

comment

RETHINKING VIOLENCE

a response to Moody 21[1]

For an evolutionary biologist reading anthropological literature, there is just one thing more annoying than theories devoid of biological background – this is when evolutionary explanations are offered that are misrepresentations of current knowledge. In a recent letter, Moody (AT 21[1]) makes the latter mistake when accusing Whitehead (AT 20[5]) of the former.

Moody summarizes: ‘Man is a hunter-killer[...] my body biochemistry is that of a hunter-killer. As were the bodies of all my ancestors[...]’ One may be forgiven for thinking this is the description of a wolf. As a description of a primate, however, it is far from the truth.

The order Primates consists of species utilizing many different food sources. Some species eat only insects, others leaves, and yet others fruit. But – excepting the insect-eaters who are very distantly related to humans anyhow – one would search in vain to find a pure ‘hunter-killer’. In fact, if we look at our closest relatives, the orang-utans mainly eat fruit, while the gorillas’ main subsistence is foliage. Of the two species nearest to us, chimpanzees are known to supplement their main diet of fruits with the occasional kill, but bonobos have never been observed to hunt – and remember, we are equally closely related to both these species.

Dietary preferences are irrelevant if one wants to make biologically informed statements about violence. While there is ample evidence of the biological background to violence, whether a species regularly hunts or not has no bearing whatsoever on the level of violence that that species inflicts on its kin. ●

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