**Anthropology 351 Office: 308 Asbury**

**Anthropology and Human Nature Office hours: 10:30-12:00 M**

**Professor D. La Lone 1:30-3:00 TuTh**

**Spring 2011**

**Anthropology and Human Nature**

Human nature is an ageless and endless theme. Everyone has views on human nature, and any number of philosophers, theologians, artists, poets, playwrights, novelists (keep listing, if you are so inclined) have been judged to offer special insights into human nature. But these discussions have for the most part been evaluative (“is it good or is it bad?”) and normative (“how should we behave?”). But evaluative and normative arguments are endless and necessarily inconclusive as generalizations about humankind.

Sciences propose another way to advance understanding by attempting to set aside evaluative and normative positions about how things should be in order to explore what is. Science works from propositional statements subject to test and refutation. Everything must be justified not by belief or faith, but by evidence:

If **x** is true, then **y** (its implications) must be true.

When tested, if **y** is found **not** to be true, then **x** must be rejected or reconsidered.

So now at last, at last, we can figure it out and write the textbook!

But who is qualified to write it?

As an anthropologist, I would argue that **Anthropology** holds a distinctive position that should put it at the forefront. What makes anthropology distinctive in the study of humankind (and presumably human nature) is that anthropology is the only discipline that explores all of humankind. Anthropology is the study of all peoples in all times and all places. Valid generalizations about humankind and human nature must encompass no less.

Yet, ironically, twentieth century anthropologists took the lead in insisting that there is no such thing as human nature. That abdication opened the way for many other disciplines to claim preeminence in exploring and explaining human nature. And they are all wrong.

Purpose and Objectives

What is human nature? We have altogether too much speculative verbiage from a great many sources. We have vague and unsubstantiated claims of wisdom about human nature. From cultural anthropology we have a vast record of human diversity and, at the same time, biological anthropology has shown much about the seven million year hominid sequence, and how we do have commonalities as a single species.

Claiming that human diversity shows there is no such thing as human nature is an intellectual blind alley. So what might we learn if instead we approach the questions seriously?

Human nature exists---but it is not what people often think it is.

This course gets at the question by examining the Big Question: “why do people do what they do?”. Our ideas and methods will not come from the special claims of any one discipline or department. But we do have a solid framework for posing and researching hypotheses.

Some Objectives from the Course:

Students will be able to explore the question of why people do what they do without the misconception that any single academic discipline, department, or major has “the answers.”

They will be able to do this with extensive study of the implications of Tinbergin’s observation that the “why question” actually refers to at least four interrelated questions.

As we explore how behavior is the outcome of multiple interactions from ultimate to proximate causes, students will gain some familiarity with many research areas, including evolution, the new genetics, development, endocrinology, neurobiology, psychology (and evolutionary psychology), culture, and why everything is in interaction with environments. This familiarity will be evidenced in ability to read and interpret science news and research articles perceptively.

Students will develop a deeper sense of who we are as humans by exploring our place in the world of living things. More specifically, studies in primatology will promote insights on commonalities as well as differences.

Primatology will reveal that much of what we think is uniquely human has deep evolutionary foundations. For example, students will be able to discuss the evolutionary foundations of empathy and compassion and the roots of morality.

Students will be able to discuss evolutionary theory with greater understanding and insight. This will be demonstrated, for example, in knowledge of the central points in evolution so that terms such as “survival of the fittest” and the notion of adaptations being “for the good of the species” will be discarded.

Students will see many of the cutting edge approaches in research on human behavior (at one point, we’ll examine no fewer than thirty-eight proposals!).

And, contrary to some common misconceptions about science, students may well discover a great deal about love, and happiness, and how what they learn may directly contribute to their own well-being.

**Required Texts**

**Common readings for the course:**

**Frans de Waal, The Age of Empathy**

**Agustin Fuentes, Evolution of Human Behavior**

**Melvin Konner, The Tangled Wing**

**Walter Goldschmidt, The Bridge to Humanity**

These are the books everyone will read as foundations for discussion and writing. In addition, current research articles will be assigned for discussion as you identify your particular interests.

**Written Work**

Everyone will develop and demonstrate understanding of the materials in a number of writing projects due at roughly two week intervals. There will be five commentaries (3-4 pp.), a presentation and essay (6 pp.) on emotion, and discussion and a final paper on a research topic you develop throughout the term.

Commentary One, February 10 100 points

Commentary Two, February 24 100 points

Commentary Three, March 10 100 points

Commentary Four, March 29 100 points

Commentary Five, April 14 100 points

Essay and presentation, May 5 200 points

Final Paper, May 18 300 points

**EvoS**

This course is framed in terms of the **EvoS** (Evolution Studies) program, founded by **David Sloan Wilson**. You will hear more about the **EvoS** project throughout the term. **EvoS** centers on the premise that evolution is not “owned” by evolutionary biology or any single academic discipline or department. It aims to draw students and faculty throughout the curriculum to discuss ideas with a common language and framework.

**EvoS** is also experienced through courses, seminars, and distinguished guest speakers from a variety of disciplines and institutions. In the 2009-2010 academic year, **EvoS** sponsored talks and class visits from **David Sloan Wilson** (Binghamton University) and **William Jankowiak** (UNLV) and co-sponsored *The Sandwalk*, a theatrical performance based on the life of Charles Darwin.

During the current Spring 2011 term, **EvoS** will sponsor a number of speakers and events. In addition to the founder of the **EvoS Consortium**, two of the authors of our course texts will come to DePauw. On March 22, **Agustin Fuentes** (Notre Dame) will visit our class and present public talks. In April, **EvoS** and the Prindle Institute will sponsor a major symposium on evolution and ethics. Among a number of distinguished participants, our visitors will include **David Sloan Wilson** (Binghamton) and **Melvin Konner** (Emory). We would have liked also to bring the late Walter Goldschmidt (one of my former professors), but his indisposition precludes a visit. We hope also to invite Frans de Waal in another year.

**Human Nature**

*Human nature exists…human nature is real, definable, and to some extent predictable. It is also quite different from what the world’s cultures have thought it to be.*

*Melvin Konner (2002:xiii, xvii)*

Week 1:  **Getting started**

What is human nature?

“It’s just human nature”

“The artist demonstrates a profound understanding of human nature”

Evaluative and normative perspectives

Science---i.e. propositions subject to testing, refutation

Abusing science in the interest of ideology----political smugness and the fallacy of “greed is

good” as a natural consequence of universal competitive struggle.

Breaking out of old boxes.

New old boxes----disciplinary parochialism and chauvinism

To make sense of it all, take ~~Psychology~~

~~Genetics~~

~~Economics~~

~~Sociology~~

~~Political science~~

~~Neurosciences~~

~~Developmental psychology~~

~~Developmental biology~~

~~Biochemistry~~

Ok, the obvious answer is that the one place you need to go is:

***Anthropology***

Well, while I’ll try to make a case for my disciplinary base of anthropology (by the way, that’s not cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, archaeology, or linguistics….but **anthropology**), even in the first week of class you might notice we’ll have to make a small correction:

~~Anthropology~~

If not anthropology (as a master discipline) then what???

We will shake off the various disciplinary parochialisms in part by following guidelines offered by Niko Tinbergin, a preeminent scholar of comparative behavior. He noted in a classic 1963 paper that our question about why a particular behavior occurs really encompasses four different (but interconnected) questions. These questions range from *ultimate* to *proximate*.

We can remember these with the mnemonic ABCDEF: Animal Behaviour, Cause, Development, Evolution, Function (Tinbergen 1963).

As John Cartwright (2008: 10) paraphrases the why questions about behavior:

1. *What are the mechanisms that cause the behaviour? (causation)*
2. *How does the behaviour come to develop in the individual? (development or ontogeny)*
3. *How has the behaviour evolved? (evolution)*
4. *What is the function or survival value of the behaviour? (function)*

We can see how Robert Sapolsky diagrammed in a continuum from ultimate to proximate

forces. Sapolsky insists that we cannot explain everything through neuroscience (he is many things himself, but perhaps first a neuroscientist), but rather we must look at the interconnections.

So I must sadly/happily report that thorough training in an anthropology department or a psychology department or a biology department, **or any one disciplinary box**, will just not cut it. You will need knowledge in depth from one or perhaps even more than one discipline, but to advance understanding of these questions, you will need to find courage to risk being a generalist.

The explanatory continuum linking ultimate to proximate causes is just a partial diagram of causal components in human behavior. Despite the way it looks graphically, the point is not to see boxes but interconnections-----note issues that strike you as particularly interesting, and these will shape your further readings, discussions and presentations, and papers.

So we’ll have to keep awake to contributions from many sources outside the boxes of academic disciplines. But our overall exploration will follow guidelines of scientific inquiry.

So we won’t make rulings on evaluative or normative issues.

But won’t we miss some of the fun?

After all, what kind of critters are we? Good/Bad? Violent by nature/peaceful and

compassionate?

On this at least, I’ll suggest an answer. It is found in a number of wisdom traditions, and I think we’ll see it also is grounded in good science. I call it **The Two Wolves**.

Then let’s get started with some human nature literature. We will end the term with a wise and beautiful book by Walter Goldschmidt, and we begin the term with a wise and beautiful book by Frans de Waal.

**Read:**

**de Waal, The Age of Empathy, Chapters 1 and 2**

**Konner, The Tangled Wing, xiii-xx, and Chapter 1, “The Quest for the Natural”**

**Goldschmidt, Chapter 1, “Nature *and* Nurture”**

**Commentary One:**

Although everyone seems ready to talk about human nature, what are some arguments against

the concept of human nature?

**Due February 10**

Week 2**: Evolution----the core of EvoS**

In a massive understatement, Agustin Fuentes notes that “evolution is frequently misunderstood” (Fuentes 2009:5).

Let’s begin to get it right! What’s wrong with SOTF and FTGOTS?

Evolution is not random----natural selection and adaptations.

What is human behavioral evolution?

The problem of altruism and misunderstanding the “selfish gene”

**Read:**

**Fuentes, Chapters 1 and 2**

**Konner, Chapter 2, “Adaptation”**

**Goldschmidt, Chapter 2**

Week 3: **Modern perspectives for understanding human behavioral evolution**

Evolution of human behavior is a vital topic that draws on many disciplines. Much of the work falls under several major approaches. Understanding these approaches will be an important part of your reading and pursuit of research questions.

Fuentes outlines major approaches and offers examples of how they work in Chapter 3. Read and review the chapter and think about questions you would like to see discussed more fully.

Chapter 5 in Fuentes is important for its summaries of hypotheses and proposals for explaining human behavioral evolution. Read his summaries of main points and main citations of specific arguments. You should then look for how your own interests and topics may be explored from these frameworks (and note the bibliographic pointers). And you should be able to apply these approaches to the extensive readings and discussion throughout the term.

Questions? Then you should feel free to ignore whatever I might say and instead ask questions directly from Professor Fuentes in his class visit on March 22.

**Read:**

**Fuentes, Chapter 3**

**Fuentes, Chapter 5**

**Fuentes, “It’s Not All Sex and Violence”**

**Commentary Two:**

How do evolutionary explanations reshape the discussion of human nature?

**Due February 24**

Week 4: **What kinds of beings are we?**

One of the great achievements in the history of science has been dramatic new work in genetics. Contemporary knowledge of DNA demonstrates that in fact all life on earth is interconnected. Yes, we are related even to sponges, but we can’t take on our relationships with all living beings. So we start with our position in the animal kingdom more specifically by considering what it means for us to be primates.

Primatology is an important component of anthropology, and, as it happens, Professor Fuentes is also a primatologist, so perhaps primatology may inspire some of your questions for him.

**Read:**

**Fuentes, Chapter 4 (ok, focus on pp. 64-68)**

**de Waal, Chapters 3 and 4**

**Konner, Chapter 3**

**Commentary Three:**

What does primatology contribute toward our understanding of what it means to be human?

**Due March 10**

Week 5: **Empathy----not just for humans**

Elephants, dolphins, self-awareness, theory of mind, mirror neurons, shared attention, shared intention. Maybe we’re not as special and noble as we claim when we insist we’re “better than animals.”

**Read:**

**de Waal, Chapter 5**

Week 6: **How the brain is built**

A common misconception about evolution of behavior is that there are “genes for” specific behaviors and traits. New research in genetics and neurosciences gives us deeper understanding of how brains work. And this also reveals that our brains are not rational computers, but that we are driven more by emotions than by rational calculations.

**Read:**

**Konner, Chapters 4, 5, and 7**

**[additional materials will be drawn from Ramachandran, Damasio, and others]**

**Commentary Four:**

How does our understanding of neurosciences, how the brain is built, respond to the argument

that “you can do anything you and your culture decide”?

**Due March 29**

Week 7: **Gender**

It has been customary for some time for social scientists to claim that behavior is socially/culturally constructed. And this applies with a vengeance to discussions of gender. But, not to be too shocking, males and females are different. What might we learn from neurosciences about differences? (one author recently proclaimed that such work is just “neurosexism,” but I trust we won’t simply surrender to intimidation!).

**Read:**

**Konner, Chapter 6**

Week 8: **Fairness, cooperation, and evolutionary foundations of morality**

Natural selection is often represented as endless, often vicious, competition. However, much of the current research in evolution has shown how **cooperation** can be a powerful force in selection. **David Sloan Wilson** has been at the forefront of these new directions in evolutionary theory. We’ll examine his arguments on “survival of the selfless” and how they shape understanding of why we cooperate.

A further step from exploring the evolution of cooperation, fairness, and selflessness is then to examine the issue as evolutionary foundations of morality. Frans de Waal has been a leader in this research, so we can see some of what he has to say and we may also look to other scholars engaged in this topic.

**Read:**

**de Waal, chapters 6 and 7**

Week 9: **Language and culture**

This past November I participated in the International Conference on Tibetan Buddhism, where the Dalai Lama brought together preeminent scientists who explore the questions in this course. One of the speakers was Frans de Waal, who offered his argument for the evolutionary origins of compassion. Since compassion is the entire heart of Buddhism, we would expect the Dalai Lama to have something to say on the topic (as the leading force in the Mind and Life Institute, the Dalai Lama is very much immersed in the scientific research as well).

He responded to de Waal’s presentation by noting his general agreement with the argument, but then went on to comment that human compassion differs because we *talk* about it (endlessly!). Human self-awareness and self-consciousness lead to complexities we could not find in any other species.

So what about language and culture?

**Read:**

**Konner, Chapter 8**

**Goldschmidt, Chapters 3 and 6**

**Commentary Five:**

The traditional argument is that morality is uniquely human (think too of all the other things

that have been said to be special to humans). Discuss work that argues that cooperation, a

sense of fairness, empathy, sympathy, and even compassion are no less products of natural

selection than aggression, violence, greed and general nastiness. What is the case for

“the evolutionary foundations of morality”?

**Due April 14**

Weeks 10 and 11: **What makes us move-----the power of emotions**

An enduring premise in the Western tradition especially has been that what sets humans apart from other animals is *reason*. We are above all thinking beings (H. ***sapiens***) who exist through our thought (“*Cogito ergo sum”).* This generally implies that other beings do not and cannot think, and that other beings lack feelings apart from fear and rage. As we can see from de Waal’s account, even in the late twentieth century scholars who explored thought and emotion in non-human beings were accused of “*anthropomorphism.”*

But more recent research increasingly shows that we greatly exaggerate our own rationality, and arrogantly deny thought and emotion in other beings. With Konner as a key resource, let’s look more closely at how emotions drive us.

Student teams will join to offer discussion presentations on *rage (Chapter 9), fear (Chapter 10), joy (Chapter 11), lust (Chapter 12), love (Chapter 13), grief (Chapter 14), or gluttony (Chapter 15).*

And we’ll turn also to further discussion of the importance of love by considering Walter Goldschmit’s insights-----it’s not all sex (and violence) and not all maximizing self-interest.

**Read:**

**Goldschmidt, Chapters 4 and 5**

**Konner, Chapters 9 through 15 (select one chapter as focus for your team presentation)**

Week 12: **The EvoS Conference on Evolution, Ethics, and Public Policy**

**The EvoS Conference takes place April 26-28. A number of major figures in evolution and ethics will be here to discuss current discoveries in evolution and how new understandings shape explorations also in ethics and public policy. Among many distinguished speakers, we will hear from David Sloan Wilson and Melvin Konner**.

**Readings, reflection, writing:**

**Accompanying the inspiration and examples of our visitors in the EvoS Conference, you should be well advanced in developing your own ideas for your final paper.**

**Fuentes Chapter 6 discusses and compares the thirty-eight hypotheses and proposals he presents in Chapter 5, and Chapters 7 and 8 offer some advanced discussion of how we may now advance our research on the evolution of human behavior.**

**Essay One: Reason and Emotion**

We started with a traditional claim that what distinguishes humans is our power of reasoning. But exploring what it is to be human from a biocultural perspective shows us again and again

that we are not disembodied bundles of thought and culture. How does our understanding of

the power of emotion refute disembodied “explanations” of human behavior?

**Due May 5**

Weeks 13 and 14: **Discussions and presentations on your research topics.**

**Read:**

**Goldschmidt, Chapter 9, and other words of wisdom on human nature**

**Final Paper Due by May 18 (the official final exam date)**