

## Evolutionary Psychology, the Easy Way

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A review of: *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology: A Graphic Guide*. By Dylan Evans and Oscar Zarate, Totem Books, 2010. ISBN: 978-1848311824

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When describing our careers and interests to others, students and practitioners of evolutionary psychology face a challenge that dentists or English teachers don't—many people have no idea what evolutionary psychology is! In the frequent event that somebody asks me to define EP, I generally have a canned response which I rattle off which is usually sufficient to settle most inquiries. But what about those people who are intrigued and want to know more? You could refer them to a thorough introductory textbook like David Buss's (2011) or Daly and Wilson's (1983). Or, you could suggest some of the terrific popular-market books on the subject like Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997) or Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976). If they truly have the time and inclination, they will pick up one of these excellent works and be that much more fulfilled and knowledgeable for having done so. But in the fast-paced world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which everyone seems to have more to do than they can fit into the day, few are likely to appreciate being assigned three-hundred pages of scientific reading just so they can understand what it is you do, and fewer still are actually going to do it. If only there were a short, light, reader-friendly intro to EP which could be read cover-to-cover in under an hour!

*Introducing Evolutionary Psychology: A Graphic Guide*, originally released in 1999 and recently republished in a new edition, is just such an item – one of over fifty in the Introducing series of books, which covers scads of topics from Aesthetics (Kul-Want, 2007) to Wittgenstein (Heaton & Groves, 1995). It is written by University College Cork lecturer Dylan Evans (although he was a Ph.D. student at the London School of Economics at the time of authorship) and illustrated by Oscar Zarate, an Introducing series regular. As the name implies, each book in the series is designed as an accessible crash course in the eponymous topic for those completely unfamiliar with it. The books are small, almost pocket-sized, and each page contains one or two short paragraphs accompanied by a full-page black and white illustration, usually in cartoon style and often tongue-in-cheek. The format is fun and simple, and it precludes the reader becoming overwhelmed by large chunks of text and dense verbiage.

The book begins by describing EP as the junction between the disciplines of evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology and briefly running through the

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history of the two fields. Practitioners who view EP as encompassing, more generally, the study of the evolution of the mind may find Evans's definition narrow (to name just one notable omission, E.O. Wilson and sociobiology are nowhere to be mentioned in this book). Regardless of his initial angle of approach, however, Evans still manages to paint a fairly comprehensive picture of EP, akin to what a student would learn in an introductory course. After describing the process of natural selection and how the mind functions as a computer, Evans introduces the idea of modularity as introduced by Fodor and refined by Cosmides and Tooby. From there, the fundamentals of evolutionary psychology are tackled, on-by-one: taste preferences, predator detection, kin selection, reciprocal altruism, parental investment, mating, and so on. Each is explained clearly, concisely, and in *much* less time than exposition of such concepts usually takes.

The book also deftly addresses some common criticisms of EP leveled by the likes of Fodor, Gould, Lewontin, and Steven Rose—excessive modularity (Fodor, 2000), pan-adaptationism (Gould & Lewontin, 1979), reductionism, and genetic determinism (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1985). In covering an academic field so (gratuitously) embroiled in controversy, author Evans is right to acknowledge these concerns; happily, he makes it clear to all newcomers to EP that researchers in the field generally do not subscribe to the views that they are often lambasted for (Kurzban, 2002; Geher, 2006), and ably defends the views that we *do*, as a field, advocate. On the whole, Evans is a capable champion for the discipline of evolutionary psychology, and his handling of both the content and the controversy of EP does the field a great service in this introductory text.

The illustrations, by contrast, can be hit-or-miss, making it both the book's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Many of the researchers who have played various roles in the history of EP—Darwin, Chomsky, Fodor, Cosmides, Tooby, Buss, and the rest—are drawn in charming caricature explaining their contributions (or objections) to the field; this was one of my favorite aspects of the book. Zarate was either unable to find or unable to use the likeness of Robert Axelrod, however, so a text box has been jarringly placed over Axelrod's head. Some of the image choices are also questionable. No evolutionist wants to see a dinosaur in the background of a scene featuring Paleolithic humans. It is also unclear why the heartrending iconic photograph of the screaming naked girl in the Vietnam napalm attack was used to illustrate parental resource-allocation to offspring, but it does not do the field of EP any favors juxtaposed with the line "Sick children need more care—unless they are so sick that it's better to let them die."

Nevertheless, *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology: A Graphic Guide* does precisely what its title advertises; it provides an easily digestible primer to the field of EP that even the most casual reader can delve into. While the book may be too shallow in scope and informal in presentation for use in dedicated evolutionary psychology classes, it may be useful for a broader course in which evolutionary psychology is one topic but not the main focus. It will be most useful, however, in the milieu for which it was designed: outside the classroom, in the hands of the self-edifying dilettante whose interest in EP may only be an hour or two deep—or on the bookshelf of the evolutionary psychologist who wants to have a resource on-hand to assign when family, friends, or acquaintances ask "So, what exactly is it you do?"

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\*\*Received July 21, 2011; Accepted December 19, 2011\*\*