

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology
Summer 2021, Long Paper Assignment – homework 3

Instructions: Write an argumentative paper on some topic relevant to our discussion of sociobiology and its application to humans. The paper should be between roughly 1000 and 1300 words. If you double space and have natural fonts and margins, this would be about 3-5 pages.

The paper must critically engage something that we have directly read or discussed in class in the past several days. But this leaves you with quite a lot of leeway as to exactly what you write about. Regardless of what you write about, you should show that you understand the readings that we have done that are relevant to your chosen topic. You may wish to read additional material that was not assigned, however, this is not necessary and not expected. But if you want to do that, I would be happy to help you find relevant readings. Some are listed in the ‘extra readings’ section of the course website.

Due Date: You should upload this paper into Blackboard before 11:59pm, Tuesday, June 22nd.

While I normally prefer to grade papers anonymously, I feel it is best if I am able to easily track who is turning in work when and grading anonymously slows this process down immensely. So please put your name on your paper.

Grading: This paper will be worth 14 points (14% of your final grade).

References: All sources used in the writing of your paper must be properly referenced. Now that you are writing a longer paper dealing with issues discussed in multiple places in our class, it is more important to be careful in this regard. “Properly referenced” does not mean that there is any particular format that I care about, but it does mean that if you say “according to Levy” or have a formal or informal quote referring to something one of our authors wrote, I should be able to very easily find exactly what they did say. So page numbers are essential for example. And if you use the words of an author or even their direct ideas, you should say it is from them. To not say so is to imply they are your words and so this would constitute plagiarism.

Topic:

You may choose to write about any topic relevant to sociobiology and its application to humans. The most natural thing to do (and probably the easiest) is to just take some controversial thing discussed in one of the papers, explain what the author says, and critically engage with their discussion (so for example, if you disagree, say why). Here are some sample topics: (note that if you think a topic is trivial or you could discuss it in less than 500 words and have nothing left to say, then don’t choose that topic).

Sample Topics

1) Is thinking about evolution important for understanding human behavior? How? How widely applicable is this? When studying human behavior, when is it appropriate to study humans in the same way we would study animals and when would that be inappropriate?

2) Wilson, Barash, and others believe that things like mate choice, marital norms in the society, and patterns of parental investment in humans can be helpfully understood through the lens of evolutionary biology. Is evolutionary theory actually helpful here or not? How?

3) Does it make sense to talk about “genes for obesity”? Or “genes for homosexuality”? (Or pick other cases.) Under what circumstances?

4) Should we care about whether a trait like IQ is heritable? Why or why not? Should this have any effect on public policy?

5) We know that both genes and the environment interact to cause any particular human traits. Roughly speaking, Levy thinks that this means that genetics causes no *special* problems for free will or moral responsibility but that the empirical question of the effectiveness of environmental changes to influence our behaviors does have social and political implications. Is he right? How should biology inform these kinds of debates? – You might be helped by thinking about a trait like homosexuality. Many people think that the extent to which this is genetically controlled matters a great deal for moral purposes. But does it? What about various kinds of criminal tendencies? Or some kind of general intelligence?

6) Is there really an important distinction between facts and values? Between normative and descriptive claims? Is and ought? What does this mean for how science (or biology) is relevant to ethics?

7) We are animals and our bodies and minds are the products of evolution. So what? Does this have any effect on how we should live? On what the ethical facts are? (Or even if there are any at all.) How does it constrain the kind of control we have over our future and the kind of society we might create? (You should look at Levy’s discussion starting on the bottom of 199 here).

8) We know that for virtually any trait you look at, the traits heritability will be between 0 and 1 and we also know that strict genetic determinism is false and that genes do have some impact on the traits that we have. So does mean that there is nothing further to discuss with respect to the nature/nurture debate? Pinker says that the nature/nurture debate won’t go away – but should it? What is left to discuss?

There are many other things that you could write about. If you are not sure if your chosen topic is relevant, ask me.