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Evolution is a Nonlinear Story

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Polityka magazine and Polish Radio One

Every columnist, as an alert observer, notices that the species *Homo sapiens* possesses a rich and varied set of traits it uses to attract attention.

For example, my friends' sixteen-year-old son practices a type of kitesurfing that has him not only gliding across the water on his board, racing against

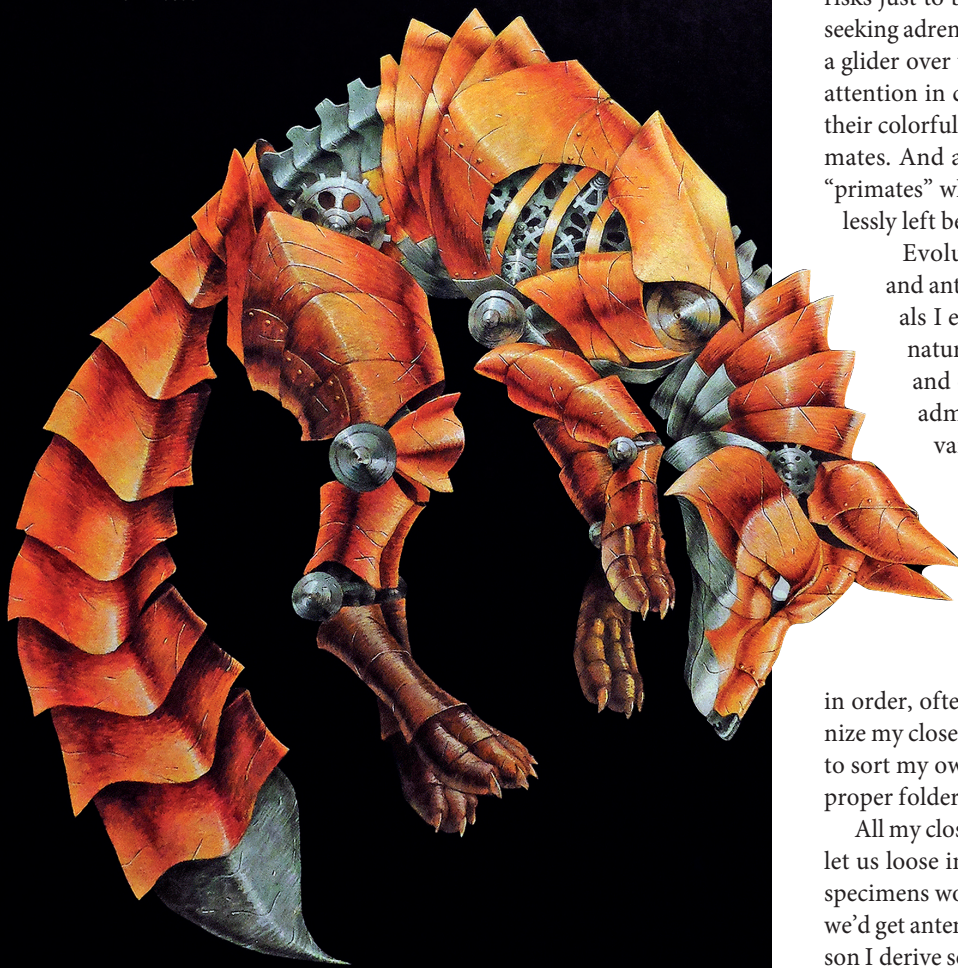
competitors, but also performing complex mid-air tricks. His astonished parents – and insurance agents – must be scratching their heads, wondering how to insure such extreme sports enthusiasts, while companies producing trendy gear are thrilled to know that every few years, a new water sport evolves that they can profit from. As for me, on my own "board" (in my kitchen), I simply serve cheese or chop vegetables for ratatouille.

I wonder if, aside from us humans, there are other organisms on our planet that, like us, enjoy taking risks just to be noticed. Recently, two Polish pilots, seeking adrenaline, fun, and the desire to be first, flew a glider over the Karakoram. Birds, however, attract attention in completely different ways: they spread their colorful tails, sing, or offer tasty berries to their mates. And a cockroach just laughs at us so-called "primates" while munching on the crumbs thoughtlessly left behind on my cheese board.

Evolutionists, paleontologists, biologists, and anthropologists – all scientific professionals I envy greatly – possess a certain quality nature never granted to me: a gift for order and organization. Throughout my life, I've admired fossil and skeleton collections in various natural history museums, from Berlin to Washington. Rows of shells, bones, teeth, skulls, and countless fossils are meticulously arranged: trilobites here, mollusks there, not to even mention all the prehistoric plants. Meanwhile, I could never keep my own school notebooks in order, often "coloring outside the lines," or organize my closet. As an adult, I struggled for years even to sort my own health and financial documents into proper folders.

All my close relatives have been messy. If someone let us loose in a paleontological laboratory, half the specimens would probably end up upside down, and we'd get antennae mixed up with legs. This is one reason I derive so much pleasure from reading essays by

Emil Goś, *Red Fox*, 2021,
acrylic and oil on canvas,
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remarkable biologists and evolutionists, like Edward Wilson or Stephen Jay Gould. Their works, whether on ants or dinosaurs, have a wonderfully calming effect on me. There are, indeed, organized members of our species who maintain taxonomy and keep chaos at bay – a feat people like me seem almost destined to undo. Take something as straightforward as zebra stripes: Is a zebra a white horse with black stripes, or perhaps a black donkey with white stripes?

Evolutionists calmly use the phrase “mass extinction.” Sure, as large-scale and catastrophic such events may be, they are not the end of the line for the planet. Waves of rapid extinction have already occurred multiple times – Pangaea snapped apart like a rubber band, and volcanic dust disrupted the Earth’s climate. All of this took place well before our species arrived on the scene, wreaking its own unique harm unto the planet and unto itself.

Reading numerous books on evolution has led me to think often of my dentist and gastroenterologist, whose financial success is closely tied to teeth, jaws, stomachs, and excrement – the stars of many evolutionary studies. Like archaeologists, evolutionists constantly study teeth, and more recently, enamel as well. Teeth, their presence or wear, reveal a great deal about us. I not only want my teeth to look good under examination, but I also know – no use denying it – that those with strong, healthy teeth are unlikely to go hungry. Chew longer, and you live longer. Better to skip the applesauce and eat a whole apple.

In nature, species diversity holds immense value, which is why I firmly believe that within our families and within our communities, there should be space for people who are a little “messy” or who “color outside the lines” like me. When I was in primary school long ago, I encountered people who identified as creationists (now often grouped with flat-earthers). While I found scientists far more persuasive, I also never liked the large poster on the wall in our biology classroom, which presented human evolution as a simple linear progression. I was frustrated by the lack of gender diversity (only males were represented) as well as by the notion that evolution had a specific goal in mind.

My chaotic nature has always led me to wonder about what falls outside these neat boundaries, what doesn’t fit into this tidy frame. Today we know that much indeed falls outside. I’ve often questioned whether standing upright truly represents a goal for all beings – instead feeling a certain kinship to chimpanzees over humans. Just because some primates became upright doesn’t make it the “right” position for everyone. In those old biology posters, a white man with a tool represented the endpoint of a sim-

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plified, linear story. But standing for long periods and using advanced human “tools” like desks and chairs exhausts me. I always knew that image needed updating; that a tool might be more of a curse than a source of pride. Recently, mobile computers and phones have been invented, devices meant to increase mobility. Yet instead of fostering movement, these devices keep us hunched over, harming our spines, digestive systems, and hips.

Ultimately, then, let’s not confuse evolution with linear progress. Sometimes it’s wise to abandon rigid rules and embrace a touch of chaos and disorder. ■

Emil Goś, *Deinonychus*,
2020, acrylic and oil on
canvas, Art in House