

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology
Spring 2016
Fourth short essay assignment

Please print your essay and bring it to class on Tuesday, April 5th. **ALSO** please make your essay anonymous by putting your R# at the top of the page and **NOT** your name.

You are to write roughly one page (400-600 words) on something broadly within the topic of genetics and human behavior.

This is an argumentative paper. You must defend some particular thesis. A good paper is clear, easy to read, and provides good arguments for its conclusion. But exactly what you write about is quite open ended. You might discuss whether it makes sense to say that there is “a gene for obesity”. Whether it is appropriate to study human behavior from an evolutionary point of view. Whether we should care about whether a trait like “IQ” is heritable and what it would mean if it is.

If you like following prompts, here are some choices for you:

1) Godfrey-Smith ends his chapter on genes by describing a way to try to defend the “particulate” view of genes as appropriate on an evolutionary scale. On this view, it is can be appropriate to say that evolution does look like a change in allele frequencies. Godfrey-Smith believes that ultimately this is not the best perspective to have on what genes are. Why does he think this? Is he right?

2) Kaplan concludes his paper by saying “to reduce the prevalence and ameliorate the impact of violent, antisocial, and criminal behavior within societies, such people should treat biological research as, at best, intriguing distractions from the hard work ahead.” Is he right?

3) 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. How is evolutionary theory helpful?

4) 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?