

## 9.20 MIT

### Classes #33: "The Triumph of Sociobiology"

Wednesday Nov 30, 2005

#### Reading:

- John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology* (Oxford 2001), ch 10, pp 217-223.

#### Study questions: Alcock ch 10

1. The first paragraphs of this final chapter are a beautifully concise summary of a major argument of the book. Comment on the following sentence: "In fact, they could not study 'genetically determined' behavior even if they wanted to because it does not exist...." Is this too extreme? Use examples in your answer. P 217
2. What explanations for fitness-reducing behaviors have been offered by sociobiologists? P 218-219
3. Why have many social scientists and people in the humanities ignored sociobiology? P 220-221
4. What are the causes you can discern, or have learned about, for the extreme environmentalism in America? (It has been more extreme in America than in Europe.) P 221
5. Appendix ch 10, Q3. *Ian Tattersall describes how women in a surviving hunter-gatherer tribe breast-feed their infants for four or more years, a practice that blocks ovulation during this time and prevents them from becoming pregnant. He writes, "Their genes hardly seem to be screaming out for replication; and economic considerations, as virtually always, lie to the fore. For hunters and gatherers, then, it's fertility, not its lack, that is the enemy. Individual San women show no sign, conscious or unconscious, of wishing to maximize their output of progeny." Tattersall believes that he has identified a major weakness of sociobiology. Is he right?*
- ~~6. Appendix ch 10, Q2: Homework due Friday. Provide a sociobiological response to Albert Bandura's op-ed piece on evolutionary psychology that appears on the Internet [Swimming against the mainstream: Accenting the positive in human nature: [www.biomednet.com/lmsbeagle/70/viewpts/op-ed](http://www.biomednet.com/lmsbeagle/70/viewpts/op-ed)~~
7. Appendix ch 9, Q2: Homework due Friday. *Defend sociobiology against the following charge: "Sociobiology predicts that only immoral or amoral actions can evolve. When sociobiologists are confronted with the existence of true altruism and moral behavior, they then change their tune and say that these cases illustrate that human beings are able to resist our evolved impulses. But why would we resist if our actions really have evolved via natural selection?"*

8. *Homework* due Friday: Read the article on the following web site on the field of evolutionary psychology: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary_psychology)  
Write a brief review, including the definition and the origins of the term, distinguishing between sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and a few of the controversies that this field has generated. For help in this, read the “talk page” accessible *via* a link.