

## Clogged Ears and Loud Mouths: A Review of The Ape That Understood The Universe

Zach Rausch, Kanji Rodriguez, & Jeremy Weintraub

State University of New York at New Paltz

Steven Stewart-Williams, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, has taken on the daunting task to report on the progress of the scientific understanding of human behavior and culture. *The Ape That Understood the Universe* is an exposé on the recent developments and accepted theories in Evolutionary Psychology, Evolutionary Biology, and Cultural Evolutionary Theory. This book serves to synthesize these areas and, in doing so, provides the reader with the capacity to formulate a complete view of human nature as understood from these perspectives. Stewart-Williams uses accessible language to present complex theoretical ideas, accepted scientific theories, and profoundly controversial arguments that allow for a non-specialist reader to enter the world of the evolutionist. Ostensibly frustrated and disillusioned with nurture-based models of human nature, Stewart-Williams utilizes extensive evidence to provide a conspicuously accessible approach to understanding the purpose of human life and why we are the way we are. Although compelling and humorous, some aspects of the book may have alienated the people who ought to read it most.

The author eases the audience into the tenets of Evolutionary Psychology by comically introducing the reader to the non-ordinary reality of a hyper-intelligent space alien, riding around on the spaceship, *Beagle*. Attempting to objectify the human experience, this asexual, genderless alien gives readers an opportunity to escape from the natural biases and emotional baggage that humans possess. Stewart-Williams uses this approach to discuss controversial arguments such as evolutionarily based explanations for sex differences, mating strategies, aggression, altruism, and cultural change. To make these types of arguments, Stewart-Williams methodically articulates a foundational definition of the evolutionary process from which all of his claims can be deduced. He postulates that natural selection can only be understood through the perspective of genes themselves. He argues that,

Evolution is about the survival of the fittest genes. Genes are selected if they get themselves copied faster than rival alleles. Adaptations are designed to pass on the genes giving rise to them.... Organisms - from worms to groundhogs to humans - are gene machines: biomachines designed to propagate their hereditary material (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 31).

For example, he makes the case, along with many other evolutionists, that the colorful peacock's tail has selectively evolved over time due to it being a marker of genetic health (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 21). Due to the value placed on genetic

---

AUTHOR NOTE: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Full Name, Institution. Contact: name@university.edu

---

health, more peahens decide to mate with peacocks with the most colorful feathers. In other words, the colorful feathers are *unconscious indicators* of genetic health and therefore tend to attract more peahens. This process leads to selective pressures driving toward increasingly colorful tail feathers. Importantly, Stewart-William's makes it clear that this process' bottom line is not actually about the survival and reproduction at the organism level; it is about the survival and reproduction of the unique genes which make up the organism, including the competing tail feather genes across the population.

Further, he states that genes also propagate themselves by helping their owners' kin survive and reproduce (since organisms share proportionally more identical alleles with kin than non-kin). This logic, Stewart-Williams argues, can help us deeply understand why it is universally found that human beings tend to act more altruistically towards kin over non-kin (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 25). For example, kin selection can help explain why children are around *one hundred* times more likely to be killed by a stepparent than by a biological parent (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 158). In addition, he posits that genes may also propagate themselves by helping their owners' groups to do better than other groups, even at some cost to their owners (through the process of group selection) (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 34).

Toward the end of the book, Stewart-Williams reveals an even broader definition of the evolutionary process. This process, called gene-meme coevolution, looks at the interdependent coevolving forces between genes and culture. He argues that almost all aspects of human behavior can be understood from the interplay of these two forces. For example, he states that the capacity for human lactose tolerance (beyond infancy) developed out of a co-evolutionary process of cultural transmission and classic natural selection (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 269). As you can see, from these foundational ideas readers will be able to understand Stewart-William's reasoning process, as well as his deep frustration with those who do not espouse evolutionary thinking.

Due to his reasoning process throughout the book, readers will find critiques and discreditation towards social scientists who tend to posit that most human behavior can be completely understood through a solely nurture-based model. Stewart-Williams goes as far as to call those who hold this view "enemies of truth" (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 113). Sadly, ironic as it is, Stewart-Williams begins to fall into the trap which he intended to help readers avoid themselves. Losing its seemingly objective, apolitical intent, Stewart-Williams may end up only perpetuating the ideological divide of 'one group is right and the other is wrong', which tends to lead to clogged ears and loud mouths. In other words, this may create an atmosphere prone to divisiveness and close-mindedness.

The controversy between these groups is straightforward. On Stewart-William's side, as explained earlier and albeit with their own variance, all behavior and culture are products of two replicating forces driven by evolution: genes and memes (self-replicating entities such as ideas, tools, and cultural units that undergo the evolutionary process by perpetuating themselves via social interaction). These two replicators are the drivers of change; human beings are the vehicles for these replicators to express and perpetuate themselves. On the other side, a group of social scientists argues that the majority of human behavior and culture are products

of social construction and are often determined and molded by those in positions of power. David Sloan Wilson and Jonathan Gottschall, renowned evolutionary scholars, describe this division as “revealing the worst aspects of tribalism in our species” (Gottschall & Wilson, 2005, p. 20). They remark that, “Each side regards the other as the enemy whose position has no substance of rational basis, other than being ideological driven” (Gottschall & Wilson, 2005, p. 20). The division, they argue, perpetuates a grueling intellectual stagnation.

This division is historically woven into the fabric of psychology itself, rooted back to divisions between Aristotle’s *empiricism* (the spirit of “blank slate”) and Plato’s *rationalism* (the spirit of endowment) (Robinson, 1995). The twentieth century was merely an extension of this conflict, where one school, the empiricists, dominated over the other, the nativists. Although the evolution of ideas never stops, one can observe the controversy today as the twenty-first century’s attempt to define itself and mark its place in the continuing saga of this intellectual warfare. Wilson and Gottschall are uniquely attempting to shape the future of the field by bridging the Social Constructivists and the Evolutionists together into a paradigm coined as “Evolutionary Social Constructivism” (Gottschall & Wilson, 2005).

Without a doubt, Stewart-Williams does articulate a potential synthesis between these seemingly opposed worldviews through the theories of coevolution and memetics. Stewart-Williams hypothesizes that “Through cultural competition, memes and memeplexes evolve to inhabit and exploit human minds. In doing so, however, they create new selection pressures on their hosts” (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 269). Memetic evolution hindered the impact of the selfish gene, transforming human beings into “hybrid creatures.” This hybridization allowed culture to become a strong evolutionary force and enabled a new understanding of culture and history that could bridge the constructivist and evolutionist. Yuval Noah Harari, a renowned historian, brilliantly postulates that Memetic theory and Postmodernism, a branch of social constructivist thought, have a shared assumption in their understandings of how history and culture shape themselves. Both agree that they are driven by forces which are not directly benefiting human beings themselves (Harari, 2015, p. 243).

Yet, to our minds, Stewart-Williams appears to have not fully effectively articulated this potential bond due to a somewhat dismissive tone throughout the book. His writing style could be characterized as colloquial and playful, and we see it conspicuously, beginning his paragraphs with sentences like “I won’t keep you in suspense...” (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 19) or “Without getting into all the details...” (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 181). This style of writing can cause problems when describing controversial ideologies within a discipline and could explain why he argued against nurture-based models of human behavior with such frankness. For example, Stewart-Williams premises one of his theories by saying “A further hole in the Nurture Only plot is that, as with earlier examples, many of the social forces invoked by the sociocultural theorists have an unfortunate habit of not existing” (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 107). Another example of this feisty approach appears earlier where he states, “Critics of evolutionary psychology are among the worst offenders” (Stewart-Williams, 2018, p. 38). Disregarding research from an opposing field may have the capacity to exacerbate the underlying problem.

This analysis led us to a pivotal question: Who does Stewart-Williams intend to have read this book and what function did he truly intend it to serve? Although not explicitly stated, his colloquial, non-intimidating approach has produced a work that can be distributed to non-specialists and curious learners to explore such issues. Further, his use of the hyper-intelligent alien suggests that he wants his audience to find evolutionary theory as both novel and counterintuitive to habitual worldviews. This unique subgroup is astutely found on the grounds of college campuses, where this academic culture war is currently raging. For better or worse, intended or not, Stewart-Williams may be unwittingly perpetuating the conflict that he appears to be trying to end. This provocative, feisty book might concurrently bridge and polarize. How will it be received? We will have to ask the alien at some future point.

## REFERENCES

- Gottschall, J., & Wilson, D.S. (2005). Evolutionary Social Constructivism. *The Literary Animal: evolution and the nature of narrative* (pp. 20-37). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Harari, Y.N. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Robinson, D. N. (1995). *An Intellectual History of Psychology* (3rd Edition). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stewart-Williams, S. (2018). *The Ape that Understood The Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve*. Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press.