

Lamarck, Wolfe and Exultants

The Urth list — 12 messages, 7 voices, 05 Aug 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5690>

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Ryan Dunn — 05 Aug 2010, 04:52

Wolfe is quoted as thus...

"I didn't know that anybody was working in the Lamarckian area, today to be honest with you. I think somebody should be because I have never been convinced that Lamarck was wrong."

Lamarckism states that acquired traits are inherited.

This led me to a question that may have been covered...

Are exultants a product of Lamarckism? It could explain the lingering height as a physical character trait, and might take less time than Darwinian theology to see an affect.

If so, were the original exultants genetically modified to be taller, more idealized, and more hierogrammatesque, and their offspring through a few iterations thus took on some of those genetically mutated characteristics into their own genes?

...ryan

Jeff Wilson — 05 Aug 2010, 08:11 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

On 8/4/2010 11:52 PM, Ryan Dunn wrote:

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Lamarckism states that acquired traits are inherited.

Yes, but "Lamarckism" is not a product of Lamarck himself. Inheritance of acquired characteristics is an ancient idea in one form or another, and Darwin allowed something like it in his idea that somatic tissues generated heritable "gemmules" in response to the development or disuse of various organs.

Wikipedia says Lamark's contributions were that inheritance of new traits is facilitated by an alchemical process that creates new complexity, and that existing traits could be adapted to the environment. This might be what Wolfe means when the BOTNS says that the continents shape new peoples into the form of the old.

Are exultants a product of Lamarckism? It could explain the lingering height as a physical character trait, and might take less time than Darwinian theology to see an affect.

Exultant height seems to be a mixture of effects. Exultants' bastards are commonly believed to be taller than the common folk, which would be plausible if they were genetically modified "supermen". This prevents commoners from posing as exultants, and lets the bastards be readily identified for elimination or co-option before they are fully of age to make real trouble.

Ultan is almost certainly one of these supermen, given his impressive mental, physical, and charismatic traits other than his blindness, and Thea and Thecla are likewise gifted with pleasing voices and faces, deep thinking, and quickness if not strength.

However, there is also talk of "royal jelly" being used to make them taller still, and this has been speculated to be growth hormones or even the actual glands taken from the khaibits, who don't have to be particularly tall to serve their purpose. This might mean that some of the exultant families were ennobled after the art of genetic modification was lost or banned or simply withheld, and have to resort to individual growth treatments as they have not yet intermarried enough with the older "supermen" stock. Vodalus may be an example of this kind, as he is described as very tall but slender, and only a little taller than Thea.

I've just now come across Master Gurloes' comment on Thecla's ancestry in SHADOW, Chapter VII that seems to confirm this: "'Not just an armiger family. High blood.'"

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Jack Smith — 05 Aug 2010, 10:22 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Exultants could result from Darwinian evolution alone, without any genetic engineering. According to Wolfe, Severian is about 6' or 6'1", and Thecla is a head taller (around 7' or 7'1"). Male exultants seem to be about 7'6" to 8'. Such heights are uncommon for us, but still within the range of the possible. The tallest NBA player is 7'6" and the tallest WNBA player is 7'2".

Imagine a planet colonized by NBA and WNBA players. Given 10 or 20 generations and sexual selection in favor of height, you could get a population where the average height could be 7' to 8'.

I used to live near David Robinson (7'1"), the center for the NBA Spurs. Once I was walking past his house and he and his two sons (about 10 or 12 years old) were outside his gate. The sons were taller than me.

On Thu, Aug 5, 2010 at 12:52 AM, Ryan Dunn <ryan@liftingfaces.com> wrote:
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James Wynn — 05 Aug 2010, 14:15 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

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Actually, aspects of Lamarckism are making a comeback with the understanding that our bodies are determined by more than our DNA blueprints. The following is a link to an abstract of a study that argues that your longevity is significantly determined by whether your grandparents experienced famine in their childhood.

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/x61m87x016213823/>

Obviously, if a trait can be acquired across generations based on experiences occurring before the second generation was even conceived, this could --over time-- have an evolutionary effect.

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Ryan Dunn — 05 Aug 2010, 14:42 · in reply to Jack Smith

Does this mean that common folk should be notably shorter then? Severian's height, were he on our planet, in most Western cultures, wouldn't raise an eyebrow high enough to stir thoughts of exulted blood.

I know his high cheekbones also indicates he may be some sort of Urthian bastard royalty, but I still wonder about the size of non exultant people of the Commonwealth.

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On Aug 5, 2010, at 6:22 AM, Jack Smith <jack.smith.1946 at gmail.com> wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 05 Aug 2010, 15:22 · in reply to James Wynn

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This may or may not be an "acquired" trait so much as a flexible phenotype. There's also jazz like epigenetics and reversion that can effectively undo the adaptation in a small number of generations; we need many generations to be sure. But this may not have been available to the author at the time of writing.

Jeff Wilson — 05 Aug 2010, 15:35 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Does this mean that common folk should be notably shorter then? Severian's height, were he on our planet, in most Western cultures, wouldn't raise an eyebrow high enough to stir thoughts of exulted blood.

The Commonwealth has poor nutrition and health care by our standards, and Master Gurloes remarks on how this affects the growth of the apprentices in SHADOW.

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The autochthons (natives) have even worse prospects and are described as small in several places. Apparently, this allows Father Inire to pass as a really old shaman with rickets or something.

Lane Haygood — 05 Aug 2010, 15:38 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Lamarckism is making a comeback in the pseudoscience of evolutionary psychology.

It's still just as much crap as Lamarckism is, but the spectre of heritable acquired traits just will not die from the popular consciousness, probably because the ideas of "corruption of blood" and the "sins of the father" are so prevalent within our mythologies. It breaks down along the same inscrutable fault lines as the "nature versus nurture" debate about how we, and other organisms, learn our behavior. How much is instinct? How much is conditioned?

As best I can tell, the answer is "a mix of both" in unknown ratios because the kinds of experiments needed to falsify a Lamarckian hypothesis are deeply, deeply unethical. The way one feels toward evolutionary psychology (and related doctrines) tends to have more to do with how one feels about a range of philosophical issues, from one's stance on the mind, to the metaphysics of souls, to base factionalism. So I recognize my own rejection of it as calumny reflects my own particular biases against such concepts as "human nature," a materialist account of consciousness, or phenotypic properties being causally-linked to genetic properties.

But I think I have darn good reasons to find such concepts objectionable, so via the transitive property of bad ideas, modern Lamarckisms are vile calumny.

LH

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Jack Smith — 05 Aug 2010, 15:43 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

I believe there are a number of references to Severian being tall, and he's around 6' and his mother is probably an exultant. I think Urth's common folk are shorter than people today. But you only have to go back two hundred years or so to have average heights 6 or 8 inches less than today.

This is mostly due to better nutrition. On Urth with its dying sun and spent resources, we would expect nutrition levels to be worse and people to be shorter.

On Thu, Aug 5, 2010 at 10:42 AM, Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com> wrote:
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about 7'6" to 8'. Such heights are uncommon for us, but still within the range of the possible. The tallest NBA player is 7'6" and the tallest WNBA player is 7'2".

Jeff Wilson — 05 Aug 2010, 15:51 · in reply to Jack Smith

On 8/5/2010 5:22 AM, Jack Smith wrote:

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Imagine a planet colonized by NBA and WNBA players. Given 10 or 20 generations and sexual selection in favor of height, you could get a population where the average height could be 7' to 8'.

The initial population would involve such extreme artificial selection from across a huge pool that I would hesitate to call it Darwinian evolution alone. you'd also need genetic screening at the least to make a go of it to avoid reinforcing the pathological sources of height, and it would need to be a pretty hospitable world to make sure big appetites did not have trouble being fed long enough to reach sexual maturity and survive mate selection.

There could also be counter pressure from smaller colonists who were un chosen and get stuck mating with the poor and the equally short, unless the cagers practice wasteful culling. Maybe you could get two groups of the few talls and the many shorties who avoid intermarriage, presuming the talls retain some advantage they can leverage to offload their greater support requirements onto the shorties in the form of tribute.

But breeding for tallness and prettiness and good loud voices, without lots of residual variation, is hard to work out, esp when human sexual selection has always been bent in favor of wealth and power.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

David Duffy — 05 Aug 2010, 23:49 · in reply to Lane Haygood

On Thu, 5 Aug 2010, Lane Haygood wrote:

Lamarckism is making a comeback in the pseudoscience of evolutionary psychology.

No, this is not correct. The basis for evolutionary psychology come from standard "neo-Darwinist" behaviour genetics and sociobiology.

It's still just as much crap as Lamarckism is, but the spectre of heritable acquired traits just will not die from the popular consciousness, probably because the ideas of "corruption of blood" and the "sins of the father" are so prevalent within our mythologies.

It breaks down along the same inscrutable fault lines as the "nature versus nurture" debate about how we, and other organisms, learn our behavior. How much is instinct? How much is conditioned? As best I can tell, the answer is "a mix of both" in unknown ratios

Sure, but able to be studied indirectly in a variety of observational designs

because the kinds of experiments needed to falsify a Lamarckian hypothesis are deeply, deeply unethical.

I presume you are thinking about humans here. There is plenty of evidence of epigenetic inheritance, including transmission of behaviours, in other species. Furthermore, the mechanisms, eg genetic imprinting, are well understood mechanistically (sections of DNA are marked by addition of methyl groups to cytosines).

The way one feels toward evolutionary psychology (and related doctrines) tends to have more to do with how one feels about a range of philosophical issues, from one's stance on the mind, to the metaphysics of souls, to base factionalism. So I recognize my own rejection of it as calumny reflects my own particular biases against such concepts as "human nature," a materialist account of consciousness, or phenotypic properties being causally-linked to genetic properties.

I think Wolfe has thought deeply about this, starting from `_tFHoC_`, `_tDoDI_`, to the chems, possession, and Horn-Pas-Silk. Specifically, the chems have souls and an interest in right thought and action, but their *minds* can be completely controlled by others, and they are aware of this. For "ordinary" humans, their actions are just as frequently controlled by society and exigency, even if they have more freedom of thought, so that practically they end up in the same boat. Many of his characters do as much good as they can within strong constraints. Those constraints can easily be genetic predispositions to particular behaviours.

Further, staying on Wolfe, he definitely believes in human nature, and that this will persist indefinitely, and will be seen in other species or in robots. A la Lem, you will know when you have a true artificial intelligence when it demonstrates laziness, duplicity, self interest, and a tendency to do other things, such as contributing to news groups, when it should be working.

Cheers, David Duffy.

David Stockhoff — 06 Aug 2010, 01:53 · in reply to Jack Smith

This is what I thought, and it's a strong argument. But there's an equally strong argument that the exultants were modified.

Both together make more sense than either alone.

Jack Smith wrote:

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