

## Re: Review of The Extended Phenotype

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"Michael Ragland" <[ragland37@webtv.net](mailto:ragland37@webtv.net)> wrote

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> *Chapter two, "Genetic Determinism and Gene Selectionism", is by far the*  
> *weakest chapter in the book. Essentially Dawkins argues that he is not a*  
> *genetic determinist (he has often been so accused) because he admits*  
> *that the environment interacts with genes to shape behavior. However, in*  
> *the sense that Dawkins likes to postulate genes that incline (if not*  
> *force) animals, including humans, towards specific behaviors, Dawkins*  
> *obviously is a genetic determinist. It is true that the phrase "genetic*  
> *determinist" often had (and has) connotations of racism and reactionary*  
> *politics, and it is understandable that the non-racist, non-reactionary*  
> *Dawkins would want to clear himself of unpleasant characterizations.*  
> *However, there must be some descriptive term for Dawkins' belief that*  
> *behaviors can be explained in terms of specific (albeit always*  
> *conveniently unknown) genes that were selected for on the basis of*  
> *influencing specific behaviors. If not "genetic determinism", then what?*  
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The problem is that the liberal left is so focused on politics that they don't bother to define what a "genetic determinist" is in scientific terms. If it means that the phenotype is wholly determined by the genes, with no environmental influence, no matter how extreme, then of course no one is a genetic determinist. However if we just mean that, for many traits, everyday environmental influence can be ignored, then skin colour for Negroes, for instance, is genetically determined, but for white people less so, since whites respond to sunshine by producing pigment. With the exception of a few Negroes like Michael Jackson, with very unusual environmental influences, all will be darker than all Europeans.

Now skin colour is so easily and objectively measured that no one can deny how the system works. Behavioural characteristics are much more difficult to measure, and much more politically sensitive. However an environmental determinist claims that any negative characteristics of Negro behaviour are necessarily and wholly caused by the environment alone, because the political implications of claiming otherwise are not acceptable. This is an ideological and anti-scientific position, though for specific aspects of behaviour the environmental determinist may turn out to be right. "Genetic determinist" is often used of anyone who is not an extreme environmental determinist, for these politically-sensitive traits.

In fact even the ideology is suspect. For instance if poor Negro school performance is caused largely by their high rate of single parenting, there is a strong argument that nothing should be done to reverse the consequences of these lifestyle choices. On the other hand if the poor performance is due to genetics, then an "equal opportunities" policy would leave few or no Negroes in positions of responsibility, which may not be socially desirable, so some form of affirmative action may be called for.

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> *(Just for the record, I don't deny that any given behavior could in principle be influenced by specific genes -- I just think that such claims should only be made on the basis of experimental evidence concerning the genes and behaviors in question. Simply assuming that genes for behaviors must exist is as intellectually bankrupt as assuming that life on other planets must exist.)*

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The behaviour is caused by the nervous system, which is to a very great extent genetically specified. The exception may be that subset of human behaviour which we attribute to "free will". So if a bee flaps her wings in response to rising temperatures in the hive, we can assume that there is a gene or set of genes which has evolved under selective pressure for that behaviour. Actually finding the genes, and determining how they exact their influence, is of course a wholly different matter and a very hard thing to do. With the exception of the knee-jerk reflex, no animal behaviour is completely understood.

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> *The 1999 rerelease concludes with an afterword by the philosopher Dennett. Whether this a good addition depends on your point of view. Personally, while respecting ancient philosophers like Plato, I don't find modern philosophers very insightful. As with theology, almost all of the interesting questions of philosophy have long since been appropriated by science.*

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I think that the current academic climate is very hostile to philosophy. Certainly it is hard to name a single work of philosophy produced in the twentieth century that will still be a household name at the end of the twenty-first, unless you count works by political dictators.

[moderator's note: Popper? Russell? Godel? Wilkins? Need I go on? I could add Dewey, Goodman, and a host of others in various areas of endeavor. – JAH]

However I don't think that science has appropriated most of the questions. Philosophers and theologians are interested in very basic physics – what is the nature of the universe – and in human behaviour – what is our place in the universe. They are not too bothered about how atoms line up in crystals nor in the immune system. Now basic physics and human behaviour are precisely the areas where normal scientific methods break down. You can try to study language as any other behaviour, but you will get nowhere, and you might even realise that what you are doing in writing a paper on language is applying language to itself, not necessarily a legitimate procedure. I know a lot less about fundamental physics, except that it also has huge

theoretical problems, and absolutely basic questions, such as "why is there something rather than nothing?", "why are physical laws constant?", "why are there three dimensions of space and one of time?" etc are not even close to being answered.

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> *In regard to Dennett's afterword, my respect*

> *for philosophy is not particularly raised by Dennett's constant*

> *confusing of the results of the research program of molecular genetics*

> *with those of traditional evolutionary biology. Despite Dennett's*

> *assertions, Dawkins' ideas have had essentially no influence on such*

> *molecular fields as HIV research. I'm not saying that HIV research (for*

> *example) couldn't benefit from Dawkins' ideas, just that they are not*

> *being used -- count the few citations to Dawkins in molecular biology*

> *papers if you disagree.*

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Ideas can be too basic to be cited. For instance we know that HIV has a very high mutation rate, and so evolutionary biology is essential to understanding how the different variants of the disease spread, but it is unlikely that anyone would bother to attribute this understanding to an original author, just as Hooke isn't cited when someone weighs a chimpanzee on a spring balance. It just forms part of the backdrop of everyday scientific knowledge.

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> *Although I have been quite critical of the book, I have to admit that it*

> *was probably the most thought-provoking book I've read in quite some*

> *time. A book well worth reading.*

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Dawkins is an excellent writer. I think the problem with the "Extended Phenotype" is that it is too technical to be a good popular book, and too popular to be a good contribution to the primary literature.