

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology  
Summer 2017  
Fourth short essay assignment

Please print your essay and bring it to class on Tuesday, Friday June 23rd. **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 to two pages (500-700 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. Or many other things.

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) Sober argues that the concept of “the environment” is really important for understanding “nature vs. nurture” questions, but that when heritability studies compare genetic causes to environmental causes, the concept of the environment that is implicitly used is not exactly what we have in mind. What does he mean? Is he right? What do we really mean when we talk about something being caused by “the environment”?

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) Why does Burian criticize sociobiology? Does he think there is some specific mistake that they are making? How does this relate to human behavioral genetics more generally? Does Burian think that the prospects for that discipline are better?