

Office: Maloney Hall, Room 331
Phone: 552-3677
Email: donald.cox@bc.edu
Office Hours: T-Th, 3:00 – 4:00 pm and by appointment

Standard economics treats preferences as given, but what if they have instead been shaped by natural selection? This concept opens up a variety of questions. Why do men tend to make riskier investments than women? Why are people impatient? What explains novelty seeking, habits, and addictions? Where does nepotism come from? We will apply evolutionary thought to such diverse topics as: violence; adolescent risk taking; sexual behavior; mating preferences; marriage and divorce; rearing and investing in children; extended families; trade and specialization; cooperation and conflict; cults and gangs; religion; interactions between genetic and cultural forces; social learning, including fads, fashion and imitative and herd behavior; behavioral finance; concerns for relative status; civic life; warfare and aggression; political revolutions and the psychology of cooperation, guilt, shame, spite and revenge.

Book: *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*, paperback reprint edition, by Robert Wright (Vintage Books, 1995).

Prerequisites: Microeconomic Theory and Econometrics.

Grading: The course grade is based on the following:

Class participation	10 percent
Assignments (5)	10 percent
Midterm (November 1, in class)	20 percent
Research paper (due December 3, 10:30 a.m.)	30 percent
Final exam (December 13, 9:00 a.m.)	30 percent

Reading: Unlike most economics texts, the required book contains mostly verbal arguments rather than equations and graphs. Most of the articles have the same style, though a few contain advanced technical material.

Class meetings: **Classes will start right on time.** Students should arrive at least 3 minutes early so we can begin (and end) on time.

Learning goals: Understanding evolutionary theory; creative problem solving; using large household survey data; applying econometrics in research; writing; presenting.

Topics and Readings

Aug 28-30 Genes and Evolution

Reading: Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, chapter 2. *This is a short chapter that contains the ideas discussed in class. You should read through it right away, to make sure you understand the “replicator” principle.*

Start *The Moral Animal*.

Sept 4-6 Evolutionary Psychology

Reading: Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal*. *This book is best read right at the beginning, pretty much all at once. It provides the foundation for the evolutionary theory that we will refer to throughout the course. The use of Darwin’s life as a case study is sort of clever but you can skim those chapters.*

Sept 11-13 Mating

Reading: *These papers address gender differences in preferences for a mate. Such preferences can have economic implications—they might even explain China’s savings glut.*

David Buss. 1989. “Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Cultures.” *Article summary*.

Russell Clark and Elaine Hatfield. 1989. “Gender Differences in Receptivity to Sexual Offers.” *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*.

Sept 18-20 Parents and Offspring

Reading: *Which family members can you count on the most to help you? Do you care as much about your grandparents as they do about you?*

Donald Cox. 2007. “Biological Basics and the Economics of the Family.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.

Sept 25-27 Family Transfers

Reading: *This section uses the material from The Moral Animal, chapter 7, plus the article below. The rule for any article marked with the (*) is to read the words and skip the equations.*

*Donald Cox, Bruce Hansen and Emmanuel Jimenez. 2004. "How Responsive are Private Transfers to Income? Evidence from a Laissez-faire Economy." *Journal of Public Economics*. Possible explanations for why family members help each other, plus implications for government transfer programs.

Oct 2-4 Geography and History

Reading: *Biological forces act in concert with environmental influences; they can't be analyzed in a vacuum.*

William H. McNeill. 1997. "History Upside Down." *New York Review of Books*. (A review of *Guns, Germs and Steel*).

Jeffrey D. Sachs, Andrew D. Mellinger and John L. Gallup. 2001. "The Geography of Poverty and Wealth." *Scientific American*.

Oct 11-16 Cooperation and Conflict among Nonrelatives

VI. *Ways that Non-relatives Cooperate and Ways They Fight*

Reading: *Can having a hair-trigger temper actually facilitate rather than discourage trade? How about a guilty conscience? The term "emotion" often implies being out of control and irrational. But maybe emotions complement rather than work against our rational side.*

Michael Waldman. 1990. Review of *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions*, by Robert Frank.

Oct 11-16 Language and Social Capital

Reading: *How many people can you keep track of? Does social media make a difference?*

*Edward P. Lazear. 1999. "Culture and Language." *Journal of Political Economy*. *When to assimilate and when not to.*

Maria Konnikova. 2014. "The Limits of Friendship." *The New Yorker*. *About Robin Dunbar and his famous "Dunbar number."*

Oct 18-23 Clubs, Cults and Gangs

Reading: *What do Hare Krishnas, academic economists, Hell's Angels, and Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Jews all have in common? Perhaps more than you might have guessed.*

Nicholas Lemann. 2010. "Terrorism Studies: Social scientists do counterinsurgency."
The New Yorker.

Nov 6 Fads, Fashion and Conformity

Reading: *How does "fake news" happen? What are the economic consequences of conformity?*

*Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch. 1998. "Learning from the Behavior of Others: Conformity, Fads, and Informational Cascades." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. *An analysis of how ideas can spread by imitative behavior.*

George A. Akerlof, "Social Distance and Social Decisions." 1997. *Econometrica*. *The economic implications of wanting to be close to your neighborhood friends.*

Robinson Meyer. 2018. "The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News." *Atlantic*.

Nov 13 Revolutions

Reading: *Why did pedophilia in the Catholic Church go unreported for so long, and also why the scandal broke so suddenly? (The same thing's happened with the #MeToo movement.) And what does these events have in common with political revolutions?*

Timur Kuran. 1991. "The East European Revolution of 1989: Is it Surprising that We Were Surprised?" *American Economic Review*.

Nov 15 Status

Reading: *A short item having to do with status and frames of reference.*

Robert H. Frank. 2000. "Why Living in a Rich Society Makes Us Feel Poor." *New York Times Magazine*. *How happy you are probably depends on more than just goods and services. It also might depend on how you are doing relative to others or relative to how you were doing before.*

Nov 20 Habits

Reading: *Why the past matters for today's consumption.*

Becker, Gary S. 1992. "Habits, Addictions and Traditions." *Kyklos*.

Nov 27 **Impatience**

Reading: *Why do people procrastinate? Is it because of a quirk in their utility functions, or because of their upbringing?*

James Surowiecki. 2010. "Later: What does procrastination tell us about ourselves?"
The New Yorker.

Nov 29 **Group Selection**

Reading: *How 'groupish' are humans?*

Jonathan Haidt. 2012. "Why Are We So Groupish?" Chapter 9 of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

Assignments/Research Paper**Exams**

August	28		
August	30		
September	4	Form your group	
September	6		
September	11		
September	13	Submit topic	
September	18		
September	20		
September	25	Assignment #1	
September	27		
October	2		
October	4		
October	11	Assignment #2	
October	16		
October	18		
October	23		
October	25	Assignment #3	
October	30		Review
November	1		Midterm
November	6		
November	8	Assignment #4	
November	13		
November	15		
November	20		
November	27	Assignment #5	
November	29		
December	1		
December	3	Paper due	
December	13		Final Exam