

## NO EVOLUTIONIST IS AN ISLAND

A review of Kevin N. Laland and Gillian R. Brown (2011) *Sense and Nonsense. Evolutionary perspectives of human behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 270 pages, ISBN: 978–0–19–958696–7

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I am really glad I was asked to review *Sense and Nonsense, Evolutionary perspectives on human behaviour*, because a great deal of it was completely novel to me. Granted, every scientist must balance the uncertain benefits of reading outside of their area of expertise, of absorbing perspectives that differ from their own and of wading through complex methods and unfamiliar logic when charted territory is to hand. In *Sense and Nonsense* LALAND and BROWN are the cartographers of an atlas of evolutionary approaches to human behaviour sketching out territories previously labelled “here be dragons” at least to inveterate evolutionary psychologists such as myself. From this overview they conclude that we are all closer together and better connected than it may seem from within our specialties. The landscape of each evolutionary approach to human behaviour is laid out accessibly and for the most part in broad strokes but *Sense and Nonsense* also takes time to focus on some of the best charted and scientifically beautiful places to visit with “case studies” of particular areas of research. However no overview would be complete without a description of the criticism levelled at the subfield; according to LALAND and BROWN every region has its trash heap with the exception of evolutionary psychology which has a nuclear landfill in desperate need of cleaning up.

*Sense and Nonsense* begins with an overview which seems written precisely for someone who is confused by or critical of an evolutionary perspective who decided to give the first chapter a shot before reading on. The chapter reviews Tinbergen’s four whys and lays out the rest of the book. They validate the preconceptions of a sceptical reader; yes, the popular portrayal of our field is often distorted and hyperbolic, the jargon can be unnecessarily confusing and sometimes we are overly anthropocentric and do not pay enough attention to relevant animal literature. They also diplomatically deflect common confusions about genetic determinism and the lack of a role for culture in an evolutionary perspective. Through all this foundational explanation, LALAND and BROWN are very careful not to be strident or place any blame on the reader. They don’t even ever use the word “misunderstanding”. This chapter is instructive for anyone interested in how to write about our field without alienating an outside reader.

Chapter 2, “A history of evolution and human behaviour” goes over some familiar territory including Darwin, Wallace and the foundations of ethology. LALAND and BROWN also introduce a reader who may be well versed in this history to new material including the earliest incarnations of the nature–nurture debate between psychologists, behaviorists and ethologists. They devote more space than other reviews I have read to racism, eugenics and social Darwinism introducing the moral quandaries belying the application of evolutionary theory and including early evolutionists who fought for more progressive moral standards.

Chapter 3, “Human Sociobiology” reviews some key concepts like the gene’s eye view, kin selection, and parent–offspring conflict. Moving on to the human sociobiology debate, the chapter describes the personalities involved including E.O. Wilson, the oft maligned author of *Sociobiology* and biologist and harsh critic Richard Lewontin, who I have seen dismissively caricatured many times. The following passage demonstrates how Laland and Brown navigate the middle ground in the debate:

“Wilson was the kind of scientist who relished the challenge of major problems, saw the big picture, and constantly wanted to push fields forward by developing and synthesizing new theory. In contrast, Lewontin was much more cautious, suspicious of sweeping statements and unsupported speculation, and deeply sensitive to how vulnerable biological arguments are to abuse. For Lewontin, science had to be as correct as possible because mistaken scientific theories lent themselves to political abuse” (p. 63).

The chapter expounds greatly on the criticism of sociobiology from reductionism and genetic determinism to prejudice and storytelling. Finally they air the grievances that social scientists had with sociobiology stating that

“for most social scientists, the real problem with sociobiology... was that too much human sociobiology was dilettante. In their enthusiasm, human sociobiologists capriciously flitted from one topic to the next often concocting superficial stories without ever stopping to develop a solid understanding of the topic, read the social science literature or consider alternative non-evolutionary explanations”.

I can identify with early sociobiologists swept away with evolutionary thought and the above criticism, however I dispute that there is such a thing as a non-evolutionary explanation at the ultimate or functional level of analysis. Similar criticisms about not considering “non-evolutionary explanations” are levelled at evolutionary psychology in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 on Human Behavioural Ecology (HBE) is introduced as a perspective that sees humans as more flexibly adaptive than evolutionary psychology (EP); these chapters can usefully be compared and contrasted to reveal imbalance in the book’s approach. For instance, the case studies focusing on specific areas of research are approached fairly uncritically in the HBE chapter compared to the case studies in the EP chapter. The authors say of the inability of a model of optimal for-