

FEAST Cluster on Feminist Critiques of Evolutionary Psychology—Editor’s Introduction

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If you are anything like me—an avid, but scientifically out-of-date reader of the Science section of the *New York Times*—this cluster will come as a revelation to you. For those scientifically sophisticated readers of *Hypatia*, this cluster will deepen your understanding of the tricks science can play on the unwary and the opportunities for feminist intervention that you may have overlooked.

The papers included in this special cluster were originally submitted for the 2nd FEAST Special Issue (Fall 2011) but there were so many papers that survived *Hypatia*’s rigorous review process that it was impossible to include all of them. Fortunately, three of the accepted papers focus on the topic of evolutionary psychology, and the editors of *Hypatia* welcomed the possibility of publishing this cluster devoted to the pressing issues this topic raises for feminist philosophers.

Letitia Meynell’s “Evolutionary Psychology, Ethology, and Essentialism (Because What They Don’t Know Can Hurt Us)” documents the successful popularization of results claimed by evolutionary psychologists concerning gender, and proceeds to demolish these claims. Deploring the persistence of gender-essentialist, dimorphic accounts of human nature and the evidentiary support evolutionary psychology ostensibly provides for this view, Meynell argues that the conjunction of development theory and evolutionary biology vindicates the sort of “ontology of variety, complexity, and contingency” that many feminists advocate. She then examines a study of female and male vervet monkeys that supposedly proves that girls and boys favor feminine and masculine toys respectively—a study that she finds conceptually and methodologically wanting. Yet, this study is widely cited, and Meynell concludes by offering several conjectures as to why such research has become so influential.

Kim Hall takes a different tack. “‘Not Much to Praise in Such Seeking and Finding’: Evolutionary Psychology, the Biological Turn in the Humanities, and the Epistemology of Ignorance” questions the authority that evolutionary psychology and neuroscience have gained over the humanities. Like Meynell, Hall doubts that evolutionary psychologists are doing good science. As well, she joins Paul Ricoeur in questioning neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeaux’s identification of the self with the brain together with his contention that evolution has endowed humans with neural predispositions that underpin morality. Finally, Hall brands the biological turn an epistemology of ignorance—a form of willful ignorance that involves “knowing that one doesn’t know but not wanting to know.” Nothing, Hall insists, prevents evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists from being more cautious in their speculations about human nature. Yet, too often such views sideline critical, humanities-based treatments of this topic along the lines that Horkheimer endorsed.

In “Feminist Engagement with Evolutionary Psychology,” Carla Fehr reflects on the aims of feminist critiques of evolutionary psychology and proposes ways in which feminists might contribute to reforming the anti-feminist strands in that research program. Fehr, like Meynell, stresses that evolutionary theory is not inherently inimical to feminist values, and she highlights the work of Darwinian feminists. Moreover, Fehr joins both Meynell and Hall in questioning evolutionary psychology’s reliance on unsubstantiated hypotheses regarding the evolutionary pressures prevalent in the Pleistocene era and its indifference to human evolution that may have occurred in the millennia since. She then articulates three goals for feminist critiques of evolutionary psychology: (1) advancing feminist scholarship regarding “gendered values in science” and especially in evolutionary psychology, (2) “mitigating the possible negative impact” of non-feminist projects in evolutionary psychology, and (3) “improving the practices and products” of evolutionary psychology. While acknowledging that to date evolutionary psychologists have paid little attention to feminist critiques, Fehr argues that feminist critics could do more to grab their attention by participating in evolutionary psychology research and teaching with evolutionary psychologists.

Together these papers make the case that feminists face a formidable opponent in evolutionary psychology but also that this opponent is vulnerable in a number of respects. The key is to capitalize on these vulnerabilities in order to promote better science, for the solid evidence points to ample overlap between good science and feminist values.