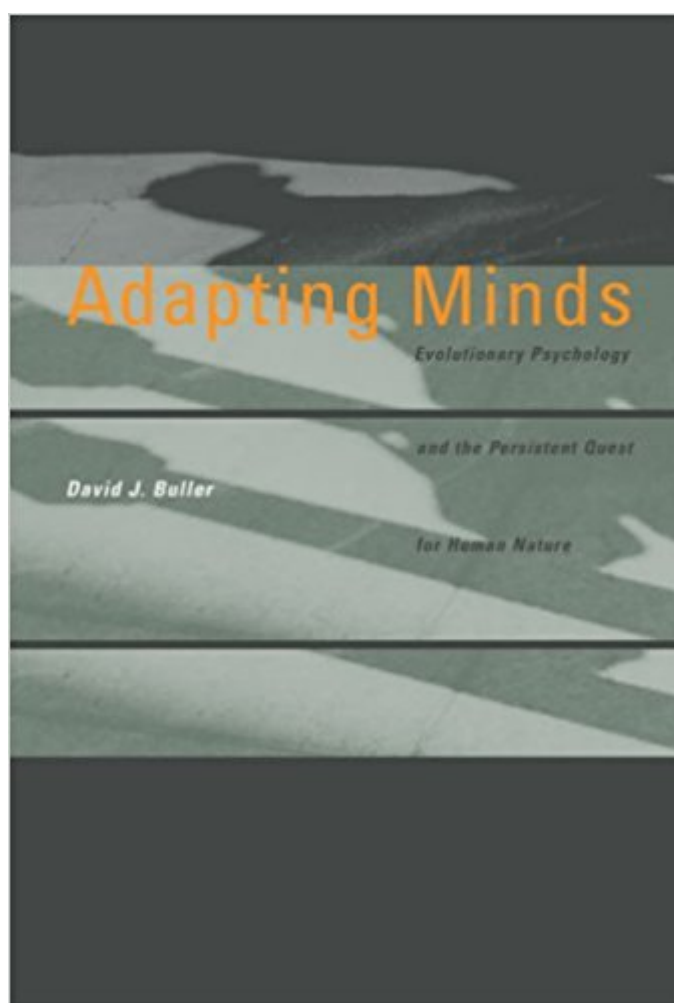


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# Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology And The Persistent Quest For Human Nature (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Was human nature designed by natural selection in the Pleistocene epoch? The dominant view in evolutionary psychology holds that it was -- that our psychological adaptations were designed tens of thousands of years ago to solve problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors. In this provocative and lively book, David Buller examines in detail the major claims of evolutionary psychology -- the paradigm popularized by Steven Pinker in *The Blank Slate* and by David Buss in *The Evolution of Desire* -- and rejects them all. This does not mean that we cannot apply evolutionary theory to human psychology, says Buller, but that the conventional wisdom in evolutionary psychology is misguided. Evolutionary psychology employs a kind of reverse engineering to explain the evolved design of the mind, figuring out the adaptive problems our ancestors faced and then inferring the psychological adaptations that evolved to solve them. In the carefully argued central chapters of *Adapting Minds*, Buller scrutinizes several of evolutionary psychology's most highly publicized "discoveries," including "discriminative parental solicitude" (the idea that stepparents abuse their stepchildren at a higher rate than genetic parents abuse their biological children). Drawing on a wide range of empirical research, including his own large-scale study of child abuse, he shows that none is actually supported by the evidence. Buller argues that our minds are not adapted to the Pleistocene, but, like the immune system, are continually adapting, over both evolutionary time and individual lifetimes. We must move beyond the reigning orthodoxy of evolutionary psychology to reach an accurate understanding of how human psychology is influenced by evolution. When we do, Buller claims, we will abandon not only the quest for human nature but the very idea of human nature itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Buller's critique of evolutionary psychology is measured, logical, and clearly developed. It is also devastating. Buller does not seek to refute the entirety of evolutionary psychology by finding a single magic bullet. Rather, he attends to the details, finding a variety of serious problems in the different arguments that evolutionary psychologists deploy. This is philosophy of science in the trenches, and it is excellent. (Elliott Sober, Hans Reichenbach Professor and William Vilas Research Professor, University of Wisconsin, Madison) This is a superb book, wonderfully clear in thought and expression. The evolutionary psychology program represented by Pinker, Cosmides, and their allies has already been the target of impressive theoretical discussion, but this has focused mostly on the assumptions they make about evolutionary theory and human paleobiology. Buller covers this material with exemplary clarity, but the real strength of his work lies in his searching critique of the experimental case for evolutionary psychology. His is by far the best treatment of these issues I have ever read. In case after case, Buller shows that the experimental case for the existence of Darwinian algorithms is much weaker than even skeptics like me have supposed. (Kim Sterelny, Victoria University of Wellington New Zealand and Australian National University) [Buller] hopes that *Adapting Minds* can clear the way for some actual science about how evolution equips us to have psychologies. Anyone with a serious interest in evolution, psychology, or humanity should read it to free their mind for that task. (The New Scientist) [H]is book, *Adapting Minds* from MIT Press, is the most persuasive critique of evo psych I have encountered... After *Adapting Minds* it is impossible to ever again think that human behavior is the Stone Age artifact that evolutionary psychology claims. (Wall Street Journal) How do you tell the difference between evolutionary psychology as popular culture and as science? Buller solved the problem. He disentangles convictions born of everyday intuition from the thinking and evidence that are necessary for a scientific understanding of human cognition and behavior in an evolutionary perspective. In clear and accessible prose, he delivers a much-needed analysis of current theory and research claiming to unlock human nature. This book is essential for evolutionary psychologists, their critics, and hungry audiences. (Linnda R. Caporael, Professor of Science and Technology Studies, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute)... *Adapting Minds* is destined to become required reading among evolutionary psychology's detractors. But, despite its flaws, it will be read with interest by evolutionary psychologists too. Buller provides a useful

overview of the field and of the current debates... Buller enables evolutionary psychologists to get back to arguing about the science. (Nature)[T]he author's restraint and generous stance ensure that evolutionary psychologists have to take *Adapting Minds* seriously.... I highly commend [Buller] for having written an outstanding book. It sets the standard for the continuing debates on evolutionary psychology. (Science)This is the wave of the future in social science research: the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, a unified conceptual framework, and rapid feedback between theoretical and empirical inquiry. (David Sloan Wilson, Binghamton University, author of *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*)

"David Buller's searching critique of evolutionary psychology is intended to make the field stronger. He shows how much philosophy can contribute to an intense and ongoing scientific debate." --David Sloan Wilson, Binghamton University, author of *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* "Buller's critique of evolutionary psychology is measured, logical, and clearly developed. It is also devastating. Buller does not seek to refute the entirety of evolutionary psychology by finding a single magic bullet. Rather, he attends to the details, finding a variety of serious problems in the different arguments that evolutionary psychologists deploy. This is philosophy of science in the trenches, and it is excellent." --Elliott Sober, Hans Reichenbach Professor and William Vilas Research Professor, University of Wisconsin, Madison "How do you tell the difference between evolutionary psychology as popular culture and as science? Buller solves the problem. He disentangles convictions born of everyday intuition from the thinking and evidence that are necessary for a scientific understanding of human cognition and behavior in an evolutionary perspective. In clear and accessible prose, he delivers a much-needed analysis of current theory and research claiming to unlock human nature. This book is essential for evolutionary psychologists, their critics, and hungry audiences." --Linnda R. Caporael, Professor of Science and Technology Studies, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute "This is a superb book, wonderfully clear in thought and expression. The evolutionary psychology program represented by Pinker, Cosmides, and their allies has already been the target of impressive theoretical discussion, but this has focused mostly on the assumptions they make about evolutionary theory and human paleobiology. Buller covers this material with exemplary clarity, but the real strength of his work lies in his searching critique of the experimental case for evolutionary psychology. His is by far the best treatment of these issues I have ever read. In case after case, Buller shows that the experimental case for the existence of Darwinian algorithms is much weaker than even skeptics like me have supposed." --Kim Sterelny, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and Australian National

University --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Very well written. Buller explains his arguments clearly. He's a bit of a nitpicker though but science needs nitpickers to become more rigorous

The field formerly known as Sociobiology has reinvented itself under the name Evolutionary Psychology, though with more of a focus on internal psychological mechanisms. The premise remains the same: current human behaviors or tendencies can be explained as adaptive mechanisms implanted in us by our evolutionary past. The field has gained tremendous attention in the popular media; you can hardly read an issue of Science Times without seeing an example of it. We are barraged with new hypotheses, such as the claim that our preference for green lawns is due to the fact that we evolved on the African savanna (perhaps our love of TiVo is because it allows us to hunt wildebeests during prime time?). But as David Buller demonstrates in his brilliant book, the emperor still has no clothes. Though Buller is a philosopher, he presents an internal critique of the field, that is a demonstration that EvoPsych is wrong on biological and evolutionary grounds. Buller is especially strong in his critique of the assumption of the "modularity" of mind (that the mind is a collection of separate modules for different function), a virtual article of faith in EvoPsych. This book is simply a must-read for those interested in this topic or in evolution and human nature. For some reason, some people feel threatened by the fact that it is a philosopher rather than a biologist criticizing EvoPsych. But this is an example of the ad hominem logical fallacy; the question is not what academic department Buller belongs to, but whether his arguments are valid. Whatever your opinions on EvoPsych, you cannot ignore this extremely important book.

Unlike reviewers of mystery novels, commentators on this book need not hesitate to reveal the ending. The author thinks evolution teaches us 'human nature' is a superstition, and that generalizations in human psychology do not attain the status of "laws of nature". In fact, pace those who consider themselves familiar with "duck nature," Buller thinks that there are NO biological species that have the logical status we ordinarily accord to those mathematical (or physical, or chemical) kinds which can be understood as classes each of whose members are definitionally required to exhibit a set of separately necessary and jointly sufficient properties. Ducks are not typed in the way that equilateral triangles are typed. This will not surprise a careful reader of the magisterial work of the late great zoologist Ernst Mayr, who repeatedly reminded us that species are polymorphic, related not by class membership but by lineage or descent. To put it more simply and

from a different perspective, a fundamental requirement of Darwin's theory is the occurrence of significant individual variability within species. We know that not all natural selection is "canalizing selection" funnelling all variation toward an optimal type. "Frequency dependent" selection is alive and well, and the world is full of hawks and doves, to say nothing of the bourgeoisie. To put it colloquially, not all of us search "for a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad." When my old dog had pups, some of them were good hunters, some were suitable for nothing but footstool warmers; when raising hens, farmers' wives cook the poor layers for dinner. It is important to emphasize that Buller seeks to defend evolutionary psychology by criticizing the excesses of Evolutionary Psychology, rightly considered as the product of a collective, or tribe, of investigators (Cosmides & Tooby, David Buss, Steven Pinker) and journalists (Nicholas Wade, Robert Wright, Matt Ridley) sharing a common set of presumptions about evolution (adaptationist), about cognitive science (massive modularity), and about the nature of culture (reducible to individual psychology). Robin Dunbar makes a similar point in noting the guerilla warfare waged by proponents of Evolutionary Psychology against dissidents who might be considered behavioral ecologists, because they don't subscribe 100% to the major tenets of Evo Psycho: e.g., because they study the contributions made by behaviors currently observable to the biological fitness of organisms currently alive. It won't do to label Buller a philosopher and not a working scientist. Perhaps philosophers are a dying breed, but they have time to read a great many books, and erudition matters when the issue is the comparative evaluation of diverse and competing scientific research programs. Historians and philosophers of science are like the prairie dogs who understand that sometime it's a good idea to quit eating and survey the neighborhood. One final metaphor: this book is polymorphic in that some of its chapters are spell-binding and some are tedious and too long. Buller tries so hard to be fair to Evo Psycho that he strings out indefinitely large sequences of hypotheticals testing the various interpretations under which the paradigm might be favorably construed. This makes the chapters on mating, marriage and parenthood a little mind numbing. I suggest judicious skimming as a tactic for getting through those bits. Some time ago Robert Wright ("The Moral Animal") after following the Evo Psycho paradigm to the letter for most of the book, was puzzled to note that, from that perspective, we are living in the "worst of all possible worlds." Then he had to conduct a rather fruitless search for an ethic that might save the world. Buller's book blazes a path around Wright's *weltschmerz*.

David Buller, a philosopher, has written a book critiquing the scientific work of a subgroup of evolutionary psychologists who adhere to a doctrine first clearly articulated in a series of brilliant articles and books by D. Symons, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby. Their work was immeasurably

enhanced by its uptake by popular science writers R. Wright and S. Pinker. I think the philosophy of science is quite important, but I cannot think of a case where philosophers, qua philosophers, have added anything substantive to the critique of a scientific theory. I read this book only because of the extravagant praise afforded it by prominent behavioral scientists, including David Sloan Wilson, Linnda Caporeale, and Kim Sterelny. While I think this book does have a lot to offer the interested lay reader, it certainly does not violate my generalization about the worthlessness of philosophers criticizing scientific theories. The author is clear in stating that his contribution is not a critique of evolutionary psychology in general, but only of this particular subgroup, which he distinguishes by capitalizing the name. For a general description of evolutionary psychology and Evolutionary Psychology (which I call EvPsych), please see my review of Scher and Rauscher, *Evolutionary Psychology*. Much of Buller's effort goes to criticizing a few prominent examples of the empirical research of EvPsychers, including D. Buss's analysis of mate preference, M. Daly and M. Wilson's analysis of parenting vs. step-parenting, and C. Cosmides and J. Tooby's analysis of cheater detection modules. I think this was an unfortunate choice because the general EvPsych approach does not stand or fall on these examples in any way. Despite Buller's strong critique of Daly and Wilson, I suspect that their data analysis will emerge superior to Buller's, if only because they are consummate professionals in the area and he is a rank amateur. But, either way, their predictions do not depend in any way on the particular doctrines of EvPsych, but are broadly based on the evolutionary psychology paradigm. Buss's analysis of mate choice is impressively broad-based and thorough, but he has not been able to show that his results are due to EEA adaptations as opposed to strong cultural uniformities across societies, based on male dominance of modern political and economic hierarchies. Cosmides and Tooby's analysis of cheater detection modules is directly related to a major EvPsych proposition (the modularity of mind), but the only people convinced by their cheater detection argument are themselves and their disciples. In dealing with the theoretical basis of EvPsych, Buller is very successful only one point, albeit a major one: the existence and nature of mental modules. His success is based on a highly cogent critique of the EvPsych position that the human mind is composed of a set of distinct, complexly organized and independent modules, each of which evolved as a solution to a particular evolutionary challenge to our species. The critique, however, is not philosophical but scientific, based on the work of contemporary developmental neurobiologists. This is perhaps the best part of the book. Buller also critiques somewhat effectively the notion that there has been little development in the human gene pool, vis-à-vis mental development, in the past 50,000 years, and hence that we possess "stone-age minds." The arguments Buller uses are plausible, and take the form of noting that genetic change is

much faster in many cases than assumed by the EvPsychers. Nevertheless, this point has not been nailed down by population biologists or quantitative geneticists, as far as I know. Buller also deploys the argument that there was no single EEA, and hence there is no basis for the notion that human nature is homogeneous. This is a correct, but well-known argument. Only the EvPsychers themselves stick adamantly to the Orthodoxy on this point. Doubtless the least effect part of this book is Buller's extended attempt to deny that there is a such thing as "human nature." Borrowing an argument from Hull, he asserts that species are "individuals" rather than "natural kinds" and only "natural kinds" have the sort of being that allows us to discuss their "nature." This, to my mind, is exactly the type of philosophizing that renders the philosophical critique of science so bizarre and ineffective. Ducks have duck nature. It is what we learn when we study the character and behavior of ducks. Mosquitoes similarly have mosquito nature. Humans being are no different. The philosopher is not allowed to define the terms of science in his own bizarre way and then claim to have detected a synthetic a priori inconsistency in the scientific use of the term. In short, I do not believe this book is an important contribution to the development of evolutionary psychology or to the critique of EvPsych, although it is a great introduction to the literature for an interested lay person, since Buller develops his themes carefully and lucidly, never leaving even the most uninstructed reader behind.

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