

Book reviews

The Triumph of Sociobiology. J. Alcock. Oxford University Press, New York. 2001. Pp. 257. Price £16.95, hardback. ISBN 0-19-514383-3.

‘No triumph of sociobiology without evolutionary psychology’

Although you cannot tell by looking at it, or by reading the synopsis on the inside cover, this is essentially a textbook, written for advanced undergraduates or graduates (as evident from the collection of superb and often deep essay questions in the Appendix). It is also good for the uninitiated and unconvinced among our colleagues. *The Triumph of Sociobiology* does an excellent job of explaining what sociobiology is and what sociobiologists do, while dispelling many misconceptions, held both by the lay person and the Goulds, Lewontins and Roses of the world. It presents a good defense of anthropomorphism in sociobiology (pp. 25-28), and of genetic explanations of behaviour, and how they differ from “genetic determinism” (pp. 52-56). Chapters 1-6 deal mostly with the behaviour of insects and birds, and much of Alcock’s discussion, especially of the “comparative method” (pp. 73-80), is fascinating to those of us who narcissistically study only one species. Chapter 9, “The Practical Applications of Sociobiology”, alone is worth buying the book for.

My only complaint with the book is its title. Throughout the book, I thought that it was *about* the triumph of sociobiology, and that Alcock would *document* how sociobiology triumphed over its critics. Only in the very last paragraph of the book (p. 223), does it become clear that Alcock believes that the triumph of sociobiology has yet to come. If Alcock believes that the triumph has not yet come, I believe he is wrong. If he believes that the triumph of sociobiology will come, I believe he is wrong.

The need for “triumph” implies a prior crisis or controversy, as indeed existed following the publication of Wilson’s *Sociobiology*. As Alcock himself notes, however, the controversy resulted purely from Wilson’s application of evolutionary principles to human behaviour. “Had Wilson omitted this last chapter [on humans], he would never have been chosen as a subject for dousing and vituperation” (p. 20). The controversy is not about whether sociobiological principles hold for birds and insects, but about whether they explain human behaviour. The verdict is already in, delivered, not by sociobiologists, but by evolutionary psychologists, whose collective empirical work demonstrates beyond any doubt that the principles of evolution by natural and sexual selection, which explain the behaviour of all species in nature, can also explain human behaviour. In other words, while the *genius* belongs to E. O. Wilson, Dawkins, Hamilton, Williams, and Trivers, the *triumph* belongs to Cosmides, Tooby, Daly, M. Wilson and Buss.

As is common among sociobiologists, Alcock blurs the distinction between sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and inadvertently commits what Buss calls the “sociobiology fallacy.” This is the tendency of sociobiologists to focus on behaviour rather than evolved psychological mechanisms, and assume that human behaviour on the whole tends to be adaptive, (“The effect of inheriting naturally selected proximate mechanisms ought to make individuals behave in ways that generally advance their genetic success” (p. 180).) Alcock’s sociobiology fallacy leads him to conclude, in a section called “Sociobiology and Apparently Maladaptive Behavior,” that “actions that superficially seem disadvantageous to individuals may actually contribute to their economic and reproductive welfare” (p. 182), rather than pondering the possibility that much of human behaviour can be maladaptive due to the disjunction between the ancestral and current environments. Alcock does discuss what he calls “the novel environment hypothesis” (pp. 182-187), but gives the impression that human behaviour can be maladaptive only in very limited instances.

Alcock’s neglect of evolutionary psychology, which actually delivered the triumph for sociobiology, is my only complaint. Otherwise, I would recommend *The Triumph of Sociobiology* to my colleagues who teach advanced undergraduate or graduate seminars on sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, although the book contains little that is new to practitioners.

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Future Perfect: Confronting Decisions About Genetics. Lori B. Andrews. Columbia University Press, New York. 2001. Pp. 264. Price \$19.69, hardback. ISBN 0-231-12162-8.

Lori Andrews’ *Future Perfect* attempts two tasks, one descriptive, and one argumentative. It succeeds at the former, but fares less well in the latter.

Andrews’ first task is to describe the ethical problems related to genetic testing. While the book claims to be about ‘genetics,’ it is really only about genetic *testing*, and to some extent genetic *research* carried out by means of such testing. Granted, that in itself is a broad and worthy topic; but readers who hope for discussions of other genetic issues such as gene therapy, agricultural genetics, cloning, or the human genome project itself, will likely be disappointed. I however, count Andrews’ effort here as a success, though a qualified one. Andrews is to be commended for amassing, in one relatively