

Common Themes in Doris Lessing's 'The Sirian Experiments' and Stephen Jay Gould's essays 'The Moral State of Tahiti - and Darwin' and 'Ten Thousand Acts of Kindness'

There are ideas in Doris Lessing's visionary space fiction 'Canopus in Argos: Archives' series that occasionally transcend mere allegory into fully-fleshed ideas of biology and philosophy. The third book of the series, *The Sirian Experiments*, gives numerous examples wherein Ambien II, of the Five (alien emissaries) that represent one of Lessing's fictitious planet-empires, the Sirian Empire, conducts bio-sociological experiments on Earth involving ideas of a crudely forced evolution that flows gradually, speeds up, or doesn't occur at all. Her process is mysterious, much like the concepts she involves to tell her story.

She tells us about the Lombis, a species transplanted from their own planet to Rohanda (a colonial name for Earth, coined by another inter-galactic empire: the Canopean Empire) by the Sirian Empire. Most of such experiments, including the experiments on the Lombis, ended in their [the Lombis'] degeneration into rough stock. Furthermore, both big Empires talk about a Necessity which justifies colonization and arbitrary experiments on lesser-evolved species from other planets. The idea is to construct societies and races, as if they were dolls, by taking them from their home planet and putting them on another, and then tracking their evolution, which almost always leads to disastrous consequences.

The Necessity later leads to something known as a Lock between the alien Canopean Empire and Earth - ruminations as to what a Lock is continue throughout the series: we never find out. Towards the end of the *Sirian Experiments*, Lessing succinctly expresses her idea of the quietly savage nature of forced evolution:

Large-scale experiments of the bio-sociological kind are in progress - the kind that one of our wits has summed up as What if we...? In other words, populations are subjected to this and that stress, or the planets of planets moved about - all that class of thing. And I am far from claiming that this does not cause suffering ... But it is not possible to avoid such disturbances of a Colonized Planet altogether. What would then be the purpose of colonizing one?

Lessing's colonized folk remember 'the shining one' - people from the stars who brought them from Planet A to Planet B centuries ago; they remember old songs and dances as quickly as they distort them and they distort not gently but crudely. All this is viewed by Ambien II from a vantage point (insert here the Big

Brother-like image of aliens viewing human progress from a spaceship or time machine). The progress, or rendering into redundancy, of the colonized species can be charted by Sirians who, of course, live much longer than colonized folk because evolution credits 'higher' races with longer lifetimes. The story is of a drive into evolution purposely set into motion by an Other – not nature, not circumstance but an alien empire. At times this could seem the most heretical of all nonsense ever assumed about an evolutionary process, at others a calculated critique of human history and the fate of Earth. **This essay tackles two aspects of Lessing's parallel universe: the hierarchy between species, and the manner in which evolution proceeds.**

History is self-motivated. Dips and peaks in intellectual development are created not just by what is popular notion at the time but also by the popular notion of what is radical at the time. Stephen Jay Gould, that avid supporter of Darwinian theory who has recently become something of a hero for me, writes essays that actively put into perspective ideas that would be considered deplorable today, but which at the time reflected conventional wisdom. Darwin's inevitable linking with the ideas of Social Darwinism¹, for instance, (for think about how pop culture has painted him out to be such a believer in an awfully deterministic inequality within the human species) he defends plausibly by separating the grain of the times of Darwin from the chaff of an assumed morality, and then takes it a step further and pleads for Darwin because [Gould claims] he was not a believer in "biologically fixed and ineradicable inequality".

The evidence Gould gives is an assessment of Darwin's acts during his lifetime, none of which could be called acts of racism. Furthermore, contrary to common knowledge, the extension of evolutionary theory to the human species was not Darwin's work but of those who came after him – here, Francis Galton, that famed eugenicist comes to mind. Gould does all that because human history must have a logical progression of ideas into the constructed mores and values we hold so dear today – at some point we must have committed the crime to discredit it so much today.

Today, the equality of human beings is an absolute concept, but in the same manner that a round Earth was not an absolute till a certain point in history, neither was the concept of equality. Think about it and it all boils down to your assumptions about human nature. Is evil innate? Does our species have an expiration date? Is the human race forcing itself to degenerate? [Can I stop rhyming before it's too late?]

¹ the idea that some races are, by nature's sleight of hand, better suited to survive and thus superior – that Auschwitz-creating ideology

Lessing's aliens certainly seem to think so. Her allegorical Earth, wasted, filled with anguished spirits, is beautiful with its plains, ravines, plateaus and mountains, but despicable by the same measure because of lost vitality. The knee-jerk response is: people wasted there, in that sickly expanse of land that feeds on energy and goodness. The lively, purposeful, occasionally matriarchal races that integrated and adapted well are replaced by cruel, authoritarian, always patriarchal races a few centuries later, overseen by the colonizers. Often people rebelled against the colonizers, but only in the rare event did it compel the colonizers to take notice, and even then they took umbrage at the cheekiness of a rebellion. Note the tone in the following words by Ambien II:

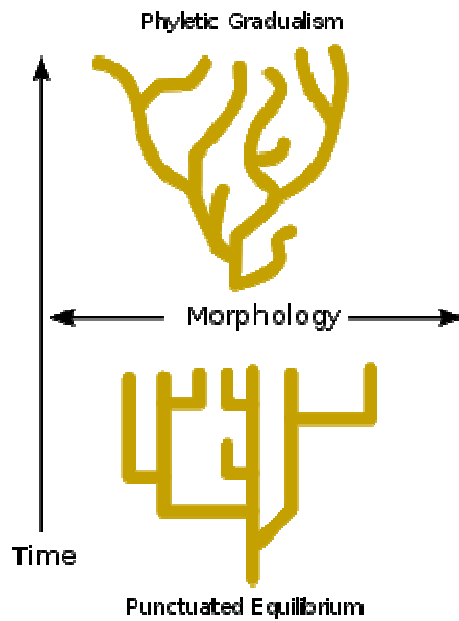
We already had billions of privileged peoples [people of their own Empire] entitled to every benefit of technology. We did not want to discover, and then colonize, planet after planet of savages or semisavages who then, it seemed almost at once, would become privileged citizens. In short, we needed a reservoir or bank of populations whom we could use for ordinary, heavy, undifferentiated work.

Towards the end of the book come the insights that set Ambien II on a corrective path. It is not an altogether painless process. For much of the book, she rejects humanistic values and acts vainly but defends herself with the 'greater good' of her parent race, the Sirians. Indeed, there are claims of unavoidable acts, 'sacrifices that must be made', but Ambien II becomes fond of Rohanda (Earth). Her final moments are those of disrepute, she is demoted from the Five for having become too different in thought. The larger question, however, is if such thought is essential and innate. We view Darwin's work today through a smoke screen, one we have created after the codification of numerous laws which are accepted the world over about how human beings are undoubtedly equal in stature and that there are no distinctions between race. But when Darwin fails to pass the nonracist test, is it because for him to say that the tribes of Africa and South America were not savage would be too radical in those times? And if we let Darwin off the hook, is that like saying that the only reason we think human beings are equal is because it's the law?

Unlike the idea of superiority and inferiority, which is never taken for granted in Lessing's book, her implication of evolution - that it's a continuous, gradual process - is never challenged. The scientific response to this idea of evolution can be found in Gould's early career success on the theory of punctuated equilibrium (presented in the paper *Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism* with Niles Eldredge in 1971 at the Annual Meeting of the Geological Society of America). Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium goes like this: allopatric

speciation² constitutes but a split second in geological terms. Gould's theory claims that most evolution is concentrated in such moments in direct comparison to the long (and since we're speaking geologically, this means very, very long) periods of stasis that the species - however long it is able to survive before going extinct - experiences: essentially evolution not along a continuum but in steps, jumps and starts. What does this mean for Lessing's colonized? It means that Gould does not think it possible that brains can grow smaller gradually (for a million years), flowing through uncountable intermediates, within the same race.

Comparison with another idea of evolution will make this easier. This idea of evolution is in (almost) direct contrast to phyletic gradualism which could be imagined as a continuous curve which at some point breaks in two (divergence). In essence of course, that means, that a species which is known to have Beak Size A in Year 0 and Beak Size B in Year 2000 did not undergo a continuous evolution (i.e. beak sizes did not slowly grow over the years: if they did that would be phyletic gradualism) but experienced speciation in short bursts of time which cannot compare in length to the long period of time for which the species' state was constant (speciation occurred and an isolated population which had broken away from the big population mutated to obtain Beak Size B: punctuated equilibrium).



Note: The preceding diagram, despite being taken from Wikipedia.org, helps the idea be visualized best. Let's revisit our suspicion of the validity of Wikipedia.org, shall we?

² a small population isolated from the big population geographically evolves differently: the primary method of the creation of two species from one as scientific ideas held at the time

Punctuated equilibrium is revolutionary in its (not entirely direct) approach towards correcting the ideas of a continuous change in species. Indeed, it does not disconfirm the idea that deleterious mutations and variation continue to play significant roles, just that the effect they have are not incremental from one generation to another. Furthermore, its assumption that large populations are more able to absorb the effects of variation is not and was not a new idea. Thus, it is possible for a large population to not exhibit the cumulative effects of variation.

What does this mean for our lives? What does it mean for history? Gould's comfort with his theory is telling:

There is a lesson, not merely frustration, in the message that change occurs in infrequent bursts and that stability is the usual nature of species and systems at any moment.

This is optimistic and Gould defends human social structures by stating that, as an extension of his theory, dark events in human history are isolated incidents that can't compare in frequency to the millions of kind acts that go unnoticed. It's just that one act of violence counts for much more than the many acts of kindness that human beings commit towards one another – thus the title of his essay: 'Ten Thousand Acts of Kindness'. Note the implications:

Many of us have the impression that daily life is an unending series of unpleasantness – that 50 percent or more of human encounters are stressful or aggressive. But think about it seriously for a moment. Such levels of nastiness cannot possibly be sustained. Society would devolve to anarchy in an instant if half our overtures to another human being were met with a punch in the nose.

That makes sense, but think about the implications of what has been said and the feeling is unavoidable that even Gould's justification accepts that ten thousand acts of kindness will go unnoticed. His logic goes like this: violent act is the jump/burst in evolution, kind acts are the stability that follow for many more years thereafter. But both Punctuated Equilibrium and Phyletic Gradualism bring us to the same end-point. Gould accepts:

One supposed insult, one crazed act of assassination, can undo decades of patient diplomacy, cultural exchanges, peace corps, pen pals – small acts of kindness involving millions of citizens – and bring two nations to a war that nobody wants, but that kills millions and irrevocably changes the paths of history.

Species diverge, become extinct, evolve. And that's irrefutable and inevitable. By extension, thus, does that mean that the ten thousand acts of kindness that Gould

talks about have no causal effect on the end-result other than the many years of stability that they bring, for inevitably bursts and changes can only be caused by violence/widespread mutation? If so, then to all logic, human agency has been limited.

Lessing's book feels the same. The nature of the bio-sociological experiments conducted by Ambien II is such that despite an overarching trend towards certain traits, random events are just as insidious and powerful. Reading about forced evolution is dangerous because the structure of the argument relies on making individuals powerless against the sweeping tide of the "overall trend" or "random change". Are we willing to accept that we can't change anything because the universe is so much bigger than us?

This is not intuitive and it certainly isn't a comfortable idea – the debate over whether humans have the 'agency' to change events runs through many disciplines – political realists say that individuals are powerless and states are all-powerful; evolutionary biologists point to the competition between species in natural selection. Lessing has the privilege of writing space fiction so in her world, there is a reason. The reason is the evil empire, Puttiora, which brainwashes, infiltrates, degrades, pervades innocent races and makes them savage. So, evolution is forced. The question is, is there really an evil empire Puttiora? Can evolution in the real world also be forced or do species have the power to successfully oppose the winds of change? There is no answer, just the whispers of a mysterious process called evolution.

Allegory is a powerful tool to understanding. During Ambien II's travels, she encounters a woman called Elylé, possibly a Puttiorian but definitely an enemy. In Elylé's captivity, Ambien II notes her captor's psychological influence on the captives. There is a moment of ambivalence – caught in the crossfire between old and new thought, Ambien II notes about these Earth beings:

But sitting there in that gilded, amiable, pleasure-loving scene, which had over it a sort of silky dew as if it were drenched with ethereal honey... I understood it all, and only too well – because I was being affected as I sat there, trying to preserve a correct, if not an official, air...And what I was understanding. Oh yes, the woman was magic! I understood that she was a daughter of old Adalantand; I remembered... but there in that time it had a very different function. The wonderful females of that island had been in a correct alignment...one could sense their oneness with their surroundings. But this descendent of theirs...had in addition a witchery that had slipped out of its place, and become sufficient to itself.

Thoughts and beliefs are like that – soundless, they shift and encompass. The history of the world, even in a parallel universe, must cleave, rethink, create – evolve. Maybe if in a modern world, we could reconcile ourselves to ideas of evolutionary change as diverse as punctuated equilibrium and as uncomfortable as the loss of human agency; to ideas of society as antiquated as Social Darwinism and as rational as justified exoneration. Maybe then, we too, could see the woman is magic.

Kamil Ahsan likes pretending he is qualified to talk about lofty topics such as evolution. He likes big words, smelling books, orbitals, and rabbits. In his spare time, he likes to sing opera.