The Social Animal: Evolution, Sociality, and Cognition

Instructors:

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Course Description:

In this course we will consider three different, but closely interconnected, angles on the connection between the human mind, evolution and the social world. First, we will consider issues surrounding the evolution of human sociality. We will address the following questions: How can we explain the evolution of our social capacities? How do we differ in these respects from other animals? Can evolutionary models (and particularly, evolutionary game theoretic models) help us to better understand the structure and origins of human morality? Second, we will consider the significance of evolutionary considerations for the objectivity and normative status of claims about morality, rationality and in epistemology: do facts about human evolution confirm or undermine the objectivity of values, morality or knowledge? What is the function of normative language and how is that function connected to our social lives? Third, we ask about the relevance of social forces for the evolution of cognition. Has intelligence evolved to deal with the complexities of the social world? What is unique about human cognitive capacities and to what extent have they been shaped by cooperative social interaction?

Required Texts:


All other readings will be made available either online and/or for photo copying.

Evaluation:

As part of this course’s tuition activities, students will be required to complete a short written piece, to be delivered as a 20-25 minute oral presentation, an oral response to a peer’s presentation, and two drafts of a major essay. The final grade for the course will be based on the final version of the essay. Regular class attendance and active participation in discussion is also expected.

Deadlines to be announced. Specific expectations for each assignment will be discussed in class.

Reading Schedule

1. Introduction and Background

Course Overview, Central Concepts in Evolutionary Biology. No Readings.
2. The Evolution of Altruism I: Classics


3. The Evolution of Altruism II: New Developments


Selected replies to Sober and Wilson, tbd.

4. Evolution and Fairness


Optional Readings:


5. Human Ultra-Sociality


6. “Morality” in non-human Animals


Selected replies to Flack and de Waal, tbd.

7. Human Morality


Selected replies to Boehm, tbd.

8. Does Evolution Undermine Morality?


9. Does Evolution Really Undermine Morality?


Optional Readings:

10. **Social Origins of Normativity?**


11. **The Social Intelligence Hypothesis**


12. **The Evolution of Human Cognition**


Optional Reading:


13. **The Cooperative Origins of Human Cognition**
