

### **Evolved Instinct Versus Civilization in Three Novels**

Darwin's theory of evolution provides a framework for understanding human behavior. According to Darwin, natural selection directs the development of instinct and promotes instincts that encourage survival and reproduction. This principle applies to humans as well as other animals, so it implies that human behavior is fundamentally motivated by survival. This can lead to "savage" behavior, where an individual gains a competitive advantage over others by acting with only his own benefit in mind. Paradoxically, the same survival instinct also provides the basis for civilization, as a group of people can rationally conclude that their individual abilities to survive will be improved if they cooperate; this parallels Adam Smith's theory that a complex economy can develop from individual self-interest. Thus, individuals are motivated to comply with the social code of their society, so that they may benefit from being in that society. Yet these instinctual and social motivations often conflict. This conflict is a major theme in many works of literature, including Voltaire's *Candide*, Butler's *Erewhon*, and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Darwin's *Origin of Species* introduces the principle of natural selection in evolution. Darwin theorizes that all species are subject to random variations that are transmitted through reproduction, so those variations which provide individuals with "the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind" are preserved (81). Because there is a Malthusian limit on the population that can be supported at any time, any variation that provides one individual with a competitive advantage over others, however slight, is encouraged. Though it is traditionally applied to physiological characteristics, Darwin notes that natural selection can also explain the development of instinct. Over long periods of time, "natural selection accumulate[s] slight modifications to any extent in any useful direction" (243). Accordingly, the most powerful instincts are those that provide a competitive advantage in the struggle for existence. *The Descent of Man* extends this principle to the evolution of humans. This suggests that the same survival and competitive instincts

are present in both animals and man. Darwin observes this similarity upon encountering a tribe of “savages” who lived “like wild animals” without government or other social constructs, and realizes that “such were our ancestors” (*Descent of Man*, 276). These instincts continue to be present in modern humans, though they are generally controlled by the constraints of society.

Darwin claims that the characteristics of man that allow him to be “the most dominant animal that has ever appeared on the earth” are “immense superiority” in “his social habits” as well as “his intellectual faculties” (229). The difference between humans and other animals lies in the development of advanced societies: by cooperating extensively, humans can be more evolutionarily fit than animals who do not. Adam Smith makes a similar argument in *The Wealth of Nations* when he observes that “in civilized society [man] stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes” whereas “in almost every other race of animals each individual ... is entirely independent” (118). According to Smith, an economy develops because humans are able to rationally conclude that their own self-interests would best be served by cooperating with others. There is a social contract at work in Smith’s division of labor: an individual will be able to specialize in performing one type of labor, because he knows that he can rely on others to fulfill his other needs in exchange. While Smith treats this primarily as an economic theory, in a larger sense the same principle is also responsible for the development of societies. It can be said that at its most basic level, the function of a society is to aid its members in survival. This requires a social contract: certain instinctual behavior is forbidden because it would be detrimental to others, and every individual must refrain from this behavior even though it might benefit him. Natural selection encourages this development because it provides the species with a competitive advantage in the Darwinian struggle for existence. But the powerful primitive instincts that Darwin observes in animals and savage man are still present in all humans, and they can conflict with these social codes. If breaking the rules of society will provide them with a great advantage, humans will naturally be tempted by instinct to do so.

The conflict between instinctual behavior and social codes appears in Voltaire’s *Candide*.

This novel presents the competitive instinct as an obstacle that prevents the achievement of a perfect society. This is demonstrated with the utopian society of Eldorado. Candide, the protagonist, upon arriving at Eldorado, describes it as “the place where all goes well,” and says it is “so different from what we are used to” (77). Wealth is abundant in Eldorado; gold and jewels are so commonplace that they are seen as worthless garbage. The social system is similarly idealized. Everyone is treated equally and with respect; it is a fundamental Eldoradan belief that “all men are free” (83). There are neither courthouses nor prisons. The society has no apparent laws, because everyone is cooperating willingly and laws are unnecessary. Their cooperation makes possible spectacular achievements, such as elegant mansions, thousand-member orchestras, and impressive advances in science and technology. Eldorado has become so perfect because social convention has entirely overpowered instinct. Here, the social convention needs not be formalized as laws. Instead, it exists implicitly because each individual is part of the community and shares the same beliefs. The survival instinct essentially does not exist because it is not necessary; everyone is prosperous in Eldorado. Indeed, it seems unlikely that Darwinian selection would take place in such an environment, because there is no scarcity to create a struggle for existence. However, Eldorado is merely a utopia that cannot exist in reality. It only exists separated from the rest of the world by an impenetrable mountain barrier, isolated from the less civilized people outside. The visiting outsiders, Candide and his companion, cannot remain in Eldorado. Before long, they decide that they must leave so they can “show their friends how rich they had grown” (82). They have no special status in Eldorado, so they are compelled by greed to return to where their newfound wealth will grant them an advantage over others. This greed is a result of the competitive instinct that arises through Darwinian evolution. Thus, this depiction of Eldorado implies that an ideal society is unattainable because it is incompatible with human instinct.

A similar theme is evident in Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, though Butler’s complex satire makes his argument less obvious. Just as the name of the novel is (nearly) an inversion of the world “nowhere,” the Erewhonian culture reverses many of the traditional principles of society. Whereas Western society provides treatment for illness and requires punishment for immoral

behavior, the Erewhonians do the opposite. Bad health and misfortune are “considered more or less criminal” in Erewhon, and the legal system passes severe sentences upon the unhealthy, such as the man found guilty “of the great crime of labouring under pulmonary consumption” (113, 115).

What would be considered criminal by Western society is acceptable in Erewhon; at most it would require some treatment from a “straightener”, the equivalent of a doctor. The narrator, an outsider, is shocked to discover that the man Nosnibor is “favorably considered in the best of society” even though he “has but lately recovered from embezzling a large sum of money” (91). The Erewhonian social values are clearly inspired by Darwinian evolution: the judge says that “human law must emphasize the decrees of nature” (113). By punishing illness, the society takes on the role of natural selection, ensuring that the most physically fit survive. This proves effective, in that the Erewhonians have extraordinary strength and beauty. Crimes such as theft are barely discouraged, for such behavior provides a competitive advantage over others and would be favored by natural selection. The narrator is uncomfortable with this idea, as he believes “by [his] education ... and also in some degree from inborn instinct” a stable society must necessarily have a social code that prevents “unhandsome dealings” such as Nosnibor’s embezzlement (92). Yet Erewhon is not without social convention. The principle of Ydgrun is a major force in Erewhon. Ydgrun is an anagram for Mrs. Grundy, a symbol of convention, and the “law of Ydgrun” is “conformity until absolutely intolerable” (158). Few people openly admit to being one of its followers, and the Ydgrunian principles of “kindly training, a good example, and an enlightened regard to one’s own welfare” often conflict with the natural-selection-based principles of Erewhon (160). Nonetheless, Erewhonian society requires Ydgrun to function, as it “kept hundreds of thousands in those paths which make life tolerably happy” (157). As a result, the “conflicting claims of Ydgrun and the gods” are generally resolved “in Ydgrun’s favor” (159). In *Erewhon* we find that natural selection encourages behavior that violates traditional morality, such as theft and embezzlement. Furthermore, even in Erewhon the social codes, as represented by Ydgrun, must take precedence over instinct for the society to be stable.

The conflict between human instinct and the requirements of society is depicted in a more

direct manner in Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In this novel, the savage, instinctual aspects of man and the refined, civilized aspects are presented as distinct entities. Dr. Henry Jekyll is an elderly, highly-regarded, wealthy doctor who strives to be as respectable and civilized as possible. Edward Hyde is motivated by animal-like instincts rather than respect for the laws of society, and everyone who encounters him is struck by his evil and repulsive nature. Hyde commits two particularly reprehensible crimes: trampling over the body of a young child and brutally murdering a distinguished gentleman. These acts are considered so horrifying because physically attacking or murdering another individual violates one of the most basic social laws. However, from the perspective of evolved instinct, they are more understandable: these sort of actions would provide a survival advantage in a competition for resources, so the instinct is preserved by natural selection. Jekyll and Hyde initially seem to be polar opposites, but we discover that they are in fact two personalities of the same person, separated only by a drug that transforms one into the other. Jekyll writes that he became aware that there were "two natures that contended in the field of [his] consciousness," and he was himself a combination of the two (84). These two natures are his rational element, which lives by his "bonds of obligation" to society, and the primitive, instinctual "lower elements in [his] soul" (86, 85). In an effort to rid himself of the undesirable "evil" motivations of instinct, he attempts to separate these two elements through a drug, and creates Mr. Hyde. However, he does not succeed, because Jekyll and Hyde are inextricably linked and cannot truly be separated. To his horror, Jekyll finds himself uncontrollably changing form: in one case, he goes to bed as Jekyll and wakes up as Hyde. Likewise, Hyde is not entirely free of Jekyll; he recognizes what is happening, and when he meets Dr. Lanyon for the final time, he is desperate to be given the potion so he can become Jekyll again. This conflicting "dual nature" is present in everyone; Jekyll notes that "all human beings ... are commingled out of good and evil" (88). Thus, each individual is composed of a rational, civilized Jekyll and a primitive, savage Hyde. Though one element may seek to dominate the other, both are present and inseparable.

Instinctive and social behavior conflict in these three novels. Since instinct is developed through evolution, according to Darwin, natural selection creates strong impulses to survive, to reproduce, and to compete with other individuals. The human power of reason makes possible the

development of societies, which arise, much like Smith's economy, when individuals realize that they can survive and compete more effectively as a group if they establish and obey a social contract. However, this social code requires restrictions on behavior, which can conflict with instinct. In *Erewhon*, we see a society based on Darwinistic principles. This results in customs that are foreign and shocking to the reader and the narrator — exchanging the treatment of illness and crime, for example. We see also that a society cannot effectively function on instinct alone: even Erewhon requires the social conventions of Ydgrun. *Candide*'s Eldorado is an ideal, utopian society that only exists because of the lack of primitive, instinctual behavior. Ordinary humans such as Candide cannot stay in Eldorado because of their greed, which results from the competitive impulse. *Jekyll and Hyde* suggests that Jekyll's civilization and Hyde's raw instinct are two conflicting elements present in every individual. Neither can be totally eliminated, much as one might try; everyone is necessarily motivated by a combination of these two factors. Taken together, these three books suggest that a perfect society is unachievable because humankind's instincts are its fatal flaw. To some degree, the impulses of the savage tribesmen Darwin describes are still present, and they conflict with the social code required for civilization to exist.