

Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life: A Psychologist Investigates How Evolution, Cognition, and Complexity are Revolutionizing Our View of Human Nature, by Douglas Kenrick, New York, Basic Books, 2011. pp. xiii + 238. \$26.99 (hardcover).

A Psychologist's Adventures, Personal and Professional

This slim and breezy book is a bit difficult to categorize. It has elements from different genres. Many passages seem to be fragments of a memoir. In these passages Kenrick describes his violent, alcoholic, prejudiced and poorly educated family background; his rowdy sex-obsessed childhood; his spotty and rebellious attempts at education (or, more frequently, his attempts to *avoid* education); his youthful crushes and sexual escapades; his marriages; his children; and even a horrendous trip to Europe that Kenrick describes as “*National Lampoon's European Vacation* meets *Lord of the Flies*”. (75) Other passages – together composing perhaps 4/5ths of the book -- consist largely of sketches of research that Kenrick has pursued in conjunction with colleagues and graduate students. Most of this research is in one way or another connected to Kenrick's interests in (a) evolutionary psychology, (b) cognitive science, and (c) dynamical systems theory.

Other passages contain Kenrick's musings on political correctness, internecine conflict in the academic world, the foolishness of journal referees, and the amounts of money he has given in contributions to various charitable organizations. In a few paragraphs at the very end of the book, Kenrick briefly mentions something we can do to make our lives more meaningful.

I should acknowledge at the outset that I am a philosopher; not a psychologist. It might seem, then, that I have no business reviewing Kenrick's book. However, the book is not intended to be a serious scholarly work in psychology. Rather, it is evidently intended for a popular audience – perhaps Kenrick is hoping to reach out to reasonably well educated people who might be amused or interested by a lighthearted, very personal, and nontechnical sketch of some research. Under these circumstances, it appears to me that I should be as qualified to review his book as the next member of the general public.

The book starts with a brief introduction (“You, Me, Charles Darwin, and Dr. Seuss”). This is followed by twelve chapters and a brief conclusion (“How does research on unsavory and taboo topics converge into a grand view of human nature and answer the question: What is the meaning of life?”). In each chapter, Kenrick starts with a little story about himself. He seems eager to tell us what a wild and crazy guy he was; how his family was uneducated, alcoholic, prejudiced, superstitious, and (in several cases) criminal; how he hung out with hoodlums; how he spent a lot of time ogling beautiful girls and engaging in sexual activities with lots of them; how he became a grey-haired distinguished looking professor; but how he is still a member of a rebellious gang of outcasts; how his first two marriages failed but his sons turned out well. In each chapter, after a few pages of memoir, he typically says that the cited personal experiences are somehow connected to some interesting question; that he and his team of “crack graduate students” (120) decided to engage in some research that might shed some light on that question. He proceeds to give a superficial summary of the research that they did together with scattered remarks about politics, the academic world, or the number of hairs coming out of his ears. In the notes (at the end of the book) Kenrick cites academic publications in which the research is reported.

Chapter 3 (“Homicidal Fantasies”) provides a good example of Kenrick’s procedure. Kenrick begins by describing an incident in which his stepfather and his mother were engaged in an alcohol-fuelled battle. When Kenrick attempted to intervene, the stepfather began to attack Kenrick:

In a scene from the movies, I managed to land the best punch of my pugilistic career – a square hit on his jaw that sent him flying across the room, where he fell unconscious on the floor. My brother looked at me, pointed to the guns [our stepfather] had just been threatening us with, and asked “should we kill him?” I actually had to think about it for a minute before I said, without complete resolve, “Nah, we’d better not.” (24)

Subsequently, Kenrick became interested in questions about homicidal fantasies. Are they more frequent among men than women? About whom do people have these fantasies? How likely are people to act upon them? And is there a gender difference here, too? He then sketches some research that he and others did mostly by asking college students to fill out questionnaires concerning their own homicidal fantasies. He speculates that some ideas from evolutionary psychology offer the best explanation of his discoveries. He concludes by saying:

So the bottom line of these series of studies is this: Either status or mating motives can lead men to want to be directly aggressive. But men seem to realize that violence itself is not sexy to women. Hence, a man in a mating frame of mind is inclined to behave himself in front of women but to be especially prone to show off his aggressive reactions if the audience is made up of other men ... the females do not need to see the fight. They merely want to know who won.” (34)

Chapter 4 (“Outgroup Hatred In the Blink of an Eye”) follows the same pattern. Kenrick begins (41-2) by describing an “attractive dark-haired” Jewish girl that he dated in his youth. His mother had not been to mass for over a decade “since divorcing my shiftless Mick of a father and marrying a Protestant”. (42) So Kenrick was surprised when his mother revealed her anti-semitism. In connection with Kenrick’s subsequent marriage to a Lutheran, his new mother-in-law revealed her “tribalism”. She wanted nothing less than a Scandinavian Lutheran for her daughter. In a beer-soaked discussion of ethnic tolerance with his new family, another of the wife’s relatives said, in a thick Swedish accent “Hitler had the right idea!”

Experiences like these piqued Kenrick’s interest in racial and ethnic discrimination. He proceeds to sketch some of his research that is in one way or another related to the tendency to feel hatred or disgust for members of other ethnic groups. He speculates that some of this invidious discrimination might be explicable by appeal to facts about the circumstances in which our ancestors evolved. He concludes by saying (58) that “an

evolutionary perspective can help us understand why humans are so universally inclined to feel prejudice toward other groups...”

In subsequent chapters, Kenrick discusses his theory of multiple subselves (Ch 6); his revision of Maslow’s Pyramid (Ch 7); some questions about selective memory (Ch 8); conspicuous consumption (under the alliterative title “Peacocks, Porsches, and Pablo Picasso” in Ch 9); his idea that the motivation to engage in religious activity is fundamentally just a mating strategy (Ch 10); his concept of “Deep Rationality” (Ch 11); and the application of complexity theory to evolutionary psychology (Ch 12). The brief conclusion is mostly about the question about the meaning of life.

So far, I have been trying to give some idea of what’s in this book and how it is presented. I now want to turn to some evaluative comments. As Kenrick makes clear at the outset, this book is not intended to be a scholarly work. Rather it is “a frolicking journey to visit the wild things inside the human mind and a jolly ride back in time for dinner.” (x) We must be sure to apply the appropriate yardstick.

I suspect that many readers will find this book to be amusing and suggestive. But at the same time, I also suspect that some readers will find it deeply frustrating. Part of the frustration will be due to the fact that Kenrick repeatedly promises to reveal profound and revolutionary insights, but then fails to deliver.

Perhaps the most blatant example of this concerns dynamical systems theory (also called “complexity theory” (viii, 183), or the theory of “complex dynamical systems” (181); or “the science of complexity” (viii)). Kenrick assures us that this is revolutionary and that it will yield profoundly important insights. He promises to explain what it is and how it works. Thus, for example, he says:

... all human beings are interconnected in a complex web, like millions of ants in a giant colony. An emerging scientific revolution known as complexity theory neatly explains how all that works. Combined with the insights of evolutionary biology and cognitive science, *as you will see*, the science of complexity gives us a whole new understanding of what it means to be a member of the human race. (viii, emphasis added)

In a similar vein, he also says:

Amazingly, all the complexities of human society – religious and political movements, economic markets, and more – emerge out of the dynamic interaction of the simple rules operating inside individual people’s heads. *I describe how all that happens in Chapter 12.* (xi, emphasis added)

The claim seems to be that complexity theory, when combined with evolutionary psychology and cognitive science, yields profound and revolutionary new insights into human nature. To understand this, we need to know what complexity theory is and how it yields insights into human nature. In the Introduction, Kenrick says he will explain it, and by the end we will see how it all works. In the Conclusion, he suggests that he has done it. (e.g., 200)

The problem with this is that when the time comes to explain what complexity theory is and how it works, Kenrick does not produce. The much anticipated explanations simply do not emerge. A more careful look at Chapter 12 makes this clear.

Kenrick assures us that the advocates of complexity theory are very smart and very rebellious. One of them – Guy Van Orden -- is described in these words:

His appearance and behavior were closer to those of a guitar player in an alternative rock band, complete with black sneakers and a ponytail (in fact, one of Guy’s subselves was a musician). Guy could drink most Germans under the table, and

departmental parties he would still be standing, beer in hand, at four in the morning, arguing about philosophical ideas. (pp, 178-9)

Another major figure in dynamical systems theory – Bibb Latane – is said to “like to party into the night with a drink in his hand, arguing about ideas.” (179) He is also an “intellectual troublemaker” filled with “radical new ideas”.

No doubt some readers will be fascinated by this personal information about some advocates of complexity theory. But what’s really needed here is a statement – or even just a summary or a hint – of the theory itself. Kenrick admits that when these brilliant colleagues start “ranting about dynamical systems” (180) he finds their technical terminology “scary-sounding” and “strange”. Since he never took a course in calculus, he cannot understand their equations. (183) He says that he has read some popular books on the topic but is able to discuss it only at “a kindergarten level”. (181) And then when the time comes for actually explaining the theory, he begs off: instead of giving an account of the theory, he chooses instead just to talk about three “Big Ideas” that are somehow connected to it.

The first Big Idea is “multidirectional causality”. This is the idea that “cause and effect are tough to tease apart in nature because an effect can turn around and alter the thing that caused it.” (181) This is illustrated by an example involving a lot of back and forth screaming and yelling between Kenrick, his wife, and their young son. The point seems to be that people try to influence others, and the others try to influence them in return. If that’s the idea, it’s hard to see why it is profound and revolutionary.

The second Big Idea is “self-organization”. “Order often emerges spontaneously out of randomness, maintained not by some overseeing governing authority but by simple, self-centered interactions between local players.” (182) This is illustrated by another homely example: hundreds of families manage to settle their internal breakfasttime conflicts and get their kids to school at the appropriate time. Again, this is problematic. If all the families have received instructions from the schools telling them that school starts at

8:30, it's not clear how this example involves "randomness" or the absence of "overseeing authority". After all, someone told them what time the kids are supposed to show up. Thus, it is not clear how it illustrates Big Idea #2; nor is it clear why the Idea itself is profound or revolutionary.

Big Idea #3 is the idea that "tremendous complexity can result from just a few interacting variables." (182) This is illustrated by the example of ants. Each ant has a tiny brain that operates on a small array of simple rules; yet the ant colony constructs a very complex society.

Beyond this, Kenrick does virtually nothing to explain Complexity Theory. As a result the reader is left dangling. Kenrick said he would explain how Complexity Theory yields a new understanding of human nature. Yet he does not explain either Complexity Theory or the new understanding of human nature. We cannot begin to evaluate his claim about their connections.

The book has another frustrating feature. In several cases Kenrick makes very grand (if somewhat vague) claims about such things as "human nature", or "the meaning of life", or "deep rationality". He says that insights from evolutionary psychology, or cognitive science, or complexity theory yield profound insights into the grand claim. He then goes on to sketch some of his research. But it is sometimes difficult to see how the research is supposed to bear on the grand claim. A good example of this can be seen in Ch 11.

Kenrick claims that there has been a revolution in economics. The old ideas of classical economics have been replaced by new ideas in behavioral economics. The new ideas of behavioral economics incorporate insights from cognitive and social psychology.

Kenrick apparently thinks this is a move in the right direction, but he claims that even deeper insights can be gained if we add insights from evolutionary psychology to the mix. (163) He says that seemingly irrational economic choices can now be seen to be manifestations of "deep rationality". Such decisions may be "outputs of mental and

emotional mechanisms designed to maximize not immediate personal satisfaction but long-term genetic success.” (164)

He then turns to a discussion of the Prisoner’s Dilemma presumably in order to illustrate his claims. The simplest sort of Prisoner’s Dilemma is a case in which there are two rational individuals; each is presented with a pair of options and payoffs; if each abides by the familiar rule for maximizing his own welfare, they will end up behaving in a way that will yield less-than-maximal benefits; there was another way for them to act that would have been better for each of them.

In a standard illustration of the situation, we are asked to imagine two burglars. Before committing a certain crime, they enter into an agreement: neither will rat on the other if they are caught by the police. Suppose they are caught by the police. Each prisoner has the choice of abiding by the original agreement to keep silent or violating that agreement by ratting on his partner. The police guarantee that the payoff each will get depends in part upon what the other prisoner does. Here is the matrix that displays the payoffs for each combination of Silence and Ratting:

		Prisoner A	
		Silent	Rats
Prisoner B	Silent	6 6	7 2
	Rats	2 7	3 3

In each cell, the payoff for A is above and to the left; the payoff for B is below and to the right. So if B remains silent, then A will get 6 points for remaining silent, but 7 points (better for A) if he rats. If B rats, then A will get 2 points for remaining silent, 3 points for ratting (also better for A). So if A is rational, and he knows the payoffs, he will rat on his partner. The same is true for B. So if A and B are both rational, they will end up ratting on each other and ending up in the lower right cell. Each will get only 3 points;

but a glance at the matrix reveals that if they had remained silent as they had originally agreed to do, they would have gotten 6 points apiece. Each would have been much better off. So it may appear that individually rational decision-making can sometimes lead to less than ideal outcomes. (There is a huge literature on this. Cases involving more prisoners, iterated games, less certain outcomes, etc. have all been discussed. For an excellent and comprehensive critical discussion see the article “Prisoner’s Dilemma” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>.)

Kenrick claims that “if you think in evolutionary terms, ..., such dilemmas often disappear...” (165) He says that he and some colleagues have explored how this works in detail. (He cites the paper in the notes at the end of the book.) He points out that if the burglars had been brothers, and if in each case the payoff coming to one burglar were adjusted by adding (or subtracting) half of the brother’s payoff, then the burglars would not have been in a Prisoner’s Dilemma.

It’s hard to see what Kenrick could mean when he says that evolutionary biology gives us a way to “make Prisoner’s Dilemmas disappear”. It’s not as if the two burglars, finding themselves in a Prisoner’s Dilemma, could then decide to become brothers, and thereby change their utility functions, and thereby escape the Prisoner’s Dilemma that they are in; it’s not as if the two burglars could have agreed beforehand to become brothers and thereby assure each other that if they should get caught, the police would not be able to put them in a Prisoner’s Dilemma. (The police could easily offer larger rewards for ratting; the brothers would still be in a Prisoner’s Dilemma.) And obviously Kenrick does not mean that developments in evolutionary psychology have revealed that Prisoner’s Dilemmas cannot arise.

It appears that all he means is that if the payoffs had been different, these two burglars would not have been in a Prisoner’s Dilemma. That seems right. But it hardly shows how recent developments in evolutionary psychology have given us important new insights into “deep rationality”. (In this case I did look at the publications listed in the

bibliography; my impression is that nothing in those publications sheds any light on the puzzle: what does Kenrick mean when he says that insights of evolutionary biology will give us a way to “make Prisoner’s Dilemmas disappear”.)

One of the recurring themes in *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life* is the idea that each of us has “multiple subselves”. This appears to be a surprising claim in the ontology of mind. Aside from the odd case of multiple personality, the natural thing would be to think that each person has just one “self”. (Assuming, that is, that we want to take talk of the “self” as being ontologically serious in the first place.) But Kenrick claims that this natural view is wrong. And furthermore, he claims that the naïve view is “directly contradicted” by certain “empirical findings”. (80)

The curious reader will surely want to know more about these empirical findings; and how they demonstrate that each of us has not one, and not many, but just seven subselves. But again, it seems to me, Kenrick’s presentation is disappointing. It is not easy to follow his argument, but I think it goes like this:

“Domain General” models maintain that we can explain human behavior by assuming that everyone is fundamentally motivated by just one set of principles. The Reinforcement Affect Model is an instance. It says that you tend to like people more if they are associated with pleasant experiences. Another Domain General Model is the Economic Man Model. It says that when you are making a decision you informally imagine the expected utilities-for-you of your alternatives and then do what seems best.

But Kenrick believes in a “Domain Specific” model of human motivation. He thinks that we use different sets of rules depending upon the subject matter that we are thinking about. He gives an example that he used in research: a woman looks at a series of pictures of beautiful women; then she looks at a picture of Plain Jane. When she sees Plain Jane, she judges that Jane is not very pretty; but she is pleased to see her, since this makes her feel more competitive than she was feeling when she was looking at all the beauties. (79-81)

You might wonder what this has to do with Domain General vs. Domain Specific models of human motivation. Kenrick says this:

This disconnect between mood and judgment suggests that emotional reactions to other people and perceptual judgments of those same people are being calculated by two separate mechanisms in the brain. This directly contradicts the domain-general assumptions of the reinforcement-affect model. In other words, the one-principle theory, though parsimonious, is too simple.(80)

This seems confused. The example suggests that in some cases a person's mood when thinking about someone is somehow not entirely in synch with her judgment about that person's attractiveness. She's in a good mood; she judges that the person is not very pretty. How is that supposed to bear on the reinforcement-affect model? After all, that model (as far as Kenrick has described it) says nothing about judgments and moods; it says that you are more motivated to like someone if that person is associated in your mind with pleasant experiences. Kenrick never claims that the experiment measured the extent to which the subjects liked Plain Jane; nor are we told much about the pleasantness of the experiences that the respondents had while thinking about Jane. The empirical research seems to have no relevance to the thesis under consideration. But let's let this pass. We are still wondering what this all has to do with "multiple subselves". Here it is:

When I said earlier that the human brain uses different sets of rules for making decisions about the different people in our lives, I was advocating a domain-specific theory. In this view, there is no unitary "self" inside your head. Instead, there is a confederation of modular subselves, each one specialized to do one thing well. (81)

Sometimes (as in the just-quoted passage) Kenrick says that the *brain* contains different areas for each subself. This is an actual quotation: "...our brains come with abundant preprogramming, which develops into a number of special suborgans during normal development." (84)

How many subdivisions does the normal brain have? He says (84) that “we now know” that ‘one’ is the wrong answer. He doubts that “massive modularity” is correct. Instead, he thinks that the brain is divided into seven subdivisions: 1. the Team Player; 2. the Go-Getter; 3. the Night Watchman; 4. the Compulsive; 5. the Swinging Single; 6. the Good Spouse; and 7. the Parent. (92-3)

So Kenrick’s reasoning seems to go like this: we use seven different sets of rules when dealing with different subject matters; for each set of rules, we have a different modular subself. Therefore, we have seven different subselves.

It’s not clear that any of this is actually intended to be an *argument* for the theory of seven subselves; indeed, it is not clear that Kenrick is serious when he claims that each of us has these seven. (In another context [179] he says that someone has a “musical subself” – that would make eight all told; in another context [v] he uses the expression “The three faces of thee”, suggesting that each person has *three* subselves. Maybe it’s all just loose talk, not to be taken literally.)

But if Kenrick is serious about these multiple subselves, then it seems to me that he has presented an utterly unpersuasive argument for it. First of all, he has not established that we use different sets of rules for different domains. A single large and suitably differentiated set of rules could do everything Kenrick wants. But more importantly, he has given us no reason to think that for each set of rules, there is a distinct “subself”. For all he has said, you might have a single self that uses different rules when thinking about different domains; and if those rules are sufficiently complex, one set might be adequate to all the examples Kenrick has given.

Maybe some psychologists who know Kenrick professionally would be interested to read about his colorful childhood and family life; maybe they would be curious about his marriages and his screaming battles with his family. Some might like to know about his fantasies about murdering people in bakeries in France. (76) But I find it hard to

imagine how anyone with a professional interest in psychology could find much of strictly professional value in this book (aside from the list of articles that appears on 207-216.)

However, as I suggested earlier, it appears that the book is not intended for a professional audience. It seems to be aimed at non-professional readers who might like to learn a little about the personal life and research interests of a lively and iconoclastic psychologist. If such readers are primarily interested in hearing about the colorful personal adventures of the psychologist, they might enjoy the book. If they are primarily interested in gaining a basic understanding of the concepts, theories, and reasoning behind the research, they may find this book disappointing.

Fred Feldman
Department of Philosophy
University of Massachusetts
at Amherst, Amherst MA
01003
ffeldman@philos.umass.edu