

ESSAY REVIEW

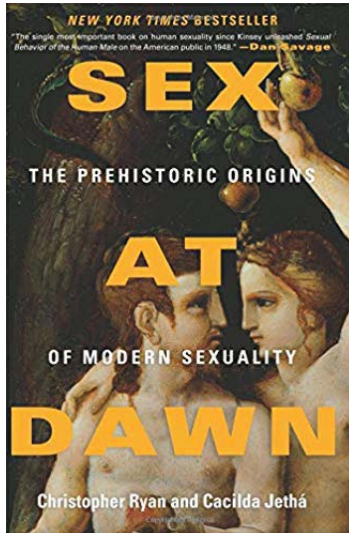
A Treat for Contrarian Thinkers

Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá. HarperCollins, 2010. 400 pp. \$26.99 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-06-170780-3. (Paperback, audiobook, and Kindle versions carry a different subtitle: **Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What it Means for Modern Relationships.**)

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The conventional wisdom across the civilized world has it that among mammals, the human species is characterized almost uniquely by the pairing of individual males and females into monogamy, a lifelong coupling that is best suited to the nurturing of the next generation. *Sex at Dawn* demolishes those beliefs with a host of evidence and logical argument. Instead, it argues, it was only after the nomadic hunter–gatherer lifestyle had given way to agriculture, settlement, and urbanization that societies came to regard pair-bond monogamy as socially desirable—and therefore as natural: “science all too often grovels at the feet of the dominant cultural paradigm” (p. 118).

In the tree of life, we humans are one of the great apes. Our lineage branched from the great-ape stem long after the gibbon (~22 million year ago) and orangutan (~17 million years). Gorillas branched off about 3 million years before humans, and we are separated by about 2 million years from our closest relatives, the chimpanzees and the bonobos. Those closest relatives live in bands or clans of perhaps 100 to 150 or so individuals (give or take on the order of dozens). Their lifestyle is gathering and hunting and moving around, and within the clan everything is shared: obtaining and consuming food and nurturing the next generation. This thorough-going sharing of activities and responsibilities is obviously beneficial to the next generation since it provides insurance against accidents that may strike any individual parent. An important part of this mutuality is that sexual intercourse is freely practiced, any given male having frequent intercourse with many different females and any given female having sex with many different males, conducive to “a more intensely cooperative social group” (p. 64). In sexual behavior, bonobos and humans resemble one another



more than either mimics chimp behavior (pp. 77–78), possibly because a genetic mutation that predisposes to cooperative sociality may be shared by bonobos and humans but not by chimps (p. 72).

One indication that this communally sharing lifestyle is evolutionarily natural to humans is that something like it persists among the surviving examples of hunter-gathering groups. Only when humans settled in fixed locations, made possible by agriculture and domestication of animals, could the very concept have arisen of *ownership* of tangible properties, including *individual* ownership. Thus only in settled, “civilized” societies could the practice of slavery come into being, as well as a patriarchal attitude that wives could be owned chattels of their husbands. Applying economic theory to human behavior as found in modern societies has brought fallacious notions (p. 167) about how or why males and females choose one another (p. 49) for individually mutual exploitation (pp. 57, 270).

Across modern societies there are many taboos and laws regulating sexual intercourse: commonly prohibitions against adultery and against intercourse before marriage, divorce as forbidden or at least stigmatized, homosexuality as unnatural and punishable. Indeed in some groups there is even an underlying attitude that there is something unwholesome about sexual intercourse itself—for example, in the Roman Catholic Church that the Servants of God preserve their virtue and purity by remaining celibate. The modern conventional wisdom, apparently supported by studies in “evolutionary psychology” (p. 52), also discounts female libido, with nymphomania classed as pathological; why then so many practices to curb it?—chastity belts, genital mutilation, isolation in harems (p. 39).

Those present-day practices are obviously incompatible with the hypothesis that lifelong monogamy is natural to the human species, that we have evolved in that manner. If monogamy were built into our genes and our instincts, societies would not need prohibitions against deviating from it; the widespread prevalence of prohibitions and punishments for deviating from lifelong monogamy is a powerful argument that this is not the lifestyle that evolution intended for us. Instead, what is natural to human beings is what is also natural to chimps and especially bonobos: freely practiced,

promiscuous (but not indiscriminate!) sexual intercourse that serves to cement the bonds of the larger community.

Sex at Dawn draws for its assertions on a tremendous range of evidence from a variety of respectable and quite orthodox sources. Some points are quite surprising, and the whole book is written in a delightfully witty style. Here are a few of the many other points worthy of thought:

- “Many biologists advocate reclassifying humans, chimps, and bonobos together to reflect our striking similarities” (p. 23), namely lack of a tail, spending much time on the ground, highly intelligent, intensely social (p. 63).

- Monogamy is not found in any primates that live in large social groups (p. 97). Gibbons, the only monogamous apes, live in “small family units . . . isolated in a territory of thirty to fifty square kilometers” (p. 64).

- That humans have evolved for frequent sexual intercourse is demonstrated by (a) male “testicles larger than any monogamous primate would ever need” and “vulnerably outside the body where cooler temperatures help preserve stand-by sperm cells for multiple ejaculations”; (b) “the longest, thickest penis found on any primate”; (c) pendulous female breasts; (d) female capacity for multiple orgasms with “cries of delight (*female copulatory vocalization*)” (pp. 12–13, 224, 230, 235).

- The insistence that monogamy is nature-intended entails confusing sexual desire with love between human beings and makes for unrealistic expectations of lifelong sexual “fidelity” in marriage (Chapter 8).

- Men as well as women tend to be happier in matriarchal societies (pp. 72, 133–134).

- Much of the conventional wisdom about prehistoric humans is based, wrongly, on extrapolating backwards from what is observed in present-day societies (e.g., p. 75). The book calls this “Flintstonization”; historians use the term “whiggishness” for the mistake of judging the past by standards of the present. The book also coins the useful term “Yucatán,” short for “Remember the Yucatán,” to describe unwarranted, misleading interpretations: The Yucatán peninsula in Mexico was so named by the Spanish explorer Cortés through misinterpreting what the natives had said to him, which meant, in their native language, “I don’t understand you” (p. 19).

- Reminder: Natural evolution does not mean that things get *better* from our point of view (p. 36). Nor does what we call progress make everything better: “Stone age [pre-agriculture] populations lived healthier lives than did most of the people who came immediately after them. . . . And maybe than people who came *long* after them” (p. 175). Through inept statistical analyses, data from prehistoric skeletons have been misinterpreted as to average height and life expectancy (pp. 200 ff.).

- The Malthus argument, evolution by natural selection under the pressure of population growth, does not apply to humans (p. 156); foraging groups do not experience appreciable population growth (p. 159). Agriculture set off the increasingly rapid growth of human populations.

- Claimed knowledge of chimpanzee behavior is flawed: Data from captive chimps are no more reliable than studies of human prisoners would be characteristic of inherently human behavior (p. 67); Jane Goodall’s conclusions about violence and selfishness were based on studies that disturbed the natural order (pp. 67, 187–189).

Suggestions that male violence including warfare was common among hunter-gathering societies are also based on invalid examples (pp. 183–187).

➤ Humankind’s deadliest infectious diseases came from domesticated animals, following agriculture and settled living (pp. 206–207).

I hope these points will act as teasers to persuade everyone to read this book; its range of evidence and sources and scrupulously logical argument can only be appreciated by reading it all. One learns of inferences that can be drawn from variations in sexual dimorphism between species, and between human races;¹ the World Health Organization guidelines call for condoms to be of different diameters for various parts of the world (pp. 240–241). There is a discussion of *sperm competition* and how this can explain much about specifically human penises and the duration of human copulation (Chapter 17).

Part V of the book discusses how present-day cultural dogmas, notably about monogamy as biologically natural, are dysfunctional and the cause of much misery, setting out at length the basis for the remark in Chapter 1 that “*many, if not most, sexually dysfunctional marriages are nobody’s fault*” (p. 23, italics in original). The authors offer their insights as sound information, but say “We are not advocating any particular response to the information we’ve put together.”

Nevertheless, we should all be grateful for this opportunity to better understand ourselves and our interactions with others.

Note

¹ Humans differ biologically in ways that correspond to common definitions of race, and this is acknowledged for example in treating diseases and in choosing medications and doses. It is not *racism* to recognize that fact, understanding at the same time that these racial characteristics are *statistical averages and tendencies*. Racism is the misinterpretation that such stereotypes apply universally to the same degree in every individual, and that these *biological* differences imply and justify discrimination on intellectual, moral, or social grounds (see, e.g., Ruth Benedict, *Race and Racism*, 1942 and later editions).

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