STS.009: Evolution and Society

An Introduction
STSI.009: Evolution and Society

TODAY:
Please complete the sheets that are being circulated, so we can complete registration quickly

BY NOON FRIDAY:
If you’ve registered but don’t intend to take the class, please email me
If you’ve not registered but do intend to take the class, please register
STS.009: Evolution and Society

The Teaching Team:

Instructor: John Durant

Writing Advisor: Jeanne Wildman

Teaching Assistant: Michaela Thompson
STS.009: Evolution and Society

What is this course about?
• One of the biggest ideas in the whole of science

• An idea that people care passionately about

• An idea that people disagree passionately about
Evolution in biology

“Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution.”

Theodosius Dobzhansky (1900–1975)
Evolution far beyond biology

“The tide of evolution carries everything before it, thoughts no less than bodies, and persons no less than nations”

George Santayana (1863–1952)
Evolution and society

“What is man? The point I want to make now is that all attempts to answer that question before 1859 are worthless and that we will be better off if we ignore them completely.”

G. G. Simpson (1902–1984)
If evolution’s the answer, what’s the question?
Whence the astonishing diversity of life on earth?
Are you curious at all?

If you’ve ever wondered why life exists on earth, or why there are so many different kinds of living things, or why some plants have colorful flowers and others don’t, or why some animals are solitary and others aren’t, or how the peacock got his tail, or why humans are so (relatively) smart, or why so many people suffer from back-ache, or why...
Are you curious at all?

Basically, if you’ve ever been tempted to wonder about life at all…then you should wonder about evolution
What does this course offer?

Multiple journeys of discovery
Journey #1

Into the history of evolutionary theory
Discover how, way before Darwin and Wallace got on the scene, geologists discovered “deep time”
Journey with Charles Darwin aboard H.M.S. Beagle, and discover how his observations gradually led him to revolutionary ideas about evolution.
Journey with Alfred Russel Wallace through the Malay Archipelago, and find out how – quite independently – he discovered almost exactly the same ideas as Darwin!
Journeys #2

Into the fierce debates around evolutionary theory
Journey back to the publication of the *Origin of Species* (1859), and discover the key arguments ranged for and against Darwin.
Discover the roots of American “fundamentalism” in popular opposition to evolution after the World War I

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Journey #3

Into multiple, contested attempts to apply evolution to an understanding of human behavior and human society
Discover how deeply Darwin and Wallace disagreed about the way their theory should be applied to humankind!

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Discover how an eccentric Austrian biologist’s work on “imprinting” in geese helped create a new post-war evolutionary science of animal – and human – behavior.
Discover how far Darwinians have gone in their attempts to explain human behavior today
Journey #4

Into some enduring issues at the interface of evolution and society
Can we really be scientific about the unrecoverable past?

What is the relationship between evolution and religious belief?

How could evolution have produced a species quite so odd as Homo sapiens?

What does evolution have to say about the origins of mind?

Evolution & Society

What light can evolution shed on patterns of social cooperation and conflict?

Can evolution really explain the origins of altruism and morality?
Journey #5

Into your own opinions and attitudes:

What do you think are the larger implications of the theory of evolution by natural selection?
How will the course work?

• Weekly structure
  – Readings
  – Lectures
  – Sections

• Assignments
  – Papers
  – Debates

• Stellar Site
Assignments

• There are no exams

• 4 written papers, one of which will be revised in light of comments received

• Participation in 2 student debates, in weekly sections; notes for second debate also submitted as 5th assessed piece of work
CI-H Component

• The course aims to cultivate communication skills

• The Writing Advisor is there to help – make use of her!

• You must meet 1:1 with the Writing Advisor at least twice during the semester
Sections

• Weekly sections are an essential part of the course

• You must inform your Section Leader in advance if you intend to miss a section

• 2 or more unexplained absences from sections will affect course grade
Grading

• 20% Attendance and participation in sections

• 50% 4 written papers

• 30% Final “debate” presentation + submitted notes
Puzzle for Monday: What do all these subjects have in common?

Archeology…Biological Anthropology, Cosmology…Evolutionary biology…Forensic science…Paleontology…Philology…?