. *That*. And that was what,
 a mound of pain, or an ever-seeping slot
 he’d carved across her? He carried on, splashed
 more cash on holidays, and made her cry
 her clapped-out affect of joy. So they learned
 hurt’s boundlessness, but lied to live, and earned
 uneasy armistice, their own Versailles.

Paul Connolly