

In Search of Human Uniqueness

In his 1871 book *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin proposed, in effect, that humans were just another branch on the evolutionary tree. Victorian Englanders, many with significant scientific training, were incredulous. Humans' closest living relatives, the great apes, still lived in forests and jungles "red in tooth and claw," but humans lived in a world of telescopes and steam engines, symphony orchestras and the British Parliament, and morning prayer followed by afternoon tea. It was a puzzle, to say the least, how just another branch on the evolutionary tree could live a life so utterly different from that of other animals.

Today this puzzle is essentially solved. At some point in human history a new evolutionary process arose. A telltale sign of this new process is that not all humans live amid telescopes, symphony orchestras, and the British Parliament but instead live among their own distinctive artifacts, symbols, and institutions. And because children, whatever their genetics, adopt the particular artifacts, symbols, and institutions into which they are born, it is clear that this societal variation cannot be coming from the genes but rather is socially created. The full puzzle is thus that humans are not only a species of unprecedented cognitive and social achievements but also, at the same time, one that displays a novel kind of socially created, group-level diversity.

The solution to the puzzle—the new evolutionary process—is of course human culture. But the traditional notion of culture as something apart from biology and evolution will not do. Human culture is the form of social organization that arose in the human lineage in response to specific adaptive challenges. Its most distinctive characteristic is its high degree (and new forms) of cooperation. Synchronically, the members of a cultural group coordinate with one another in the context of self-created