

**Introduction to the First Issue:  
Why We Need a Journal with the Title  
*Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture***

Joseph Carroll

The greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities. The ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship. . . . Consilience is the key to unification. . . . Its surest test will be its effectiveness in the social sciences and humanities. The strongest appeal of consilience is in the prospect of intellectual adventure and, given even modest success, the value of understanding the human condition with a higher degree of certainty.

Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998, 8-9)

Given the recent convergence of evolutionary psychology and human behavioral ecology-sociobiology, one might expect that the next generation of researchers will rapidly untangle all the major mysteries of human behavior and cognition. Unfortunately, I do not think that this will happen quickly. The main reason is that no branch of the evolutionary social sciences has an adequate understanding of human culture. Culture is a product of evolved cognitive mechanisms, but its existence may significantly alter behavioral patterns from those normally expected (from non-cultural organisms), and its emergence has probably uniquely shaped evolved human cognition and emotion

Kim Hill, "Evolutionary Biology, Cognitive Adaptations, and Human Culture" (2007, 351)

*Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* is designed to make use of an opportunity that has only recently opened up for the social sciences and the humanities. These fields now have before them the prospect of a synthesis that would produce, for the first time, a comprehensive and scientifically robust understanding of the human condition. That synthesis would immensely enrich both the humanities and the social sciences. It would ground the humanities on the bedrock of scientific fact, and it would consummate the explanatory potential in the evolutionary social sciences.

During the past four decades, the social sciences and humanities have moved in nearly opposite directions. Beginning in the late 1970s, many disciplines in the humanities began expanding their scope so as to become "cultural studies," taking in not only some particular subject matter in the arts, philosophy, or history, but also popular culture, ideologies, and features of social identity such as gender, class, and race. While broadening their scope in this way, scholars in the humanities also aggressively championed the idea that culture is the constitutive force in human life. This primary emphasis on culture brought the humanities into alignment with the main idea that had guided the social sciences through most of the twentieth century, but it also separated the humanities from the most important development in contemporary social science. The culturalist revolution in the humanities coincided almost exactly with the sociobiological revolution in the social sciences (Freeman 1983; Fox 1989; Degler 1991; Tooby and Cosmides 1992; Carroll 1995;

Abrams 1997; Pinker 2002). During the same period in which many humanists, like an earlier generation of social scientists, were affirming that culture constitutes all of human life, evolutionary social scientists were demonstrating that the human mind and body have evolved complex adaptive structures—anatomical, physiological, and neurological—that impel and constrain human behavior.

The Darwinian revolution in the social sciences is not complete, but it has arguably now achieved decisive intellectual dominance in the study of human behavior. It has expanded very rapidly and has accumulated interlocking empirical findings about a vast array of human behaviors (Segerstråle 2000; Alcock 2001; Kenrick 2011; Buss 2016). Moreover, it has an unshakeable rationale in the logic of evolutionary biology. All life on earth has evolved, and human life did not somehow slip outside the process, billions of years old, that has produced all complex adaptive structure in living things. One need not be a partisan of evolutionary psychology to envision a future in which the adjective “evolutionary” will no longer be needed as a qualifier for the term “social science” (De Waal 2002). Eventually, and perhaps soon, all social science will be at least implicitly evolutionary.

Over the long run, then, the prospect for a comprehensive evolutionary understanding of the human condition looks very promising. In the short run, there are serious obstacles. To succeed in their effort to gain a comprehensive understanding of the human condition, evolutionists must integrate the logic of evolutionary biology with an understanding of how culture, uniquely for the human species, interacts with biological principles such as natural selection, sexual selection, inclusive fitness, differential parental investment, and life history. Evolutionary social scientists still sometimes speak as if culture is peripheral to the biological imperatives that govern human behavior. Nonetheless, just in the past few years, some of the old blockages seem finally to be breaking up. A few dozen scholars in the humanities have been assimilating ideas, and sometimes methods, from the evolutionary social sciences. The psychology of religion has attracted the attention of numerous evolutionary social scientists. Many evolutionary social scientists now recognize that humans have special cognitive adaptations for social learning, and that these adaptations produce uniquely human powers of cooperation and cumulative innovation (Baumeister 2005; Tomasello et al. 2005; Boyd and Richerson 2007; Hill, Barton, and Hurtado 2009; Whiten and Erdal 2012; Henrich 2016). The most important next step is to expand evolutionary thinking about culture to encompass not just social life and technology but also “imaginative culture”—the whole wide world of shared mental life: tribal myths, jokes, graffiti, superstitions, dancing, songs, stories, poems, plays, acting, mimes, film, opera, baby talk, painting, sculpture, riddles, sit-coms, music, video games, architecture, digital media, cartoons, stand-up comedy, fads, fashions, advertising, internet memes, political iconography, religious iconography, tall tales, legends, historical narratives, sacred books, ceremonies, rituals, and the idioms and styles that give imaginative expression to social identity.

*Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* is founded on the assumption that imaginative culture is an essential part of the human condition. Uncontroversially, one can affirm that imaginative culture reflects human motives, emotions, and forms of social organization, and that it thus offers a rich field of research for evolutionists in the social sciences and humanities. More controversially, but plausibly, one can argue that imaginative culture is animated by passions grounded in biology. At the most controversial level, and the level of deepest significance, some evolutionists argue that imaginative culture is an adaptively functional feature of human behavior and that it interacts causally with evolved dispositions for survival, mating, parenting, maintaining kin relations, and cooperating with non-kin (Pinker 1997, 538-43; Wilson 1998, ch. 10;

Dissanayake 2000; Scalise Sugiyama 2001; Tooby and Cosmides 2001; Salmon and Symons 2004; Scalise Sugiyama 2005; Boyd 2009; Carroll 2012; Gottschall 2012; Saunders 2015). These theorists argue that imaginative culture affects cognitive and emotional organization, influences motives, and thus helps regulate behavior.

Human beings can make conscious decisions about value structures and can subordinate immediate impulses to abstract concepts and symbolic figurations. Perceptions and sensations do not enter the human mind as a series of tightly channeled stimuli that release a narrow repertory of stereotyped behaviors. Human minds contain a complex array of percepts, inferences, causal relations, contingent possibilities, analogies, contrasts, images, metaphors, and hierarchical conceptual structures. Humans reflect on their own mental life, imagine other minds, and imagine themselves reflected in the minds of others. They locate present reality within memories of the past and anticipations of the future. They create their own personal life stories and situate those stories within the legends and myths of their social groups. They create elaborate conceptions of the natural order, often populate that order with supernatural agents and spiritual forces, and picture their own actions and the actions of others within that order. In all these ways, humans live in imaginative virtual worlds. All the multifarious forms of such worlds, interacting with evolved dispositions, are the subject matter of this new journal.

The evolutionary social sciences and evolutionary humanities are necessarily synthetic and interdisciplinary. Evolutionists typically need to assimilate information from evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, primatology, anthropological research on hunter-gatherers, genetics, human life history theory, cognitive and affective neuroscience, linguistics, archeology, game theory, developmental psychology, social psychology, the psychology of mate selection, and still other fields (Dunbar and Barrett 2007; Gangestad and Simpson 2007; Buss 2016). Evolutionary humanists have to assimilate that same information and also develop expertise in specific historical periods and specific subject areas such as art, literature, religion, history, music, or philosophy. Evolutionary historians with an ambitious scope in political, economic, or intellectual history face special challenges in integrating universal principles of biology with historically contingent features of institutions and civilizations (Turchin 2006; Clark 2007; Smail 2008; Cochran and Harpending 2009; Fukuyama 2011; Pinker 2011; Fukuyama 2014; Wade 2014; Carroll 2015; Turchin 2015).

Evolutionary studies in imaginative culture is still establishing itself as a distinct field. This new journal is designed to provide a nexus for research in that field—to help scholars stay informed about the newest thinking in evolutionary cultural theory, to illuminate connections between findings in seemingly disparate disciplines, to help establish a body of common knowledge, and to set standards for informed and theoretically competent commentary.

The Darwinian revolution that has taken place in the social sciences should ultimately have a constructive effect on the humanities. So long as social scientists ascribed causal power to social and cultural forces alone, humanists could comfortably ignore biology. The larger intellectual context within which the humanities operate has now fundamentally changed. Humanist disciplines that ignore biology are increasingly isolated from other research fields and from the interests of generally educated readers. Institutional inertia within the humanities is in painful tension with the creative energy of intellectual life outside the humanities. Humanists have the option of releasing that tension by absorbing creative energy from the social sciences, and by contributing their own creative energy to the common enterprise. Already, evolutionary scholars and scientists who focus on humanistic subjects have produced a substantial body of work, much

of it good, some of it excellent. That kind of work points a way toward the future. This journal is meant to be an avenue into that future.

## References

- Abrams, M. H. 1997. "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995." *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 126 (1): 105-31.
- Alcock, John. 2001. *The triumph of sociobiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baumeister, Roy F. 2005. *The cultural animal: Human nature, meaning, and social life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boyd, Brian. 2009. *On the origin of stories: Evolution, cognition, and fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boyd, Robert, and Peter J. Richerson. 2007. "Cultural adaptation and maladaptation: Of kayaks and commissars." In *The evolution of mind: Fundamental questions and controversies*, edited by Steven W. Gangestad and Jeffry A. Simpson, 327-31. New York: Guilford.
- Buss, David M. 2016. *The handbook of evolutionary psychology*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Carroll, Joseph. 1995. *Evolution and literary theory*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- . 2012. "The adaptive function of the arts: Alternative evolutionary hypotheses." In *Telling stories / Geschichten erzählen: Literature and evolution / Literatur und Evolution*, edited by Carsten Gansel and Dirk Vanderbeke, 50-63. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- . 2015. "Evolutionary social theory: The current state of knowledge." *Style* 49 (4): 512-41. doi: 10.5325/style.49.4.0512.
- Clark, Gregory. 2007. *A farewell to alms: A brief economic history of the world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cochran, Gregory, and Henry Harpending. 2009. *The 10,000 year explosion: How civilization accelerated human evolution*. New York: Basic Books.
- De Waal, Frans BM. 2002. "Evolutionary psychology: The wheat and the chaff." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11 (6): 187-91.
- Degler, Carl N. 1991. *In search of human nature: The decline and revival of Darwinism in American social thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dissanayake, Ellen. 2000. *Art and intimacy: How the arts began*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Dunbar, R. I. M., and Louise Barrett, eds. 2007. *Oxford handbook of evolutionary psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fox, Robin. 1989. *The search for society: Quest for a biosocial science and morality*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Freeman, Derek. 1983. *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2011. *The origins of political order: From prehuman times to the French Revolution*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2014. *Political order and political decay: From the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gangestad, Steven W., and Jeffry A. Simpson, eds. 2007. *The evolution of mind: Fundamental questions and controversies*. New York: Guilford.

- Gottschall, Jonathan. 2012. *The storytelling animal: How stories make us human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Henrich, Joseph 2016. *The secret of our success: How culture is driving human evolution, domesticating our species, and making us smarter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hill, Kim. 2007. "Evolutionary biology, cognitive adaptations, and human culture." In *The evolution of mind: Fundamental questions and controversies.*, edited by Steven W. Gangestad and Jeffry A. Simpson, 348-56. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hill, Kim, Michael Barton, and A. Magdalena Hurtado. 2009. "The emergence of human uniqueness: characters underlying behavioral modernity." *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews* 18 (5): 187-200.
- Kenrick, Douglas T. 2011. *Sex, murder, and the meaning of life: A psychologist investigates how evolution, cognition, and complexity are revolutionizing our view of human nature*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pinker, Steven. 1997. *How the mind works*. New York: Norton.
- . 2002. *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York: Viking.
- . 2011. *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Viking.
- Salmon, Catherine, and Don Symons. 2004. "Slash fiction and human mating psychology." *Journal of Sex Research* 41 (1): 94-100. doi: 10.1080/00224490409552217.
- Saunders, Judith P. 2015. "Darwinian literary analysis of sexuality." In *The Evolution of Sexuality*, edited by Todd K. Shackelford and Randal D. Hansen, 29-55. New York: Springer.
- Scalise Sugiyama, Michelle. 2001. "Narrative theory and function: Why evolution matters." *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2): 233-50.
- . 2005. "Reverse-engineering narrative: Evidence of special design." In *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, 177-96. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Segerstråle, Ullica Christina Olofsdotter. 2000. *Defenders of the truth: The battle for science in the sociobiology debate and beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smail, Daniel Lord. 2008. *On deep history and the brain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tomasello, M., M. Carpenter, J. Call, T. Behne, and H. Moll. 2005. "Understanding and sharing intentions: The origins of cultural cognition." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28 (5): 675-91.
- Tooby, John, and Leda Cosmides. 1992. "The psychological foundations of culture." In *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture.*, edited by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, 19-136. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. "Does beauty build adapted minds? Toward an evolutionary theory of aesthetics, fiction, and the arts." *SubStance* 30 (1): 6-27.
- Turchin, Peter. 2006. *War and peace and war: The life cycles of imperial nations*. New York: Pi.
- . 2015. *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 years of war made humans the greatest cooperators on earth*. Chaplin, CT: Beresta.
- Wade, Nicholas. 2014. *A troublesome inheritance: Genes, race, and human history*. New York: Penguin.
- Whiten, A., and D. Erdal. 2012. "The human socio-cognitive niche and its evolutionary origins." *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences* 367 (1599): 2119-29. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2012.0114.
- Wilson, Edward O. 1998. *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York: Knopf.

