

## **Matthew Arnold as a Progeniture of Culturist Literary Darwinism**

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### **Abstract**

This article will outline some of the ways in which Matthew Arnold, (1822-1888) should be considered a founding Culturist Literary Darwinist. Literary Darwinism applies Evolutionary Psychology insights to literature. Not only did Arnold anticipate Evolutionary Psychology by 150 years, he also applied those findings to literature. For this Arnold, in his time, got called a 'culturist,' one who uses literature to guide society. Arnold's most thought provoking and earliest work in this field probed how religion evolved and contributes to social control. While others had connected religion to social control, Arnold uniquely experimentally sought the means by which it did so. Furthermore, he used evolutionary models to explain how religion, as literature might have evolved. Much of Arnold's literary criticism illustrated the juncture tying together our mental stability and social stability, based on a assumed model of thought, now seen as explicitly scientific in Literary Darwinist circles: Narrativity. The culturist portion largely comes from his efforts to implement curriculum based upon his Literary Darwinist findings. Furthermore, Arnold developed his Literary Darwinist Culturist insights in an American lecture tour. Herein Arnold overtly argued that literature needs to inform our understanding of science and that science needed to inform our approaches to understanding literature.

**Keywords:** Culturist Literary Darwinism, Matthew Arnold, Evolutionary Psychology, Culturism, Literary Criticism, Curriculum, gene-culture co-evolution, Literature and Science.

## LITERARY DARWINISM INTRODUCED

Literary Darwinism explains how literature functions to further natural selection. The average Briton spends over six percent of their waking life attending to fictional drama performances. (Dennett, 187) Since evolution's relentless battle for survival shaves away all inefficiencies, how does one explain literature's contribution to survival? The prehistoric telling of stories often entailed extensive training, scarification, hours of ritual, costume design and more. Literary Darwinism's explanations rely on Evolutionary Psychology, a field which shows how natural selection pressures shaped our mental facilities. In this effort, Evolutionary Psychology has calculated the survival value of jealousy, sexual desire, maternal love, belonging to social groups, favoring kin, desiring prestige, social morality and other psychological and social mechanisms. (Carroll, 2011, 13) Literature explaining just these mechanisms hints at survival functions. Primatologists, such as Robin Dunbar, noted that from a Literary Darwinist perspective our literature should concern itself with small tight-knit social groups; interacting in cliques; and that mate choice and status should be prominent. (Nettle, 67) More intimately, Literary Darwinists have shown that beyond illustrating these social dynamic, literature illustrates the very structure of our thoughts. Robert Storey summarized, "Narrative is not, as many theorists have maintained, so much 'story' as an innate way of knowing, essentially as prelinguistic in its operation as conceptualizing has proven to be." (Storey, 84) Additionally, E. O. Wilson wrote, "The mind is a narrative machine, guided by the epigenetic rules in creating scenarios and creating options." (Wilson, ix) Founding Literary Darwinist Joseph Carroll summarized, "culture does not stand apart from the genetically transmitted dispositions of human nature. It is rather, the medium through which we organize those dispositions into systems that regulate public behavior." (Carroll, 2011, 17) Offering a multitiered explanation, Literary Darwinism looks literature at multiple levels: the gene, the individual, the kin group, and the larger social conglomerations. (Carroll, 2011, 41)

## ARNOLD'S DARWINIAN THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

The leading Victorian author, Matthew Arnold, developed an astoundingly modern Literary Darwinist theory which explored the origin of morals, literature, and religion. Arnold framed the Church of England as tool of national moral guidance. But, in his lifetime Darwinism was eroding religious belief. Arnold argued that to continue its role as moral guide, religion needed to modify itself; he said that the "poor machinery" of "miracles," would prove unable to sustain church attendance in the modern world. (Arnold, 1883, 203) Instead of morals, he urged religious leaders to stress the Bible's social moral guidance capabilities. To explain this role, he showed that the Bible, as literature, formed and guided nations. In his 'bottom up' explanation of religion's development, he suggested that perhaps some Jews, by "accident" or "blind, selfish impulse," took care of their elderly parents. This practice lead to "material success" and "order;" Having survival value, this behavior spread through the population. (Arnold, 1906, 81-82) Furthermore, the commandment to 'honor their parents,' could have functioned as a center of Jewish identity. This 'bottom-up' formulation, wherein culture blindly accumulates features conducive to survival, without conscious design, anticipates our most modern understanding of Darwinian mechanisms. (Dennett, 2017) He then argued that when the Jews wrote down

their moral code, this solidified their cultural evolutionary advantage. (Arnold, 1906, 85) Elsewhere he tells us, "Probably this was the moment when such ideas became fixed and ruling for the Hebrew people, and marked it permanently off from all other peoples who had not made the same step. But long before the first beginnings of recorded history, long before the oldest word of Bible literature, these ideas must have been at work." (Arnold, 1883, 23) In this formulation, Arnold provided a probable mode of development for religion and literature.

Arnold then detailed how written language would aid in survival value. He presented a plausible scientific model of, "how these 'religious' statements work," (apRoberts, 194) Arnold wrote two lists of Biblical prohibitions; One list used the Bible's original language, the other plainer modern English. Via this process Arnold highlighted the bible's, use of emotional language. Arnold concluded, "Religion, we know, arises when moral ideas are touched with emotion." (Arnold, 1883, 16) One recent Evolutionary biologist made the same exact point, saying "Emotion is evolution's way of indicating importance." (Boyd, 161) Arnold famously quipped that religion consists of "morality touched by emotion." (Arnold, 1883, 16) Via neural scanning would could now check Arnold's theory more scientifically: we could measure the location and strength of neural reaction to the biblical passages and ordinary passages Arnold provided. E. O. Wilson called for the integration of the sciences and humanities and labelled this effort's goal, 'consilience.' Wilson has directly contributed to Literary Darwinist efforts. (Carroll, 2016) Using modern technology to check Arnold's literary theories and then using that to confirm would contribute to 'consilience.' Bible's social role and implement said findings, as per Arnold's recommendation, would be an ultimate example of 'consilience.'

## **WRITING AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

After engaging in comparative moral precepts, Arnold continued his Literary Darwinist mechanism analysis, saying, "So what is meant by the application of emotion to morality has now, it is to be hoped, been made clear. The next question will probably be: But how does one get the application made?" (Arnold, 1883, 18) His answer, "By dwelling upon it, by staying our thoughts upon it, by having it perpetually in our mind." (Arnold, 1883, 18) He put memory at the center of this process, noting that "the idea of humanity, of intelligence, of looking before and after, of raising oneself out of the flux of things, rest upon the idea of steadying oneself, concentrating oneself, making order in the chaos of one's impressions, by attending to one impression rather than the other." (Arnold, 1883, 18) This steadying built upon "a permanent self requiring the restraint of impulses a man would have naturally indulged; -because by attending to his life, man found it had a scope beyond the wants of the present moment." (Arnold, 1883, 18-19) The survival advantage got even strong via writing the morals down, "placing human nature on a higher stage." (Arnold, 1906, 87) Writing a mere 20 years after Darwin's 'Origin of Species,' was published, Arnold speculated that writing itself changed our perceptions, morally and so socially. He thus anticipated Literary Darwinists' idea of gene-culture co-evolution. Anthropology and history could shift light on the impact of moral literature, bringing both fields, alongside literature, closer to consilience.

## GOD AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Arnold, via analysis in which he employed his fluency in Hebrew and Greek concluded that Jesus' miracles were not originally in the New Testament. Rather, the original text focused on righteous conduct. Wherein, Jesus and Paul used "psycho-physiological" introspection by which they, "verified" that "renunciation" controlled "instincts" of "sensuality," resulting in guilt-free happiness. (Arnold, 1903, xvi) Herein his terminology reveals his scientific bent. Furthermore, he tied the direction to which their literature pointed stemmed from our innate propensities. Arnold noted, "We did not make ourselves and our nature," or the idea that "happiness should follow conduct." (Arnold, 1883, 21) What feels good and bad predates our social indoctrination, as "we did not make our nature, or conduct as the objects of three-fourths of that nature; we did not provide that happiness should follow conduct, as it undeniably does . . . as satisfying his hunger, also, gives pleasure to a man who is hungry." (Arnold, 1883, 21) Thus, our innate morality became the "scientific basis" of "our belief in God." (Arnold, 1883) The Biblical authors were aware of their metaphorically writing about innate tendencies. He told us, "when the Hebrews named the power, not of their own making, which pressed upon their spirit: *The Eternal*." [Italics in original] More pithily he defined God as, "the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness." (Arnold, 1883, 43) Herein he anticipated the Literary Darwinist mission of seeing if our literature mirrors our instincts.

## ARNOLD'S CULTURIST EDUCATION POLICY

Having been a school inspector for 35 years, Arnold used curricular development to apply his Literary Darwinist insights. Arnold wanted ministers to take part in guiding curriculum. (Arnold, 1908) He argued that schools should have "the thorough study and appropriation of the Bible, both in itself and in all the course of its relation with human history." (Connell, 146) He called the Church of England, "a great national society for the promotion of goodness," it needed to highlight the "natural truth" of Christianity. (Arnold, 1883, vii) The mainstream religious community rejected Arnold's reimagining of the Bible as a cultural management tool. The secular world rejected his calls for infusing Biblical teaching into the curriculum. Holding fast, he argued, "The Church exists, not for the sake of opinions, but for the sake of moral practice, and a united endeavor after this is stronger than a broken one." (Robbins, 143) The religious community also balked at Arnold's approach to religion, (Robbins, 152) denouncing him as a secular "culturist," practicing, "culturism," (Shairp, 99) Adopting their language, we can call Arnold a 'Culturist Literary Darwinist.' Undeterred, he published "A Bible-Reading for Schools" textbook, for use in public schools. (Arnold, 1872, 40-86) Arnold's curriculum focused on Isaiah because it takes place during a socially significant historical period; The moment when Israel realized, "unrighteous kingdoms of the heathen could not stand." (Arnold, 1872, xxix) Herein Arnold applied his Literary Darwinist findings. Modern Literary Darwinist's fundamentally agree with the connection of literature and social guidance as a mode of consilience.

Literary Darwinist Richard Storey noted that we justify use "narrativity" to justify our lives in terms of relation to our society and social world. (Storey, 102) This makes narrativity necessary to survival. Arnold's criticism moaned that poetry should encompass a coherent, "idea of the

world." (Carroll, 1982, 30) Today's Literary Darwinism argues that we must judge work by its concurring with the social order, our evolutionary-biased propensities, and thought of coherence. (Gottschall, 2005) Arnold specifically denounced the Romantic poets' sensual impressionistic emotive incoherence. He argued for poetry that conveyed, "great actions calculated powerfully to affect what is permanent in the soul." (Arnold, 1853) This required an interaction with history of long standing. He specifically argued for the use of Homer and Sophocles as sources. Ancient Greek literature, Arnold argued, helps the audience, "cultivate what is best and noblest in themselves," and "moral grandeur." (Arnold, 1853) Arnold told us that "commerce with the ancients" creates a "steady and composing" impact on our judgement, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general." (Arnold, 1853) Revering our civilization's artistic ancient legacy, logically would give us respect for it and a will to maintain it better than modern disconnected works. And, just as when he wrote his Biblically-based curriculum, Arnold did not argue for this without context, but as an extension of his Culturist Literary Darwinist program.

### **ARNOLD'S LITERARY DARWINISM IN AMERICA**

Even though he was a famous poet and had worked steadily as a school inspector for 35 years, Arnold had no cash upon his retirement. Therefore, he undertook two lecture tours across the United States. During his five month 1883 – 1884 United States tour he spoke to approximately 40,000 audience members. Bolstering his Culturist Literary Science credentials, the speech he recited more than any other was entitled, 'Literature and Science' Herein, he refuted 'Darwin's Bulldog,' T. H. Huxley, who wished to replace humanist education with scientific education. Rather Arnold argued that England needed to teach both. Herein he engaged in his penchant for catch-phrases, saying we should teach, "the best that is known and thought in the world." But, in terms of blending literature and science, he specified that, Galileo, Newton and Darwin were among the world's greatest thinkers to be included. (Arnold, 1912, 92) But, interestingly an appropriately, Arnold argue that what we call science had to touch upon the human condition and constitution, saying, "At present it seems to me, that those who are for giving to natural knowledge, as they call it the chief place in the education of the majority of mankind, leave one important thing out of their account: the constitution of human nature." Rather than just genetic drives, he reminded his listeners that, "our hairy ancestor carried in his nature, also, a necessity for Greek." By this quip, he did not mean to deny evolution or science, only to argue that any true science of man must account for our love of literature. Further, detailing his Literary Darwinist program, Arnold reminded his audiences that science alone cannot give us, "the power of conduct, the power of intellect and knowledge, the power of beauty, and the power of social life and manners." Yet he also urged the study of 'Greek accents and physiology' to connect itself to, "the instinct of self-perseveration in humanity." (Arnold, 1912) He tantalized the 19<sup>th</sup> century potentially Literary Darwinist audience with the line, "If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art as it is served by no other literature and art, we may trust to the instinct of self-preservation in humanity for keeping Greek as part of our culture." Thus the 'Literature and Science' speech he featured on his American tour specifically outlined a Literary Darwinist agenda.

## CONCLUSION

Much Literary Darwinist theory builds on Evolutionary Psychology work. In his application, Arnold treated religion as a form of literature dedicated to the control of society. He specified that "the object of religion is "conduct" which is at least "three-fourths" of human life. (Arnold, 1883) Putting literature in a scientific context, aside from instinctual conduct, "aesthetic and intellectual disciplines" (art and science included), only share a portion of the remaining quarter. (Arnold, 1883, 135) Modern neuroscientists confirm this by noting how much of our life is instinctual and how little is conscious and exists in the realm of literature.. (Norretranders) So, Arnold looked at literature as a tool, a spiritual, but emotional tool. Yet, he also stood up for literature noting that not all of our behavior is innate. He noted how effective written literature was in guiding our instincts. Probing the intersection of instinct and literature, Arnold characterized the question of "whether moral ideas . . which now seem instinctive, did not grow, were not once inchoate, embryo, dubious, unformed" . . . "is an interesting one for science." (Arnold, 1883, 23) But, rather than simply postulate such queries, as a cutting edge Literary Darwinist, he did his experiment aimed at finding which particular characteristic made literature effective in social control. He found writing literature in an emotionally evocative way heightened effectiveness. He then wrote curriculum based on these principles and promoted them publicly, confirming those who typified him as a 'culturist' Literary Darwinist. We should recognize Arnold as a founding father and progenitor of Culturist Literary Darwinism.

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