Crespo, H. (2014). Reasonings on the other races of men. S*ociety of Friends of Epicurus Journal*, 7, pp. 28-30.

Reasonings on the Other Races of Men

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

In my book *Tending the Epicurean Garden*, I attempt to articulate a dialectical relationship between contemporary science and ancient Epicureanism. I focus mostly on modern atomism, neuroscience and the social sciences, as I feel this is necessary for keeping our tradition relevant.

I barely cover Darwinism in the book but there is an intimate connection between Darwinism and our Canon, as well as many of our doctrines, that deserves to evolve into a full revision of Epicurean theory. Darwin, in a way, brought to completion what Lucretius and many ancient atomists had begun, and brought new insights so significant that they deserve to be considered non-different from Epicurean teaching, adding flesh to the bones of the original doctrines.

There are other worlds in other parts of the universe
and other races of men and of wild beasts.

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura, Book II*

After considering the infinitude of atoms and the number of combinations of bodies possible in the universe, Lucretius did not hesitate to conclude that there are other humanlike species in other planets.

We do not yet have confirmation of the many races of men and creatures, but we do have thousands of confirmed exoplanets, all within our galactic neighborhood, which leads us to reasonably expect that these worlds must number in the trillions if we count all the galaxies, and if we include their orbiting moons.

Today there is another, non-atomist way to reason about the Other Races of Men Hypothesis: by evaluating what we know of natural selection. If life evolved in other worlds, there is no reason to suppose that natural selection would have operated in ways different from how it has operated in the varieties of niches for life on Earth.

Necessity creates evolutionary pressures that force creatures to adapt. Only the members of the species that adapt in the face of these evolutionary pressures and challenges, get to survive and pass on their DNA. What this

means is that creatures invariably are expected to gain traits that produce advantage over the long term, particularly as they are confronted with evolutionary pressures.

Intelligence is among the traits favored by natural selection, but only in certain instances. Hunters often have to develop social skills to be more successful in their hunt, and complex collectivist behavior requires communication and bonding, which require some level of intelligence. Intelligence makes entities resourceful and much more adaptable than non-intelligent entities so that, although it only happens rarely, when it does happen it greatly benefits creatures.

Nature favors and rewards adaptability and increases the most adaptable creatures over many generations so that the most adaptable survive and pass on their genes over the long term.

Intelligence has varied expressions, among them communication and tool-making. On Earth, there are many species that are extremely intelligent: octopi are able to escape from captivity, some elephants have been taught to create complex paintings, dolphins have the ability of language and each answers to its own name, monkeys and the great apes are known to be very curious and to make tools, with the bonobos even being rumored to have recently mastered the art of making fire.

More intelligent creatures oftentimes operate successfully to the detriment of less intelligent creatures. We see how humans are believed to have brought neanderthals and the mammoth to extinction, just as we're doing today with thousands of species.

It's likely that one species, or several (as on Earth), over the long term will develop very high levels of intelligence and adaptability in any planet where life evolves. It's also likely that some of these species, like ours, will gain so much power over their environment that they will drive many other species to extinction as we are doing.

Humans occupy a unique place within the evolution of life here: we have more power over our environment than any other creature in the past. If comparably intelligent races evolve elsewhere, the ethical questions, dangers and responsibilities that this would raise for them would likely be similar to our own: issues of environmental justice, ethical use of science, etc. Let us call these creatures, these crowns of planetary and galactic evolution, the **alpha sapiens**, or the wisest of the creatures for each planet where there is life, as the main evolutionary adaptation that alpha sapiens have is their intelligence. Notice that we humans lack the canines of predators and the claws of bears: we have gotten domesticated and have no choice but to live from our wits and tools.

Presumably it's likely that any other alpha sapiens species that has learned to live by its wits and developed culture, may also go through a similar domestication of itself and several other vegetable and animal species.

I chose the term **alpha sapiens** to denote that, when Lucretius speaks of other races of men, it's healthier to assume that he speaks of the sapiens portion of homo sapiens. In other words, we have more reason to expect to find an exceptionally wise species than to find wise hominids elsewhere or even wise mammalians. The specific anatomical features will depend on the niche they evolve in (aquatic, terrestrial, etc.), but an alpha sapiens would likely have tool-making abilities and intelligence enough to develop communication and inventiveness. It might even develop the sciences, so that for all purposes its species is the humanity of its planet.

This leads to consider the notion of self-creation as it relates to the Swerve, which is an euphemism in Epicureanism for the volition of creatures. Animals bodies change, over many generations, as a result of dietary choices and other acts of volition, choices made by creatures regarding their survival strategies. Turtles in one Galapagos island, for instance, developed a different shell and longer limbs and neck to access certain cacti, whereas in other islands their shells remained circular. Something similar happened with giraffes: they chose to

eat the fruits and leaves from the highest part of the tree so that they have little competition for food. This produced their uniquely tall anatomy.

We can understand how acts of volition changed our hands and feet by considering our decision to get off the trees and live on the savannah. Notice, by the way, how it is through necessity that the adaptability and inventiveness of a species is tested: desertification during an Ice Age led to the death of the trees, and our ancestors had to join the savannah. We would have stayed in the trees if it had been easier. It was safer, no doubt. Need is the mother of invention, and I suspect also of volition. Need pushes creatures out of their comfort zone.

Now, the new science of neuroplasticity is teaching us about how fast the activities we engage in can change the human brain, not within generations but within months. The knowledge of how we consciously change who we are and how we can steer our own evolution has led to some people considering the possibility of transcending our natural identity and join the transhumanist movement.

It's true that scientific insight into cancer and certain hereditary diseases may justify some of the ethical claims of the transhumanists, but it's also clear that there are serious dangers associated with transhumanist technology: a post-human super-race might be likely to threaten modern humans and make us obsolete much faster than it took us to replace the neanderthals, or at least relegate us to a place in history similar to that of Cro-Magnon and other primitive cultures. Then again, if other sapiens races do transcend their beastlike traits and we don't, this may represent a severe disadvantage in any future process of transplanetary diplomacy and scientific research.

Although the idea of other races of men sounds fascinating, we should all have mixed feelings about meeting another sapiens species. As the masters of our environment, we have always woven narratives of terror around the idea of an alien invasion of Earth: would it not be fair to expect any other sapiens species to be similarly disposed to distrust the intentions of our visit, if we ever find them?

Nature rewards those who can both identify opportunities as well as take advantage of them, that is: perception and wits. Therefore, species that evolve elsewhere are likely to eventually exhibit these traits. If they can eventually raise an alpha sapiens species that removes every trace of the ancestral beast enough to be trustworthy and form healthy, productive interplanetary relations, then it's natural that we would with to learn their sciences, their philosophies, their cultures, etc. But as for humans, I don't think we're there yet. We may be big-headed, but we're still hairy beasts.