

HUMAN VARIATION AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A CONVERSATION WITH BO WINEGARD

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This month, we are so very pleased to present this interview with Bo Winegard, an evolutionary psychologist and former professor. [He was fired](#) from his tenure-track post at Marietta College because of what he researches and what he writes about human biological differences and physical and psychological traits. He is now an [independent scholar](#). He is in conversation with Grégoire Canlorbe, who is [well-known](#) to the readers of The Postil.

Grégoire Canlorbe (GC): The “coalitional value theory,” which you helped formulate, asserts that humans evolved unique mental mechanisms for assessing each other’s marginal value to a coalition. Could you tell us more about those mechanisms—and how they intervene in artistic, scientific production?

Bo Winegard (BW): The basic idea is that we evolved some kind of mental system—I’m not sure exactly how this is instantiated in the brain/mind—to assess each other’s value to coalitions. For example, suppose that we form a soccer team. Pretty quickly we would understand who is better (more valuable) at soccer, and who is worse (less valuable). Ceteris paribus, we defer to those who have more coalitional value (e.g., if Messi were on your team, then you would defer to him); and we often assert ourselves over those who have less value.



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My colleagues and I hypothesized that these mechanisms might partially explain the creation and display of certain cultural artifacts, such as paintings, poems, history books, scientific articles. The idea is that cultural displays signal underlying traits (e.g., intelligence, ambition, education) that generally contribute to a coalition, that make it (the coalition) more formidable and successful. In politics, for example, being able to persuade other people is valuable; it helps a coalition to achieve its goals. Therefore, politicians might signal their value by delivering eloquent speeches. And those in the coalition might respond to such speeches with awe and admiration.

The grand idea, which is not entirely novel, I should say, is that human coalitions are cooperative status-

exchange systems. Leaders and other revered coalitional members have high coalitional value; they make the coalition better. And in exchange for their service, members defer to them, giving them priority access to coveted resources, such as food, material wealth, and mates. In this way, the coalition benefits (by having the person high in coalition value) and the high-status person also benefits (by getting priority access to evolutionary relevant resources).

GC: A whole field of investigation lies in sex differences as regards cognition and the relationship to knowledge. What did your long-standing collaboration with [Cory Clark](#) allow you to learn in that area?

BW: Ha! I'm not sure I understand the question. I think you are asking what did I learn about sex differences by collaborating for so long with Cory Clark? If so, I will just say a few things. First, Cory is atypical for females, so I would not generalize from my experience with her. And second, I do think that men on average are more tolerant of direct confrontation. My brother and I often get into vehement debates while working on projects, for example. I spare Cory from that because that's not how our relationship works.

GC: It is sometimes doubted that intellectual manhood (i.e., the ability to think for oneself and to be intellectually innovative and dissident) is substantially correlated with IQ. What is your take on that issue?

BW: I'm not aware of research on this topic. (And it would be arduous to operationalize "think for oneself." Even creativity is incredibly difficult to operationalize, and I'm not sure I trust much of the research on it.) I do think originality and innovation require a certain minimum level of cognitive ability. However, once one is above that level, I doubt there's much correlation. I know many brilliant people who are intellectual cowards. In fact, I would contend that American universities are filled with craven professors who are afraid even to voice their true beliefs on a wide variety of taboo topics. I suspect that intellectual cowardice and cognitive ability are completely orthogonal.

GC: It is easily noticed that the greatest military strategists in human history have been, if not bisexual (like Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar), at least misogynist (like Napoléon Bonaparte). Is there a coalitional value theory of that phenomenon?

BW: I'm not sure that I completely understand the question. But I think that some misogyny is likely a

result of coalitional value mechanisms. For men's coalitions, women, on average, simply aren't as valuable as other men. Consider, for example, a sports' team. Clearly men are better, on average, than women at sports. Thus men often deride other men who are bad at sports as being effeminate (e.g., "throwing like a girl," "crying like my sister," et cetera).

GC: You challenged the idea of a "panhuman nature." Could you remind us of your argument? Do you also contest, more specifically, the idea of a certain psychological, physical structure invariant across those human populations that are racially European?

BW: The idea behind a panhuman nature is this: Most human-specific traits evolved before the end of the Pleistocene; and, more specifically, most probably evolved before humans expanded across the globe to face novel selection pressures. Therefore, most human psychological traits are shared across populations. There is thus a panhuman nature. I think the concept is useful in some ways but mistaken in others. Think about a different example that is clearer: Dogs. It is the case that one can generalize about a canine nature. Dogs of different breeds share many tendencies. On the other hand, it is wrong or misleading in my view to say there is a pancanine nature in a strong way because dog breeds also vary in behavior proclivities in important and fascinating ways. A Yorkshire Terrier is quite different behaviorally from a Whippet, for example. If you purchased one expecting the behavior of the other, then you might be surprised!

Human groups are not so different from each other as dogs are, obviously. But they are different. And for similar reasons: selection. Of course, dogs were artificially selected and humans were more or less naturally (sexually and socially) selected. And the intensity of selection dogs faced was probably much higher. But humans lived in different environmental conditions from each other for many thousands of years. They faced different selection pressures (probably primarily related to climate). This is phenotypically obvious. People whose immediate ancestors evolved in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, look different from those whose immediate ancestors evolved in Northern Europe. The most obvious difference is skin color, which is related to the intensity of ultraviolet radiation in such a way that darker skin is associated with more intense radiation. In my view, psychological traits are no different from other physical and anthropometric traits.

Thus groups have slightly different psychological traits from each other. Unfortunately, in the United States at least, this is a very controversial topic—probably more taboo than any other in the social sciences. If groups are different from each other, then some groups might score higher on average on

certain socially desired traits such as intelligence and compliance and self-control. And this offends the sensitivities of many progressives, who appear to believe in what I have called "cosmic egalitarianism," or the notion that all human groups are equal on all socially desired traits.

I think this belief, this cosmic egalitarianism, is no more plausible than Greek mythology or leprechauns at the end of a rainbow. It's almost impossible to imagine, that is, that human populations are the same on all psychological traits. Now, they aren't terribly different. So we can make generalization about human nature that apply, I think, to all human populations. But we have to consider group differences, if we want to understand basic social phenomena, such as income and crime disparities between populations, et cetera. Again, it is hard if not impossible to talk about these things honestly in the United States because of the dominance of progressives in the media and academia. But I don't think it helps anybody to concoct a fantastical fiction about group sameness and to use it to then promulgate the myth that systemic racism is the cause of all group disparities.

As for the second part of your question—again, that depends upon what one means by "invariant psychological structure." Do I think that European populations differ slightly in traits and propensities? Yes. I think that is quite likely. Do I think that they have fundamentally different psychological structures? No. In a paper, my colleagues and I once compared this to guitars, and I think that's a good comparison. So guitars are pretty similar to each other. They share a certain structure, if you will. But, there are also subtle differences among them that lead to different tones and tendencies. A Fender sounds slightly different from a Gibson. And an acoustic guitar sounds different from an electric guitar. I think the same holds for human populations, even within Europe.

GC: You covered some of the bias present in politically liberal scientists. What are those? Do you also identify some political bias in hereditarian research about intelligence?

BW: Cosmic egalitarianism. And what we have called "equalitarianism." Equalitarianism is really a set of biases about group differences. Primarily, liberal scientists repelled by the idea that groups might differ in socially desirable traits in ways that appear to favor white people. At this point, I have no confidence in social science in the United States because of how pervasive this bias is. It's simply impossible to write about or study topics that are related to race honestly. This is especially true of hereditarianism, because the IQ gap "favors" whites in that whites have a roughly 15-point advantage on average in IQ inside the United States. (The gap appears to be globally consistent, although the exact number depends upon the country, and our data are much more copious inside the United States.) At this point,

hereditarianism, or the view that a not insubstantial proportion of the gap is caused by differences in genes, has been removed from mainstream discourse and the academy like a heresy. The orthodoxy simply will not tolerate it, will not debate it, and will not even interact with those who promote it. It has been defeated not by evidence, but by moral bullying—and it is a victim not of falsification but of suppression.

GC: You established yourself as a defender both of “scientism” and of “conservatism.” Yet a common criticism against the view that science (i.e., imaginative hypothesizing corroborated through quantitative, not-trivial empirical predictions) should be solicited to solve all the problems of society is that the limitations of the human mind render science unable to do as well as our cultural traditions, which have been molded—and successfully tested—over several generations of intergroup competition. How do you conciliate science and tradition?

BW: Great question! It's certainly true that many conservatisms have railed against so-called scientism. But I think that is a mistake. Of course, what follows depends upon one's definition of scientism. There is certainly a pseudoscientific pretense of knowledge that one should condemn. And there is also a “we trust science” attitude promoted often by progressives in the United States which is mendacious because, of course, they do not trust science that contradicts their sacred values. What I believe is that scientific thinking—skepticism, experimentation, reliance on evidence, et cetera—is the greatest force for generating accurate knowledge in the history of the world. And since I think conservatism is an accurate political philosophy, I think that the insights of science will generally align with the insights of conservative thought. Of course, science will contradict certain particular hypotheses. Maybe, say, the claim that homosexuality is a “chose,” which used to be popular among American conservatives, at least. That is no longer tenable. But the basic idea behind conservatism, namely, that tradition is a good guide to a well-ordered, hierarchal, and cohesive society, is something that will be supported by science. In fact, I'm writing a book on this right now!

Some critics of scientism have argued that it is wrong because science can't determine values. This is correct, I think, in an academic sense. We could find out, for example, that social policy X would increase human flourishing significantly, and some nihilist could say, “I don't care. I don't like human flourishing.” Sure. And science will never show that we should care about human flourishing. But most humans share the intuition that human flourishing is important and should be promoted. Once we have that shared intuition, then we can use science to assess policies. Of course, we should always be humble and recognize that we are incredibly ignorant about many things. That is an important

conservative argument.

GC: Some attempts have been made to solve moral issues on the basis of biology and evolutionary psychology. Thus abortion and contraception are deemed permissible on the grounds that birth control—a mere cultural acquisition among humans, but an instinctual predisposition among a large variety of other vertebrate species—comes to implement the “natural law” that is allegedly the demographic adaptation of any population to its environment.

As for homosexuality it is claimed that its recurrence as a genetic trait proves that homosexuals, despite being disadvantaged as concerns their reproductive success, are provided with a number of competitive advantages by reason of which homosexuality should be socially welcomed rather than sanctioned. Likewise premarital sex is justified as fulfilling an alleged hidden function of the sexual intercourse among humans, namely, the function of ensuring—especially throughout pregnancy—the emotional attachment of the male to his female partner and their future progeny. Do you subscribe to such inferences?

BW: On these issues, I do not think evolution (or biology) is informative about what our moral values should be. In general, I think we should promote human flourishing (broadly defined). I don't think that finding an evolutionary reason for something justifies or condemns it. I'll give you two examples. It is possible that rape is an adaptive strategy. Not all rape. But the general behavioral predisposition. I certainly don't think that makes rape morally acceptable. On the other hand, love is an adaptation, and I think love is often (though not always) morally laudable. What is important is the trait or behavior's relation to social cohesion and human flourishing, not its evolutionary or genetic logic.

GC: You proposed an evolutionary approach to “tribalism in human nature.” How would you sum up your insights? How do you account for the ability of human individuals (to a varying degree) to identify to groups extending beyond the level of ethnical, biological bonds—from multiracial nations and multiethnic religions to humanity taken as a whole?

BW: To be clear, there was nothing particularly unique in that approach! But the basic idea is this: Humans evolved in the context of competing coalitions and therefore evolved traits and proclivities that facilitate tribalism. They create tribes, favor members of their own tribe, and see other tribes as potential competitors. The first and most primitive tribe is the family, for straightforward reasons of kin selection. But humans collaborate with non-kin as well.

My best guess is that ethnic affinity is a byproduct of a kin-recognition system. Humans recognize kin via certain cues. One such cue might be maternal perinatal association. Another is probably phenotypic similarity to the self or to other close kin. Experiments have found, for example, that people trust putative others in photographs that have been manipulated to look like the self more than others in non-manipulated photographs. Individuals in the same ethnic group on average look more similar to each other than individuals from different ethnic groups. Others have argued that ethnic affinity is a byproduct of tribal recognition system. I suppose it doesn't really matter for the purposes of this question. What does matter is that humans do evince ethnic affinity. But they can of course transcend such affinities, creating large tribes called "nations" that are multi-ethnic.

They do this mostly by inculcating norms of inclusion and tolerance and creating shared symbols (flag, national anthem). But it is worth noting that even within nations, ethnic groups often compete with each other. Ethnic diversity, in other words, often creates tension; and it appears to decrease social trust. This does not mean it is necessarily bad (or good). It's simply a statement of empirical fact. So, it is true that humans can create large tribes that include many strangers and members of diverse ethnic groups; but those tribes are often inflicted by at least low-level tribal competition and tension.

GC: Thank you for your time. Would you like to add a thing or two?

BW: The thing that I think is most important is to promote free, judicious debate about all scientifically interesting topics, at least in academia. And we are losing that audacious spirit of the pursuit of truth, replacing it with a timid spirit of obsequiousness. But the truth should not be feared. And our pursuit of it should be non-negotiable in the sciences. I'm not suggesting that we should say every thought or idea that pops in our head because we think it is true. But I am saying that we should explore every reasonable theory about the empirical world. And today that is simple not happening.

The *featured image* shows "Battle of San Romano," by Paolo Uccello, painted ca. 1436-1440.

