

The Polished Savage

How to be Inspiringly Human

Colin M. Frayn

Introduction

We are the lucky ones. For the first time in history, our species is reaching the end of a journey that began many thousands of years ago, long before the dawn of human civilisation. Within the next few generations we will finally understand what we are; what separates us from the other creatures living on this luxurious place we call Earth. The human body is beginning to give up its secrets to 21st century science and, perhaps most excitingly, we are beginning to understand that most magnificent of devices, the human brain.

This is a story of what was, what is and what might be. It deserves to be told because it is so fundamental to every aspect of human life and achievement. This book covers only a tiny fraction of the epic tale we, as a species, have uncovered, yet in the chapters you are about to read, I shall tackle one question that has divided mankind for generations: What does it mean to be human? The search for an answer blends together countless strands of knowledge into a tapestry of life that is both empowering and awe-inspiring. To convey that same extraordinary vision I need to address three vitally important questions: Firstly, “where have we come from?” Secondly, “where are we now?” And thirdly, “what is our potential for the future?”

The first of those questions deals with a subject that has caused one of the greatest intellectual revolutions in the history of our species. From an age of superstition and social upheaval came a work of unparalleled genius, one of the greatest pillars of our modern world: *The Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection*. Its most devoted champion, and the man almost uniquely associated with the theory today, was a well-respected British naturalist called Charles Robert Darwin. It was from a little-known quote of his, taken from his personal diaries, that I named this book.

Charles was a gentle, kind-hearted man, much troubled by the oppression he saw in the world around him. In one entry, campaigning against the slave trade, he wrote that members of English society were nothing but “polished savages”, incapable or unwilling to accept the equality of their fellow human beings. Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* gave us justice – it put an end to centuries of human arrogance. It taught not only that no single race was superior to any other, but also that we are all descended from one single ancestry, through the same processes which gave birth to every living creature on Earth. It took sworn enemies and instantly made them brothers, sisters and cousins. It took those whom time and geography had separated, and showed how they all fitted harmoniously together into the one universal family of life.

Darwin himself was perhaps not the greatest ambassador for his own work. Though his knowledge and intellect were unsurpassed, he was often troubled by insecurities and low self-esteem and spent a great deal of his life in poor health. The predictions that he made were to spawn a conflict far too vicious for him to fight alone. He was battling against millennia of comfortable ignorance; against assumptions that had remained unchallenged since the dawn of human civilisation. It was never going to be easy.

The Theory of Evolution caused a scientific revolution, upturning beliefs that were sacred and untouchable; beliefs that nobody before had seriously dared challenge under fear of death. This extraordinary idea was so utterly simple that few people actually believed it could explain the enormous diversity of life of Earth. Yet at its heart was a process so methodical, so rigorous and so enormously powerful that it was to have a greater effect on our perception of ourselves than any other single theory in history, before or since.

Darwin even believed that this revolution could improve and expand our understanding of the human mind, forming the foundation for a new theory of psychology. And this is where we move on to that second question: “Where are we now?”

Every single one of us has a human body, yet we rarely take the time to learn how it works. That strikes me as profoundly odd. It is a tragedy that so many human beings live their lives without ever knowing their full capacity for achievement. Many people even find the subject of human nature confusing and frightening. In this book, you will discover that it’s actually the most empowering realisation you will ever make.

We can use Darwin’s theory in a way that he himself would have greatly appreciated: To overcome the problems that sometimes prevent us from realising our most cherished goals. By studying the mind and its origins, we can begin to understand the unique potential of the human species; a potential that lies within all of us.

This book is not written for bedside reading. I’m afraid it won’t entertain you on the beach in Lanzarote. I am presenting these ideas for one purpose only: to celebrate the magnificence of human life. I often find that the best way to improve my own understanding of a subject is to teach it to others, and I’m sure that I have learned as much from writing this book as you will learn from reading it. For that, I offer my thanks. I’m also grateful because you’ve trusted me to introduce you to these huge theories, perhaps for the first time, and I don’t take that responsibility lightly.

Many weighty texts have been published on these epic discoveries, probably more than anyone could ever read. So what’s new about this one? My aim in these few chapters is to take all this knowledge off the dusty academic shelves and bring it to life. I do this not just to illuminate and entertain you with dinner-table anecdotes, but actually to empower you to increase the enjoyment that you get out of your life. I believe that humanity is the single most amazing achievement of this great Universe: Beautifully complex; endlessly ingenious, resourceful and adaptive; exquisitely tuned to the tiniest detail and surely capable of countless undiscovered wonders. It is a truly inspiring blessing to understand our privileged role in existence, and to appreciate the remarkable virtuosity with which we fulfil it.

The message of this book is a simple one: The human mind is not a mystical force to be wrestled with and subdued; we are not unpredictable, uncontrollable or irrational at heart. In fact, we act the way we do for very good reasons, and once we understand those reasons we can use that knowledge to guide ourselves towards the goals that we desire. By understanding human behaviour, we can also learn how best to understand the other people we meet in our lives, including those who are most important and closest to us. From that understanding comes a far greater level of friendship, appreciation, cooperation, enjoyment and unity.

Many people claim that modern science takes away the incentive to achieve. I think that's a dangerous viewpoint, and it's not one I share. In fact, on the contrary, knowledge of our evolutionary history gives us the certainty that we were born to achieve, to tackle overwhelming odds, to face our fears and to arise victorious. A far greater proportion of our lives is under our potential control than most people dare to acknowledge. I find this an exhilarating thought and the aim of this book is to bring you to that same sense of wonder, awe and excitement. Then, in the third section, I will encourage you to transform those proud feelings into actions that will positively change the course of your life.

As you read on, I will explain why we think the way we think, why we do the things we do and why we feel the way we feel. By understanding how the human brain has evolved and how it reacts to the world around us, we can learn how to use it as a tool for our own advantage. Understanding the 'Polished Savage' means understanding the ancient drives and impulses lurking behind and beneath our conscious mind. It also means understanding the elaborate, modern adaptations that our species has discovered which have taken our ancestors from treetops to skyscrapers.

I hope I've been able to explain these huge topics in a way that not only makes them clear and memorable, but also entertains you. I want to spark an interest that will revolutionise the way you see the world around and inside you. There are already too many books about the human mind, filled with all the information you could possibly want but never any advice on what to do about it. There are scores of volumes published every year giving advice on how to live your life but without any basis in science – each one an ephemeral fad rising and falling with the whim of human fashion.

This book is different. My aim here is to give you something useful; something creative; something based on how the world actually *is*. Once you understand the story of the human mind then you will immediately see how to harness its remarkable power to move your life in the more positive and fulfilling direction that you so richly deserve.

I honestly believe that this is possible for every person who commits to read on. I promise, for my part, that I will do everything I can to bring you to that same state of wonder and amazement.

Colin Frayn,
Birmingham,
UK,
October 2006

About the Author

Dr. Colin Frayn, PhD., was born in Staffordshire, England, in 1978. He lived his early years in the Midlands, before going up to Cambridge to read Natural Sciences in October 1996. It was there that he first studied the theory of evolution, and immediately became fascinated by it. He graduated top of his class in Astrophysics in 1999, and completed his PhD in 2002. Leaving Cambridge, he moved back to Birmingham, where he still resides. He researches computational techniques inspired by the ingenuity of nature, from evolution and neural networks through to communication between social insect colonies.

Aside from his research, Colin is a keen badminton player with a great passion for music. He plays several instruments and very much enjoys choral singing. When he gets the time, Colin is an avid traveller with an unparalleled love for exotic cuisine. He is the author of an International Master strength chess program, and the joint holder of a world record for distributed computation with the ChessBrain project. If you ask him nicely he will probably also admit to writing a screenplay, an opera and various travel diaries, none of which has any relevance to this book whatsoever.