

Darwin, Camus, and Hamlet went into a bar, AND . . .

By Jeff Huggins

Originally posted on CHORA, June 13, 2009

Darwin, Camus, and Hamlet happened to go to the same bar one night . . .

Strangers to each other, more or less, they sat at separate tables at first, with their own friends.

After a few drinks, each shared his concerns and notions, at his own table.

Darwin said, among other things:

“The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man.”

(Admittedly, it’s unclear whether he was much fun at parties.)

Hamlet wondered: “To be, or not to be . . .”

And Camus philosophized:

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.”

After a few more rounds—which often helped more than hindered—the talking at each table got louder and more involved. Newcomers to the bar joined in, each sitting at the table that seemed to be speaking her or his own language.

(Although I'm not great at recognizing faces in bars, especially after a few drinks, I think I saw W. D. Hamilton, Robert Trivers, E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, Frans de Waal, David Sloan Wilson, Peter Richerson, and a few others join Darwin's table. Some of them even asked for his autograph! I think I saw Hume arrive and try to figure out where to sit, quite curious about what that guy Darwin was saying. And, I think I saw Kwame Anthony Appiah walk in, trying to find a place where he could hear the conversations at all three tables.)

Someone yelled, "More drinks over here!"

The bartender—a generous and hopeful chap—decided to serve everyone, on the house, and to keep the place open into the morning. It seemed to him that things were just starting to get interesting.

(And anyway, he thought that maybe, just maybe, some of these conversations might lead to something that could help heal the rioting in the streets outside.)

Then, after more drinks, and even more, something began to happen: People started moving among the different tables. Indeed, people even started losing track of which table was which!

I think I felt the wind blow and saw Bob Dylan arrive.

Then, when someone challenged something about the drink he chose, a guy named Jean-Paul proclaimed:

"Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth."

And that got another guy, called "Wil", waxing poetic:

"Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Then some guy with wacky white hair, who'd been talking about "e" and "c-squared" earlier in the evening, spoke softly, but many people listened: "It seems to me that we have to think at a different level." One of his friends, who also commanded much attention, observed something like, "Some people would rather die than think." Another guy stood on a table and shouted, "Character is destiny".

And the people all shared their thoughts, more and more.

The joint jammed and jumped, drinks runneth over, and dots began to be connected. The drinks seemed more helpful than you might imagine.

After overhearing someone say something, a guy named Ed responded:

“Ethical philosophers intuit the deontological canons of morality by consulting the emotive centers of their own hypothalamic-limbic systems.”

Many people had to go running for their dictionaries—including me!

After a lot of listening to the commotion all night, Kwame Anthony Appiah finally said:

“In ethics as in optics, we need stereoscopy to see the world in all its dimensions.”

(Another fun one at parties?)

Some people began noticing, and pondering, the very interesting connections between the ultimate function of adaptations (favorite terms of the folks at one table) and Hamlet’s “to be, or not to be” question (a question that Camus couldn’t put as eloquently but nevertheless did a great job highlighting) and the ways in which the question could be approached—by intoxicated humans anyhow!

Could a key connecting factor, a harmonizing chord, a common theme, a bridging platform, among the diverse members of this now-rowdy crowd have something to do with the relationships between those considerations?

The “is” table and the “ought” table seemed to be finding some solid common ground, finally, and even forming friendships. After all, they were both tables of folks in the same room, drinking the same beer, using the same bathroom, and about to face the same rioting crowd outside.

The bartender, starting to grow slightly impatient, and worried about his windows, reminded the now-fearless crowd about the rioting and asked, “And how will all this actually help address the rioting, anyway?”

To that, a brainy guy named Michael replied:

“I am convinced that we must commit ourselves to the view that a universal ethics is possible, and that we ought to seek to understand it and define it. It is a staggering idea, and one that on casual thought seems preposterous. Yet there is no way out.”

As the morning sun began to rise, someone else asked,
“Just one more beer, please!”

Be Well!,

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