

Et in Arcadia Ego

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been forgotten in favor of overemphasizing the importance of either immediate or delayed rewards. For instance John Dewey (1938), in reaction against the emphasis on delayed rewards in education, wrote:

Everything depends on the quality of experience that is had. The quality of experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence on later experience. ... Hence the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (p. 27)

On the whole, however, Dewey's understanding of the need to integrate the dialectic tension between immediate and delayed rewards was trivialized by many of his epigones in favor of an exclusive present orientation. I hope such reduction will not result from Martin's laudable focus on the advantages of living in the moment.

Note

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Et in Arcadia Ego

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Monumentum Aere Perennius

You will all have heard of Stonehenge. But throughout the length of Southern England there are many other signs of human settlement dating back several thousands of years—stone circles, hut circles, burial mounds, earthwork forts, and enclosures. Remarkably, we know very little about the ancient inhabitants of these places, beyond what can be guessed from the size of their dwellings and the presence or absence of defensive walls. Prehistory, by definition, leaves us no records. But this, of course, does not remove its fascination, and it has not deterred latter-day Druids, New Age mystics, and many others from giving rein to their imagination and even asserting that we are still influenced today by magical forces hidden in these granite slabs. Harmless nonsense, we smile, because we know better, or rather, we know where knowledge ends and make-believe begins.

Carpe Diem

Martin (this issue) sketches an intriguing outline of the origins and consequences of human motivation. Much as Freud saw a conflict between the principles of

pleasure and reality, so Martin sees a conflict between the kind of culture “in which humans first evolved” and the demands of contemporary “delayed-return” society. From this stems much of the anxiety, if not the psychopathology, of everyday life, including, supposedly, our concerns about death and immortality. It is a powerful word, *evolved*, but what does it really mean? How many thousands or millions of years are we talking about? In many nonhuman primates (as well as other species), one can identify different forms of social structure even within closely related species, depending on factors such as the density of food supplies, the threat of predators, and competition from conspecifics (Crook, 1970).

One could well argue that by the time one could talk about *human* culture, “evolution” of our present cognitive and behavioral capacities was practically complete. Why should we assume that, because a particular cultural form (African hunter-gatherer society) has been around for a good deal longer than our own, it exerts any more of a causal influence on our present wishes and fears than might the stone-age societies of Northern Europe? Although Martin does not quite put it in such terms, an answer might be because such hunter-gathering societies in some sense are a closer

reflection of the natural “instincts” that we all, as human beings, share. Put differently, members of hunter–gatherer societies (a few of which still exist) have an easier time of it than us, at least psychologically, because, unlike us, they have only to behave instinctively, or at least do what comes “naturally.” This is not only dangerously patronizing, it also paints a simplistic picture of the differentiated organization of such societies. For a start, the hunters are typically men and the gatherers are women. Are such sex roles also the product of differentially evolved motives?

The problem here is not so much the selectivity of anthropological evidence, but the idea that what underlies behavioral differentiation is the evolution of distinct “motives” that fit us best only for environments of a certain kind. Contrast this with the idea that the more important product of evolution is a capacity to adapt to whatever environment one encounters. According to such a view, no cultural form has a necessary causal or psychological primacy, but all reflect an interaction between inherited capacities and environmental demands.

O Tempora! O Mores!

Whatever the status of such evolutionary speculations, Martin (this issue) is explicit in his assertion that present-day industrialized society is a “delayed-return system.” Perhaps it is the consequence of having come of age rather far away from Samoa, but I find it difficult to characterize the culture with which I am most familiar as any single kind of system, whether delayed return or anything else. Of course, studying for a PhD (Martin’s example) involves a different kind of time investment than picking berries, but it seems curious to take this as contemporary culture’s defining activity. Other epithets, no less selective, invoke quite different images: the consumer society, the affluent society, the permissive society, post-Communist society, and no doubt soon and at least as justifiably, the Internet society.

These terms are used to make a point about social change, not to describe society as a whole. Even so, it would be as easy to argue that we live in a society that, far from being definable by its emphasis on delayed returns, encourages and legitimates instant gratification, perhaps to a greater extent than even a generation or two ago. In how many North American or Western European families (even those with budding PhDs among them!) is it still the custom to insist that children eat every last mouthful of food on their plates if they are to avoid having it cold for breakfast the next morning? Where once we had rationing, now we have overproduction. I am not suggesting that either circumstance is inherently preferable, but only that social change is happening all the time and is detectable, not merely in evolutionary time, but in living memory.

There are serious issues to be addressed concerning the psychological consequences of social change and of engagement in different forms of employment and economic activity. Issues such as “powerlessness” (Seeman, 1971) and a mismatch between job demands and job control (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) reflect inequalities in societies and can adversely affect both psychological and physical health (Bosma et al., 1997). Evidently, individuals will make different choices in specific areas of their lives with respect to the balance of inputs and anticipated returns over shorter and longer time frames. This can be reflected in their preferences for casual hourly paid work versus a weekly wage versus a monthly salary, for buying or renting their home, for investment and saving or gambling on a lottery. These choices frequently covary with inequalities of power and opportunity. Even so, as Seeman pointed out, to opt for more immediate than delayed returns may reflect a strategy of adaptation to social constraints rather than alienation from society’s basic values.

O Lente, Lente Currite, Noctis Equi!

Martin (this issue) links his thesis explicitly with terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Against the backdrop of most cognitive social psychology, this theory is certainly an outlier in terms of its appeal to notions such as “unconscious mortality concerns” and “an instinctive desire for continued life, which humans share with all other creatures” (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997, p. 379). Events or stimuli that, even subliminally, increase the salience of people’s concerns for their own mortality supposedly lead to a compensatory commitment to a “cultural worldview” on which their self-esteem depends. This, it is implied, goes beyond the more general influence of negative affect on information processing.

Martin’s addition to this heady cocktail appears to be that the conflict between how we have evolved and the delayed-return society in which we now live is a major cause of such supposed mortality concerns. One sign of this is the belief in a form of afterlife. It would be interesting to know the strength of the anthropological evidence linking religious beliefs about an afterlife to differences in the economic system of a society. Once again, because the main contrast is supposedly between a very few hunter–gatherer societies and “the rest,” I worry that the diversity of such belief systems is being underestimated. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, say, all view the idea of life after death in somewhat different terms. Surely it is simplistic to gloss over these differences by lumping them all together as examples of “delayed-return” religions? If one is going to start trying to account for such

diversity and the geographical distribution of the world's great faiths, is it not more parsimonious to look at historical patterns of migration and imperial conquests than at prehistorical shifts from hunting and gathering to farming?

None of this is to deny that, among religious individuals, and perhaps even among those for whom their absence of faith is an issue, beliefs concerning the possibility of life after death may sometimes have important consequences, and it is not to deny that all of us may, at some time, feel anxious for the life of a loved one, if not for our own life. The difficulty is attributing any of this to the fact that we supposedly live in a delayed-return society.

Et in Arcadia Ego

Martin (this issue) claims that his "is not so much a theory of cultural differences as it is a theory of individual processes." However, a theory of individual differences must address the question of how they are acquired. From the perspective of social learning theory, personality is essentially the way we have learned to respond to specific environmental, physiological, and interpersonal cues. If the evidence points that way, we can allow that many such cues may be subliminal. (Indeed, the influence of subliminal cues and primes may well depend largely on prior learning.) This does not deny the possible role of hereditary factors in shaping such learning, but if we are looking for an account of individual *differences*, an emphasis on *universal* motives seems a curious place to start. Indeed, if the "various social psychological motives" to which Martin refers have a part to play, it is as the products of social learning, rather than their cause. Such learning consists, to a great extent, in recognizing the constraints and opportunities for goal-attainment inherent in both more specific and more general classes of situations (Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Of course it is true that in our society (just as in less developed societies) people can often be frustrated in their attempts to gain delayed rewards. It is also true that (just as in less developed societies) people can seek satisfaction or solace in activities that provide more instant gratification, and persistence in the pursuit of distant goals can be enhanced, as Martin (this issue) notes, by positive feedback at intermediate stages. Immediate reinforcements are more powerful than delayed ones (as they are for other animals), not because they rekindle collective memories of some hunter-gatherer idyll, but simply because they have greater information value; that is, they provide a more reliable and identifiable basis for prediction. It is here, to my mind, that Martin misses an important trick. Whether at a societal or an individual level, the "systems" he describes may not necessarily conflict with

one another. They may simply be activated in parallel. Depending on the particular behavior in question, the timescale between activation and completion can be shorter or longer, but each behavior pattern in an individual's repertoire will have its own learning history and its own dynamics in space and time. The same poet (Horace) who urged us to "pick today's fruit without relying on the future" also offered his verses as "a monument more lasting than bronze", thanks to which he would not "altogether die."

The real question implicit in Martin's article is how human beings come to acquire a self-system that allows them to deploy such impressive complexity and adaptability in pursuit of multiple goals. Many complex behaviors (like the selection of keys on a keyboard) are performed so quickly that they appear almost reflexive. Others, such as the planning of a journey or the stalking and capture of a wild animal, can take far longer. Time is integral to all such performances, but in the sense of timing rather than of mere duration. Indeed, it is our capacity for coordinated activity across many different time frames that characterizes human skill and adaptability (Port & van Gelder, 1995). To describe this capacity as an attempt to compensate short-term needs with long-term demands seems far off target.

Our civilization may offer us different conveniences and discontents than might be found in different continents and epochs. Technology can allow us to go faster and further and to share and store information more reliably. Just as civilization reflects our goals, it also shapes our behavior, but these are particularities of product, not primarily of process. The differences we observe between and within cultures testify not only to the demands of different environments, but also to the versatility of our self-system and our cognitive capacity to interpret and respond creatively to those demands. This capacity is not magic. It is far more powerful than that, and there are the signs of it everywhere, even in Arcadia.

Note

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The Tireless Social Psychologist

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A good friend of mine once remarked that commentaries are usually not much fun to write—or to read for that matter. After all, the major intellectual advance has already happened in the target article, and so the commentators are left to sift through the ashes, dot the *is* and cross the *ts*, search for survivors, tie up loose ends, sweep up behind the parade, and otherwise mix a few metaphors as the dust settles. Then again, when we come across an intellectual advance in our field, most of us are full of commentary only to find ourselves with few takers for our insights. Thus, another way to look at writing a commentary is as a privilege. It gives us a public forum for our thoughts, and we can be reasonably certain that at least one person will pay attention to them.

In this case, writing a commentary is a privilege for other reasons as well. Given Lewin's admonition that nothing is more practical than a good theory, one might expect the field of psychology to be chock full of bold theories that explain elegantly, yet parsimoniously, a wide range of behavioral phenomena. But as popular lament would have it, rather than advancing far-ranging theories with reckless abandon, social psychologists have confined themselves to advancing models and niche theories to account for a set of data in ways that alternative explanations cannot. I am not sure that this is an adequate description of the theoretical state of our field, but those who subscribe to such a view should take solace in knowing that at least every once in a while someone will rattle the cage of our collective theoretical confinement.

Martin's (this issue) I–D compensation theory rattles the cage in several ways. At the least it provides a new way of looking at a set of phenomena generally understood as indicative of terror management, fear of social exclusion, escape from the self, and ego-defense. At best it has the potential to provide us with a more social psychological understanding of the operation of social motives in general. Given that this

is the first time out for the theory, it is not surprising that it does a better job at some of these than others. At this point, I am most intrigued by the theory's ability to provide an alternative account for terror management phenomena.

A New Look at Terror Management?

Terror management theory has us believe that a great deal of our behavior is motivated by a fear of death. More specifically, to cope with the terror brought on by the awareness of our mortality, we create and enact a cultural worldview that allows us to believe that some part of us will continue after the physical demise of our bodies. Now I will not deny that the theory has amassed a wealth of data that seem to support it. But whenever I try to explain this to students or other unsuspecting victims I am overcome by the ir-repressible urge to dance around an 18-in. replica of Stonehenge. The point is that it seems silly to assume that we live our lives consumed by the utter terror brought on by the awareness of our mortality. Sure, few people probably cherish the idea of their mortality. But at the same time there are probably few who experience the sense of terror the theory proposed in its early days. Recent reformulations have dealt with this and other issues in two ways. First, the fear of death is now said to be experienced outside of conscious awareness, thus explaining why it is often not included in our phenomenological and reportable experience. Second, this unconscious fear is now said to have the potential for terror, thus explaining why most of us are not constantly consumed by a fear of death.

Of course, one could call this theoretical refinements, but it seems to me that moving the fear of death from the realm of consciousness and replacing the notion of terror with a mere potential of terror constitutes a bit of theoretical backpedaling. Sure, on one level the