

## *Correspondence*

### **Man's inheritance**

Sir,

If I may, I would like to make a few observations on Dr Crombie's second and third essays on inherited human characteristics.

He says on page 268, "the genetic component has for all intents and purposes finished its evolution by natural selection". I am sure that Dr Crombie would agree that nothing in human nature is ever finished; rather only the direction is changed or the rate is altered. Thus the importance of the quotation lies in the last three words, which presumably mean that natural selection has ceased to operate for biological man. It follows from this that where he would have failed due to natural selection man has now become successful.

Man, therefore, now relies on social manoeuvres for attack and defence and any progress he makes is not biological, but in Dr Crombie's terms, in his plastic component of behaviour and his cultural component of memory and knowledge. Crombie confines his plastic behavioural patterns to customs, habits and rituals; but is not, for example, depression a form of behaviour? If so, into which group of behaviour patterns would it fit? For that matter any response to environmental stress by the body is a form of behaviour pattern. This is of more than academic interest, because of the curious but important fact that together they form bodily states, which are strongly genetically determined. Their universality indicates that we all have these harmful genes, which can produce behavioural forms or codes under adverse environmental circumstances, and therefore loss of fitness.

Dr Crombie then argues that the behavioural subsystems of language and artificial intelligence are rapidly evolving, and influence man through his behaviour. This means, does it not, that man's behaviour affects man's behaviour, which then affects man's behaviour. From this, the author suggests that the cultural component has taken on a life of its own, and man is "now only one component in a rapidly evolving complex system".

It is difficult to see how the adaptive mechanism in the simple optimistic Darwinian sense can occur in this spiral. Thus, over large areas of experience, there is manifestly a failure of adaptation, possibly temporarily. To take one example, Steiner and others have described a retreat or regression from words into other modes of communication, and language is more and more used as a means to other ends than the ones Darwin had in mind when he wrote of the inherent virtue of words.

Crewkerne.

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#### REFERENCE

Steiner, G. (1960). *The Listener*, July 14.

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