

Debating group differences in intelligence: A conversation with philosopher Nathan Cofnas

Nathan Cofnas is an American philosopher and philosophy PhD Candidate at Oxford University. He is known for his works on the evolution of morality; his debate with Kevin B. MacDonald about Jewish ethnic interests; and his paper titled “[Research on group differences in intelligence: A defense of free inquiry.](#)”

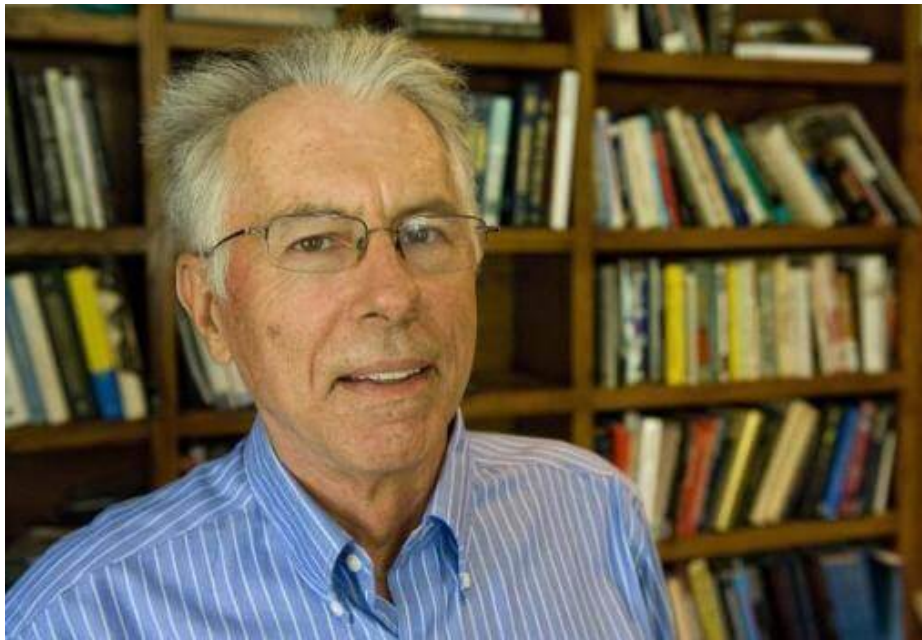
The following interview is part of [a series of conversations](#) of independent scholar Grégoire Canlorbe with natural and social scientists (In addition to his scientific interviews Canlorbe also interviewed a variety of renowned cultural and political figures—such as Greenpeace’s co-founder and former president Patrick Moore and Hollywood stars’ trainer Kamel Krifa).



Nathan Cofnas

Canlorbe has critically studied Kevin. B. MacDonald's thesis on Jewish ethnic interests—namely that Jews are genetically and culturally predisposed to a combination of high collectivism and high out-group hostility, and in the two last centuries have been serving their perceived ethnic interests through promoting left-wing doctrines like anti-racism.

A retired psychology professor at California State University, MacDonald is claimed to be an anti-Semitic theorist; his controversial and often derided thesis has yet gained traction in some quarters. His critical interest led Canlorbe to have [a conversation with Kevin B. MacDonald](#) in March 2019; and then the following interview in May 2020 with one of MacDonald's most renowned intellectual critics, Nathan Cofnas, who is generally supportive of the theory of genetically based group intellectual differences.



Kevin MacDonald

Grégoire Canlorbe: It is not uncommon to hear that IQ tests are not measuring intelligence *stricto sensu*, but only the success in passing IQ tests. Hence so many people supposedly gifted with a high IQ turn out to be complete morons in the real life... lacking subtlety, depth, hindsight, creativeness, polyvalence, humility, alertness, and a critical and independent mindset. As a defender of the research on group differences in intelligence, do you contest such claim?

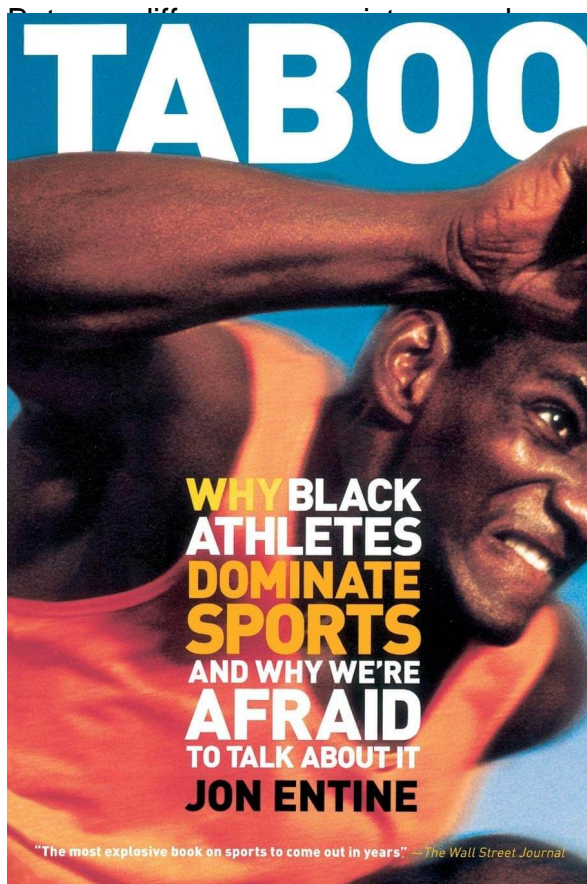
Nathan Cofnas: The claim that IQ tests only measure the ability to take IQ tests is a common critique, but not among those who are familiar with the relevant evidence. IQ is highly correlated with a range of real-life outcomes both inside and outside the classroom: educational attainment, job performance, health, even your chance of getting into a car crash. This is not surprising when you consider that, as Robert Gordan put it, “everyday life [is] an intelligence test.”

Nonacademic tasks like planning and following a healthy diet, preventing or treating diseases, reading a bus schedule, making a budget, avoiding accidents, or setting up household appliances involve problems

that have the same basic form as IQ test questions. People with higher IQs tend to do these things better and more reliably than those with lower IQs.

That being said, the ability that IQ tests purport to measure—so-called “general intelligence”—is not well understood in any detail, and “intelligence” certainly has other dimensions. Success at any given activity requires a constellation of abilities and dispositions. It’s pretty much always an advantage to have more general intelligence, but the people with the highest IQs are not necessarily the most successful or the “smartest” in a colloquial sense. The traits you mention—subtlety, creativity, critical thinking, etc.—are to some extent independent of general intelligence, and can be just as essential.

As readers may or may not know, there are nontrivial differences in the distribution of IQ among racial groups, and these differences go a long way toward explaining racial disparities in socioeconomic status. There is a debate about the role played by genes vs. environment in producing race differences in IQ. We know that environmental factors can influence IQ: better nutrition/healthcare as well as familiarity with abstract, scientific thinking both increase IQ up to a point.



environments become as equal as we know how to make them. Whites in the US has been stable for decades, and has resisted racial adoption. I have argued that it’s time to start thinking about what would be if these differences are influenced by genes.

[Editor’s note: For a historical discussion on Black-White

differences in culture and genes, read [Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We are Afraid to Talk About It](#)

, by Genetic Literacy Project's Jon Entine]

Grégoire Canlorbe: In contrast to the view that the evolution of moral and juridical norms is best explained by the psychological forces operating within individuals (and facing the trial of natural selection), you argue that the success of an established norm is most often imputable to the magnitude of the power backing the latter. How do you sum up your argument? Does your thesis apply to the transition of Ancient Judaism to Talmudism—a renovated practice of Judaism in which kings and priests would be left behind for the benefit of the masters of exegesis?

Nathan Cofnas: An influential approach in cultural evolutionary theory assumes that beliefs/ideas/practices spread as a result of individuals' learning biases, natural selection, and random forces. People have learning biases to, for example, conform to the majority or adopt practices that seem useful. Then natural selection favors individuals and groups with adaptive beliefs and practices.

William Durham, Joseph Fracchia, and Richard Lewontin raised the objection that this ignores the role of *power* in cultural evolution. Maybe cultural evolution is not driven by the aggregate of the *individual decisions* of agents in a population but by the whim of the powerful. If so, the learning biases that feature in some cultural evolutionary models of the evolution of morality would be largely irrelevant in practice.

Drawing on work by Christopher Boehm, I argued that the evolution of morality probably was driven largely by the exercise of power in ways that undermine cultural evolutionary models that emphasize individual learning biases. Hunter–gatherers in the Pleistocene did not choose what moral rules to follow based on learning biases. Instead, rules were imposed by coalitions of the majority to advance their explicitly represented collective interests. Rule-violators were subject to fitness reducing punishments. This created selection pressures to internalize group norms and, I argue, to be innately receptive to certain rules that were widely enforced across groups.

This is not to deny that we have the learning biases identified by cultural evolutionary theorists. We really are disposed to, for example, conform to the majority and copy prestigious individuals. But these are not always decisive forces in cultural evolution. In regard to morality, the ultimate source of many of our moral values are powerful individuals and coalitions who managed to enforce values that serve their interests. Once a norm becomes culturally entrenched, people conform to it without being aware of its origin. The idea that power influences morality in this way might seem like common sense to many people, but it hasn't been incorporated into mainstream cultural evolutionary theory because it doesn't fit with the standard models.

Regarding the transition to Talmudic Judaism, there wasn't really an option to continue with the old system. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70, and the Bar Kokhba revolt was put down by the Romans in 135. So there was no Temple for priests to operate, and no country for a king to rule. In the absence of strong central authorities, individual choice might have been more important than usual in driving cultural evolution.

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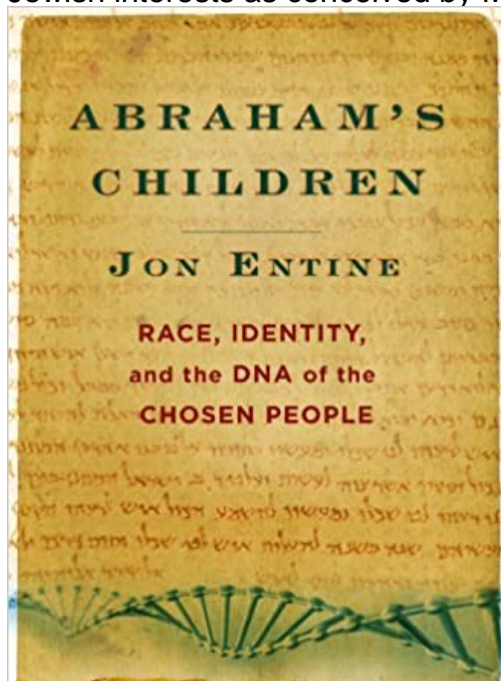
Grégoire Canlorbe: An eminent assertion in the field of evolutionary psychology has been that human individuals are born with an innate capacity for language, which is unique to our species and which emerged as a tool to solve the specific problem of communication among hunter-gatherers. Do you judge this view to be substantially corroborated?

Nathan Cofnas: I don't know enough about this subject to have an opinion.

Grégoire Canlorbe: Challenging psychologist Kevin MacDonald's thesis on Jewish ethnocentrism and the "culture of critique" you make the case that the Ashkenazi intellectual brilliance simply leads to Jewish overrepresentation in all intellectual movements (instead of the Jewish perception of their ethnic interests leading them to destabilize their host societies out of genetic and cultural reasons). It seems quite reasonable to hypothesize that those of Jews who are preaching cosmopolitanism—and who are self-identifying as Jews in the process—are indeed acting (at least in part) on behalf of a certain perception of their ethnic interests; but that the aforesaid perception, far from being stipulated in the Torah and genetically influenced, is really contingent: only one of the perceptions possible in the Jewish mindset. Also it seems quite reasonable to hypothesize that the Jewish perception of their ethnic interests—just like the Jewish actualization of their messianism—is actually molded by the Western intellectual climate; and not the other way around.

Nathan Cofnas: It would not be surprising if some cosmopolitan Jews have acted "in part" to advance "a certain perception of their ethnic interests." But MacDonald makes a much stronger claim, which is that modern liberalism is a Jewish intellectual movement designed (consciously or unconsciously) to promote Jewish ethnic interests. He says explicitly that Jews' pursuit of their ethnic interests was a "necessary condition for the triumph of the intellectual left in late twentieth-century Western societies."

This can be broken down into claims about the motivation of Jewish liberals (i.e., ethnocentrism) and the influence they had (i.e., without Jewish activism the intellectual left as we know it would not have triumphed). I can find no compelling evidence that the leading Jewish intellectuals discussed in MacDonald's book were particularly concerned with Jewish interests. Many of them in fact opposed Jewish interests as conceived by MacDonald (e.g., they promoted multiculturalism for Jews and the West was on a liberal trajectory long before Jews became triumphed in a number of societies where Jews had virtually no



[Abrahams' Children: Race, Identity and the DNA of the Chosen People](#) by Genetic Literacy Project's Jon Entine]

Grégoire Canlorbe: MacDonald also deals with the National Socialism movement in Germany, claiming Nazism to have been a group evolutionary strategy mimicking (what MacDonald believes to be) the very own principles of Judaism—outgroup hostility combined with within-group collectivism—as a response to alleged Jewish parasitism. What are your thoughts about it?

Nathan Cofnas: MacDonald never clearly defines what he means by “group evolutionary strategy.” Sometimes he implies that strategies are shaped by group selection, sometimes that they were (or are) consciously designed. In any case, if National Socialism was a “group evolutionary strategy” it wasn’t a very successful one. Twelve years of National Socialism led to several million German deaths, and the survivors were subject to the largest mass rape in history. The political movements that MacDonald sees as opposed to white interests were largely a backlash against National Socialism, so it indirectly led to multiculturalism and mass immigration to Germany.

Grégoire Canlorbe: When it comes to explaining the “cross-cultural convergence on liberalism,” an occasionally proposed narrative is that people came to acknowledge the objective, universal truth of liberalism—what is plausibly a laicization of the Biblical faith in the march of humanity towards the acceptance of Yahweh and His objective law. Another occasionally invoked factor lies in the extension of peace and the increasingly intricate interdependence of humans within the worldwide division of labor. As the proponent of a “debunking explanation for moral progress,” how do you assess those perspectives?

Nathan Cofnas: I do not believe that there are objective, mind-independent moral truths. We may have the intuition that morality is objectively real, but this is an illusion that can be explained by non-moral-truth-tracking forces such as natural selection. If we find that the cause of our belief that p doesn’t track the truth about p, then the belief loses its justification. Since (in my view) our moral beliefs are satisfactorily explained by naturalistic processes, there is no reason to postulate moral truth.

Some moral realists, however, have argued that cross-cultural convergence on liberalism does not have a naturalistic explanation, so (they say) the best explanation for this phenomenon is that societies are independently discovering the mind-independent moral truth. I have argued that there are good naturalistic explanations for why societies tend to gravitate toward liberalism as they become more prosperous and adept at keeping the peace. Peace makes people more sensitive and averse to violence, and prosperity (and everything that goes along with it) removes many of the incentives for illiberal practices like oppression and fighting.

Grégoire Canlorbe: Besides familiar considerations about the dysgenic trends that are allegedly miscegenation, the proliferation of spiteful mutants, and the higher fertility of low IQ people, the marginalization of war has been claimed to be one of the most psychologically detrimental features of our bourgeois industrial era. Robert Ardrey’s remark on this point deserves to be recalled. “We face in the elimination of war this most fundamental of psychological problems. For almost as long as civilization has been with us, war has represented our most satisfactory means of at once escaping anonymity and boredom while preserving or gaining a measure of security.” Fifty years later is *The Territorial Imperative*

still relevant?

Nathan Cofnas: I think the reduction in war is an overwhelmingly positive development, but it may have some negative side effects. Our innate psychology is adapted to conditions where war and violence were much more common. The desire to bond with groups to fight an enemy used to be adaptive, but may now lead to pathologies.

Grégoire Canlorbe: Thank you.

Grégoire Canlorbe has authored a variety of philosophical and metapolitical articles, and proposed a renovation of Platonic metaphysics as well as a new approach to the influence of Judaism on the “Aryan” mentality. Visit his website or email him: gregoire.canlorbe@wanadoo.fr

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