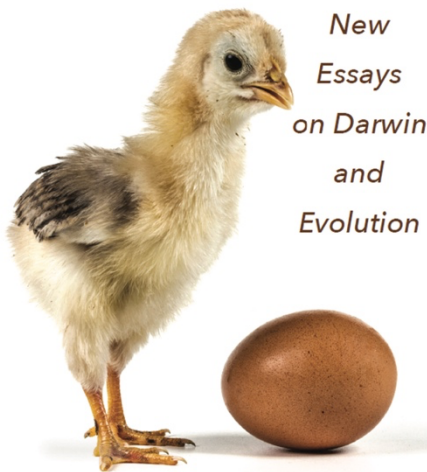


Beyond Primates: New Essays on Darwin and Evolution

By Rebecca Coffey

Discussion Guide

Beyond Primates



By Rebecca Coffey

1. *Beyond Primates* repeatedly cites Charles Darwin's theories of evolution. Do you ever think of Darwin or evolutionary theory when, for example, you see how people in their 20s or 30s behave when they're dating?

2. Have you ever seen a woman display the head, eye, and hand movements described by Austrian ethologist Irene Eibl-Eibesfeldt and featured in *Beyond Primates* in the chapter, "Humans and Animals Share Non-Verbal Expressions and Gestures?"

Eibl-Eibesfeldt identified what he thought was a curious, Genetically encoded flirtation gesture of young women. Around the world, in first world cultures as well as in pre-industrial and relatively isolated ones, they follow a smile with a lift of the eyebrows and an opening of the eyes. Next, the eyelids drop, and then the head tilts to the side and away. Eibl-Eibesfeldt filmed the sequence secretly again and again as he traveled the world.

[Page 32.]

If you think you've never seen this, have you ever seen a woman bat her eyes at a man? Have you ever seen Betty Boop do it in a cartoon from the 1930s? (She did, sometimes.) Isn't it amazing to imagine a mud turtle or albatross doing what Eibl-Eibesfeldt described?

3. Thinking about natural selection, in which animals rely on sometimes baroque ornamentation to select a mate: Do humans have any such ornamentation on their bodies? Could it be that we've evolved to purchase ornamentation at clothing stores and cosmetics counters?
4. The "look" of the ideal woman and the ideal young man reflects the values and needs of specific cultures. Some men prefer rail-thin women. For other men, curvier women like Kim Kardashian are their objects of desire. Darwin suggested that, while mating and sex are fun, whether we know it or not, at least when we're of procreating age we are all hoping to mate productively. If he was right, then (at least in theory) young men would be looking for women who are sturdy breeders. What might that look like? Do you know of any cultures in which that look is favored above all others?

5. Darwin suggested that evolution can happen with gross and subtle physical changes, with microbiological and chemical changes, and with behavioral changes. It's easy to imagine how physical, microbiological, and chemical changes could be encoded genetically. But how about behavioral changes?
6. Many people think evolution and religion are at odds with each other. Do you think that's true?
7. **Male bower birds** have extraordinary courting behaviors. They build bowers (nests) and then decorate them with stones, feathers, plastics, ribbons, and bling to entice a female. What home-building behaviors do male humans have that seem to serve the same survival function that bower-building serves for bower birds?
8. Across species, mating behaviors are largely binary, which is to say males behave like males while females behave like females. In the modern world, this isn't always true for humans. What do you think Darwin might say about this? Would he think it bodes well for the survival of the human species or would he think it immaterial now that we've evolved as far as we have?
9. At least in part, courtly behavior is codified, exaggerated expressions of empathy. Some **animals are empathetic** to others of their species. Rats, for example, will work to free companions that are restrained inside a clear tube. How do you think empathy might have evolved in various species, and do you think it plays a probable role in mating?
10. **Even bacteria are altruistic** — which is to say that there is a courtliness about them. Do you think that facts like these bolster Darwin's views about behavioral adaptation that serve evolution?