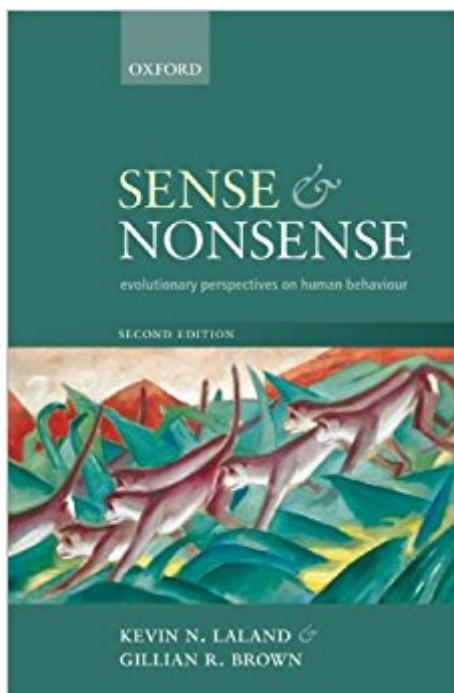


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# Sense And Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives On Human Behaviour



## Synopsis

Evolutionary theory is one of the most wide-ranging and inspiring of scientific ideas. It offers a battery of methods that can be used to interpret human behaviour. But the legitimacy of this exercise is at the centre of a heated controversy that has raged for over a century. Many evolutionary biologists, anthropologists and psychologists are optimistic that evolutionary principles can be applied to human behaviour, and have offered evolutionary explanations for a wide range of human characteristics, such as homicide, religion and sex differences in behaviour. Others are sceptical of these interpretations. Moreover, researchers disagree as to the best ways to use evolution to explore humanity, and a number of schools have emerged. *Sense and Nonsense* provides an introduction to the ideas, methods and findings of five such schools, namely, sociobiology, human behavioural ecology, evolutionary psychology, cultural evolution, and gene-culture co-evolution. In this revised and updated edition of their successful monograph, Laland and Brown provide a balanced, rigorous analysis that scrutinizes both the evolutionary arguments and the allegations of the critics, carefully guiding the reader through the mire of confusing terminology, claim and counter-claim, and polemical statements. This readable and informative introductory book will be of use to undergraduate and postgraduate students (for example, in psychology, anthropology and zoology), to experts on one approach who would like to know more about the other perspectives, and to lay-persons interested in evolutionary explanations of human behaviour. Having completed this book, the reader should feel better placed to assess the legitimacy of claims made about human behaviour under the name of evolution, and to make judgements as to what is sense and what is nonsense.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Review from previous edition: "This is a superb book." --Johan Bolhuis, Trends in Ecology and Evolution  
"Lucid and balanced, 'Sense and Nonsense' will hopefully reach a broad audience."  
--Sarah Hrdy  
"This is a remarkable book: succinct informative and very sensible. It strips away the polemic to map a way forward, and is worth reading by anybody interested in how best to analyse human behaviour." --Paul Harvey, T.H.E.S  
"Laland and Brown are superb pilots for these treacherous waters. It is an altogether excellent book." --Patrick Bateson  
"A 'must read' for my undergraduate courses for the foreseeable future." --Henry Plotkin  
"I recommend that everyone with some influence or interest in popular culture read this book." --Mark Pagel, New Scientist  
"A welcome and incisive corrective to the disarray within evolutionary social theory." --Herbert Gintis, Human Nature Review

Kevin N. Laland is Professor of Behavioural and Evolutionary Biology at the University of St Andrews. His research encompasses a range of topics related to animal behaviour and evolution, particularly social learning, gene-culture coevolution, and niche construction. He has published 6 books and over 160 articles on these topics and has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He is also a former President of the European Human Behaviour and Evolution Association. Gillian R. Brown is a lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of St Andrews. Her research focuses on sex differences in the behaviour of mammals, which she studies from neuroendocrine, developmental and evolutionary perspectives. She has published over 40 articles on sex differences, covering topics such as adaptive birth sex ratios, sex differences in infant and adolescent behaviour, parental investment and the evolution of mating strategies. She has held a Wellcome Trust Career Development Fellowship.

Sense and Nonsense is a great book. It covers a range of evolutionary approaches to human behaviour. The key concepts of each approach are treated in turn in separate chapters and then the authors describe case studies and then offer a critical evaluation for each one. The approaches considered are: sociobiology, human behavioural ecology, evolutionary psychology, memetics and gene-culture coevolution. There's also an introductory chapter, a chapter covering the history of the field prior to 1975 and a final chapter that wraps up. I read the last three chapters first. These are the

ones on memetics, gene-culture coevolution and the last chapter on "comparing and integrating approaches". I did this because Memetics and gene-culture coevolution are really the only remaining attempts at a proper study of human evolution, and that matches my own particular interests. The authors are mostly in the "gene-culture coevolution" camp. They seem to be mostly looking at the other approaches to see where they went wrong. Their descriptions of the other approaches are pretty fair, but they do go out of their way sometimes to make them look stupid. Despite this, their coverage of memetics is mostly accurate, sympathetic and good, though some of their criticisms appear to be straw-man attacks. The authors claim that memetics: "denies any substantive filtering role for evolved psychological mechanisms". I am very sceptical about this. I've never come across any author who has said anything remotely like it. I suspect this is down to some kind of misunderstanding. The next chapter is about gene-culture coevolution. The authors use the term "meme" throughout this chapter. They claim that "genetic inheritance is exclusively vertical" - and so isn't like cultural inheritance. However, this is completely untrue. Organic entities can be transmitted down the generations horizontally and obliquely too. This happens with parasites and mutualists. This is in fact a deep similarity between organic and cultural evolution - rather than grounds for treating them differently. I felt the authors were rather soft on Boyd and Richerson's Cultural Group Selection concept. They use the concept to support the thesis that: "when cultural transmission is included into evolutionary models, the nature of the evolutionary process may be quite dramatically different." However, this is not a very reasonable conclusion. Parasites also act so as to rapidly produce and maintain differences between groups of humans. Parasites have very similar dynamics to culture in this respect. Like culture, they involve horizontal spread between hosts, short lifecycles and rapid evolution. As with culture, migrants tend to adopt the parasites of their new population. We have empirical data on the relative influence of parasites and culture when it comes to death as a result of humans invading other groups of humans - since there have been many invasions in recorded history - for example in America, Australia and Africa. Organic parasites (such as smallpox) did a large proportion of the work in producing fitness differences between groups of humans in many of the cases studied - accounting for more than half the deaths in some cases. Culture does some of this sort of thing as well - but the organic and cultural realms are not so different here. Next, the chapter on evolutionary psychology. This chapter is excellent. I especially appreciated the idea that the popularity of evolutionary psychology is partly due to its manifest lack of racism. However, the authors don't mention the biggest criticism of evolutionary psychology until the very end of their chapter. That criticism is that - as currently practiced - evolutionary psychology only deals with human universals and says little about cultural evolution. I feel that this point needs

to be emphasised at least a little. While evolutionary psychology only deals with human universals it will remain a forlorn and useless endeavour. Culture is just too important a force to ignore. Ignoring it has produced a substantial mountain of evolutionary psychology-based junk science. To become relevant, evolutionary psychology must reform itself - or attempt to fuse with memetics and/or gene-culture coevolution. The chapter on human behavioural ecology is again of fine quality. However, human behavioural ecology isn't really a serious attempt to model human evolution. It is a small piece of the puzzle. The chapter on sociobiology was excellent as well. Controversy makes for readability, and this chapter was quite a page-turner. Sociobiology was a nice idea but it became rather tarred by association with Wilson's presentation of it - which had both theoretical and political shortcomings. Wilson went on to try and fuse sociobiology with his own version of gene-culture coevolution - an attempt which met with only rather limited success. These days sociobiology seems to have mostly become a dirty word - which is a bit of a shame. Lastly the history chapter. This covers Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Jean Baptiste de Lamarck, Francis Galton, Konrad Lorenz, Desmond Morris - and many others. I thought this was the worst chapter in the book - and recommend readers read it last - so they are not put off. One of the chapter's themes is that people believed in progressive evolution - which led to all manner of social evils - whereas now we know that evolution has no direction. However, progressive evolution is a perfectly reasonable concept, and it is clearly evident in the world. The authors apparently criticise it without even trying very hard to understand it. Social evolution is a politically-charged subject. I appreciate that it is hard to cover the subject objectively - but I felt that the authors failed to keep their own political perspective out of the picture. The book has dated rather little in the 10 years since 2002 - though I believe the work has been republished recently. Gene-culture coevolution is now on a much firmer footing. The author's call for more experimental work has been met in the mean time with a substantial volume of work demonstrating cultural evolution under laboratory conditions, and probing the properties of cultural transmission processes. The authors manage to make themselves look pretty smart in the book, by poking holes in practically all the existing theories. That is not unreasonable - the authors are obviously pretty smart people - but I found it a little grating. From time to time, I noticed that the criticised theories were getting bent out of shape a little - in ways which helped to give the authors some corrective work to do. The book is very broad and ambitious in scope. Alas, that means it inevitably lacks depth. I would have much preferred a book about the topic covered in the last three chapters. Having said that, several of the other chapters were mostly high-quality entertaining content containing material which I was less familiar with - so I learned more from them. Anyway, overall a great book, I expect that most readers will learn a considerable amount of interesting

things about how evolution applies and has been applied to humans from it.

I held a professional development seminar for high school science teachers about the topic of human evolution. I elected to have the teachers read this book for discussion during the seminar. We had an excellent discussion and found this book a great framework to build discussion around. I feel it was pitched at the right level for a science-experienced but not necessarily science-expert audience and was provocative enough to keep us talking for two days.

Not in this field but really good introduction to the topic and easy read! Would recommend to get a general overview.

Sense and Nonsense is a clear, lucid explication of the current landscape of the research on how evolutionary theories are applied to the social sciences. By their own admission often oversimplifying for clarity's sake, they break down the different ways in which evolutionary ideas are used in the social sciences into four categories--human behavioural ecology, evolutionary psychology, memetics and gene-culture coevolution--and show how these descended, with modification, from sociobiology, and from Darwinian evolution itself. The book clearly and succinctly describes the methodologies and underlying assumptions that define each approach, and no less clearly do they identify their perceptions of the relevant strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches. Although, as another reviewer states, it might be more interesting in a dramatic sense to see them take a more polemical position, it is difficult to argue with them that each of the approaches has its merits and defects, and that, in a new religion, as it were, no one is served by internecine warfare. I have two reservations, however. My first is something between a quibble and a small problem: Laland uses primarily gene-culture coevolution models himself, and although he is generally balanced in his assessments, one cannot but come out of the book feeling that gene-culture coevolution is first among equals in the authors' minds. They don't hide their sympathies, exactly, but if you don't know of them up front, you have to be paying pretty close attention to find them out. My second concern has to do with audience. Whom is supposed to read this? If it is directed toward people in the field (that is, people who apply evolutionary models to the social sciences), another commenter is spot on in saying that it is written at too simple a level. If it is directed toward hostile social scientists who think the whole idea of evolutionary study of the social sciences to be debased, or worse, it isn't going to reach them; the book does not duck the fact that social scientists in general despise evolutionary models, but it makes no real effort to respond to

those criticisms directly. As an introduction to the subject to someone outside the field entirely, it suits reasonably well. The authors say in the preface that they are going after all these audiences, but I don't think the same book can do all those things well; they would have been better to narrow down whom they were really speaking to.

great product at a modest price I'm VERY happy with my purchase and bought another set! Works just as advertised and good followup by seller. I am very fond of. Beyond my imagination, I think it might be bad. But when I received, I am very satisfied. Great product, most people do not believe I'm in the at such a low price to buy it. would not hesitate to order again!

This is not a book for anyone without specialized knowledge in this field. It is basically unreadable if you do not know the literature. Midwest Independent Research, [mwir-evolutionsscience.blogspot.com](http://mwir-evolutionsscience.blogspot.com).

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