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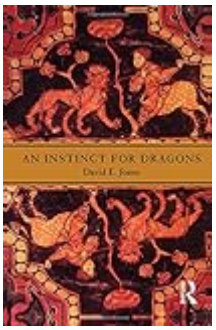

David E. Jones. *An Instinct for Dragons.* New York: Routledge, 2000. 175 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92721-5.

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Deeply Etched Responses

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Perhaps the most startling revelation in Jones' exploration of the human affinity for the dragon is not that so many cultures have imagined dragons in so much the same way or even that those similar images have been assumed that of a real creature, but that what explains the similarity and affinity is the shared biological heritage of all humans–all primates. "The world dragon," Jones explains, "was formed by the nature of our own shadowy progenitors' encounters with the creatures who hunted them over millions of years" (p. 25). The significance of those encounters first occurred to him when Jones was observing the behavior of the African vervet monkey who give "distinctive alarm calls at the appearance of three different predators: leopards, martial eagles, and pythons." Preparing his field notes for a lecture on vervets, Jones found the images of the three predators–feline, raptor, and eagle–merging in his own mind into that of a dragon (p. 4).

Following what he accepted as inspiration, Jones discovered supportive evidence "in the field of communication theory" as well as in the fields of "brain evolution, information processing, and memory," all of which have observed that "the brain merges different but related items into single information-rich units" (p. 55). Herbert A. Simon discovered in 1974 that assembling compound symbol structures–"chunks"–is a basic mechanism of memory. Animal cognition theorist, Donald Griffin suggests the term "template" for such a particular "sensory pattern," while Earl Count coined the term "biogram" for "patterns that are transmitted genetically." "The human biogram," he wrote, "may be seen as an evolutionary transformation of the primate biogram, which is in turn a transformation upon the mammalian biogram, and so on down the phylogenetic scale" (pp. 58-59). Based on their insights Jones concludes, "The dragon is an expression of such chunks, indexing, biograms, ... a brain-dragon that was created during the time when our ancient ancestors [creatures not unlike the vervet, perhaps] were adapting to a life on the ground. The deeply etched patterns of recognition and responses to the three major predators, honed among arboreal primates for millennia, were lumped at this point into a general predator

category, the culturally phrased expression of which is 'dragon' " (p. 60).

That the raptor-snake-carnivore complex constitutes a pervasive presence in human phobias lends further support to Jones' theory. The most obvious characteristic of the dragon is reptilian. Secondary are the creature's raptor and carnivore features (wings, fangs, and claws). The most common human phobia is fear of snakes, and although fear of cats and birds is less prevalent, these are nonetheless frequent and much documented phobias. Based on information from such disparate fields of study, Jones comes to the suggestive conclusion that "the dragon image [is] ... a kind of clock, or temporal map of an important aspect of the history of primate (and, therefore, human) predator/prey relations" (p. 78).

He also finds it supportive that human heroes worldwide are cast as dragon-slayers in the early phases of "cultural evolution." Later dragons may acquire a more balanced reputation, symbolizing both good and evil, or even evolving to represent good. Thus, dragons also serve as a clue to the development of politics and religion in individual human cultures. In the West, where dragons were for centuries believed to be both real and related to the devil, dragons proved an encouragement to centralized organization under a "dragon-slayer." Once such organization was established, the dragon became a symbol of state and, over time, "its nature changes to reflect that fact." That the Eastern dragon has existed as "the friendly consort of emperors" for many more centuries than has been true in the West seems to Jones to explain what is often assumed to be a contradiction between the Western and Eastern dragon. The latter has simply had longer to mellow. The Western dragon is still in the mellowing process (p. 111). Hence while 21st century young adults take the challenges of *Dungeons and Dragons* quite seriously, their younger siblings cuddle with Puff the Magic Dragon.

I have only two quarrels with Jones, neither having to do with his major premise which I find both convincing and appealing, since it reinforces acceptance of humans as another animal, all of whom are coevolving. (I would like to see biograms considered in studies of every human cultural archetype!) First is my disappointment at what probably was the publisher's choice to use only black and white illustrations. The illustrations included are ample and are clearly tied-in to points made in the text, but such a potentially colorful topic, so richly represented in the art of so many cultures, requires more than a color cover to have maximum impact. My second disappointment is Jones' total rejection of any possible influence of dinosaur fossils (or indeed of a truly ancient predator/prey relationship) on the development of dragon images–or for that matter of the influence of dragons on efforts to recreate dinosaurs "in the flesh" (though I realize that is another study altogether).

In his Introduction, Jones states emphatically that dinosaurs "cannot be the model for the dragon because dinosaurs had become extinct many millions of years before the evolution of humans.... How can one recognize something as a dragon unless one already knows what a dragon is?" (p. 3). While logical, his statement contradicts the basic concept of biograms, and seems to me to be based on dualistic assumption. Later in the text he seems to realize that the biogram concept does not rule out ancestors who walked with and were eaten by dinosaurs but remain adamant about any possible merging of the two creatures in the human imagination: "even though the most ancient ancestral roots of the human line existed at the time of the dinosaur, ... our primal ancestors would come to have a relatively longer history with basic primate predators of the contemporary era than of the dinosaurs, thus tilting the scale in favor of the three [predators] ... and not the dinosaur as the most likely models" (p. 114).

Why either/or when it would seem even more supportive of Jones' argument to consider the possibility that the two predator images, the earlier stored deep in the reptilian brain, merged in human consciousness? This possibility would enhance Jones' major thesis that all thought and image, human and nonhuman, flows from the evolutionary process. It would also strengthen his conclusion that "In the end, we find that our psyches are stalked by fabulous creatures whose outlines, etched by evolution and polished by natural selection, remind us that we are still ancient being possessed of an instinct for dragons" (p. 119).

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