

more reminiscent of *Disclosure*, Crichton's perverse attempt to address the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace by focusing on a case in which a woman harasses a man, rather than vice-versa. Similarly, in *State of Fear*, the specter of a vast environmentalist conspiracy—a problem even less significant than sexual harassment of men by their female superiors—gets trumpeted, while real concerns (climate

change, for instance) get scoffed at. By the book's end, one can only ask: What planet is Michael Crichton living on? Because this one is clearly getting warmer.

Editor's Note: The SKEPTICAL INQUIRER invited Michael Crichton to publish in SI his own comments about global warming and the politicalization of science from his viewpoint but received no response.

derived from evolutionary-adaptationist theory are about the behavior of groups, not individuals. And Barber provides numerous examples of individuals who have behaved selfishly.

Organisms are not born into and do not live in vacuums. As Barber shows, environmental variation has as much to do with altruism (or its absence) as with genetics. The famous experiments of Stanley Milgram and Phillip Zimbardo are part of a large body of research that indicates that aggression and discrimination, in addition to altruism, are traceable to powerful forces of the social environment. As we have been adapted for group life, the influences of our social environment are understandable. This history explains the capacity of humans for altruism toward strangers as well as the frequent hostility of members of an in-group to members of an out-group. The sensitivity of human altruism to the social environment means that it is weakened in developed countries because of the lack of close relationships between people and their neighbors. During our evolutionary history, we behaved most altruistically toward those with whom we lived in close proximity for long periods of time.

Barber maintains that among some mammals, including primates and humans, "moral emotions" may be necessary for altruistic behavior. Such moral emotions as guilt, embarrassment, outrage, empathy, and gratitude are expressed in all human societies. For example, moral outrage at cheats or "free riders" is a necessary enforcement system of reciprocal altruism among humans, and it plays an important role in keeping people honest.

In addition to his exposition of the concept of altruism and its development in humans, Barber discusses the social impact of altruism (kindness) on health, kindness among strangers, conformity as altruism, and when altruism fails. As throughout the book, the topics are illustrated with interesting examples. The book's last section deals with altruism and



Kindness Explained

PETER LAMAL

Kindness in a Cruel World: The Evolution of Altruism.

By Nigel Barber. Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York. 2004. ISBN 1-59102-228-2. 415 pp. Hardcover, \$28.

Why do people donate their blood, leave tips for people they will never see again, and throw themselves on hand grenades that are about to explode? Nigel Barber makes a convincing case that altruism can be understood as the result of evolutionary-adaptationist processes, and he consistently applies an evolutionary-adaptationist framework throughout his new book *Kindness in a Cruel World*. And in doing so, he addresses questions about, and criticisms of, the concept of altruism and its origins.

Barber defines *altruism* as "actions that help another individual at some cost to the altruist." This approach enables us to include nonhuman species in our consideration of altruism. As Barber notes, the biological definition of altruism he advocates is sometimes criticized on the grounds that supposed acts of selflessness are really only selfishness in disguise. If

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altruistic behavior is biologically based, it is only undertaken to make the altruist feel better, to increase the reproductive success of the altruist, or to increase the prevalence of genes for altruistic behavior. In response, Barber maintains that altruism is real because it is predicated on evolved moral emotions like empathy and shame. Furthermore, humans and other species can engage in altruistic actions that have no ulterior motive, other than whatever pleasure comes from the altruistic behavior itself. And there might also be no delayed benefit for the behavior. In order for altruistic tendencies to have evolved, it was not necessary that every altruistic act should have a reproductive payoff; rather, altruistic behaviors should generally increase the biological success of those acting altruistically.

The well-established principle of kin selection provides support for the biology-driven perspective on altruism, and Barber points out that the simplest and most widespread type of altruism is parental care of offspring. The principle of kin selection is valuable, because it allows us to make important predictions about people's behavior. But it is important to bear in mind that the predictions

politics broadly conceived and includes discussion of the potential benefits and costs of religion, saving the environment, and criminals ("evil people"). With respect to religion, it is clear that religious belief is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for altruistic behavior.

Readers should be aware of the following: Contrary to Barber's glowing description of Pitcairn Island, in 2004 (presumably after this book was sent to

the printer), the island's mayor and five other Pitcairnian men were sentenced to prison for a string of rapes and sexual assaults dating back forty years. Barber also conveys the distinct impression that the Kyoto agreement to deal with the world's polluted atmosphere is dead. This is not true. This book is written for a general audience and includes citations of references for those who wish to delve deeper. I highly recommend this book.

Received Opinions, which has been justly celebrated for satirical definitions such as these:

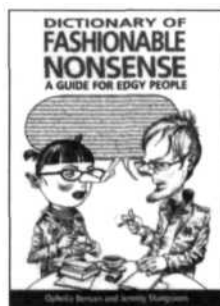
Memory: Complain of your own; indeed, boast of not having any. But roar like a bull if anyone says you lack judgment.

Principles: Always "eternal." Nobody can tell their nature or number; no matter, they are sacred all the same.

The American writer Ambrose Bierce also contributed to this genre with his classic book *The Devil's Dictionary*, published in its final form in 1906. The book is a comedic favorite because of its caustic humor (it defines *disabuse* as "to present your neighbor with another and better error than the one he has deemed it advantageous to embrace"), yet its function was partly serious. Bierce, like Flaubert, disliked the prejudices and unexamined ideas packaged in frequently used words and phrases and wanted to do something about it.

Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom wanted to do something about it too, and *The Dictionary of Fashionable Nonsense* is the result. Proprietors of the excellent rationalist Web site Butterflies and Wheels.com, Benson and Stangroom fight fashionable nonsense of all flavors, whether it's the wishful thinking of Intelligent Design proponents or the latest examples of political groupthink. Some of the nonsense fashionable today was also popular in the days of Flaubert or Bierce, particularly the automatic distrust of anyone claiming authority in matters of knowledge. But our times are also filled with new and more pernicious absurdities, particularly those of an extreme-leftist variety. Radical postmodernism denies that science is superior to other "ways of knowing," and theory-obsessed writers "lean on clotted jargon and tortured syntax to make no point at all." As rational leftists, Benson and Stangroom are rightly concerned about the popularity of such illogical thought in public discourse.

Inevitably, some fashionable nonsense uses the linguistic sleight of hand



Nonsense in Vogue

PHIL MOLÉ

The Dictionary of Fashionable Nonsense: A Guide for Edgy People. By Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom. Souvenir Press, London. 2004. ISBN 0-285-63714-2. 128 pp. Softcover, \$14.

Students of language have long argued that common usages of words are as important as official definitions, since words often soak up assumptions of the day. This causes problems when commonplace usages of words override all other possible meanings. As Francis Bacon observed, language can trick us into uncritically accepting assumptions associated with particular words—a fallacy he called the "idol of the marketplace."

Consider the common advice that "we must be careful not to generalize." This adage implies that generalization is inherently wrong and we should take special care to avoid it. Yet generalization is needed to understand the complex world we live in, and science and rational thought would be impossible without it. In addition, note the paradox that the statement "we must be careful not to generalize" is itself a generalization, so we would disobey the advice if we followed it! Clearly, words like *generalization* carry unstated cultural assumptions that con-

fuse rather than clarify discussions.

When we ignore the biases piggy-backing on common words, we perpetuate a kind of linguistic con game. We may convince ourselves that certain words carry inevitable implications, but the perceived implications may not necessarily follow. The implications we perceive may merely come from widely held ideas about the words, and we err if we identify these ideas with legitimate definitions. If we do so, we compromise the intellectual honesty of public debate and contribute to philosophical confusion.

For these reasons, many writers have protested the infiltration of language by unrecognized biases. A few have addressed this problem by writing satirical dictionaries emphasizing the unstated ideas lurking within word usages. These dictionaries often replace the official definitions of words with comical exaggerations of their common meanings or expose deeper truths about the words in question. The great novelist Gustave Flaubert appended such a document to his novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. This addendum eventually earned separate publication as *The Dictionary of*

Phil Molé wrote "Nurturing Suspicion: What College Students Learn about Science" for our May/June 2004 issue.