How Biology Shapes Philosophy

How Biology Shapes Philosophy is a seminal contribution to the emerging field of biophilosophy. It brings together work by philosophers who draw on biology to address traditional and not-so-traditional philosophical questions and concerns. Thirteen essays by leading figures in the field explore the biological dimensions of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, gender, semantics, rationality, representation, and consciousness, as well as the misappropriation of biology by philosophers, allowing readers to interrogate critically the relevance of biology for philosophy. Both rigorous and accessible, the essays illuminate philosophy and help us to acquire a deeper understanding of the human condition. This volume will be of interest to philosophers, biologists, social scientists, and other readers with an interest in bringing science and the humanities together.

David Livingstone Smith is Professor of Philosophy at the University of New England. His most recent book is Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave and Exterminate Others (2011).
For Maxwell MacFarland Smith
Welcome to the biosphere!
He who understands baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.

– Charles Darwin
Contents

List of Figures ................................................................. ix
List of Contributors .......................................................... x
Acknowledgments .............................................................. xiii

Introduction: Biophilosophy .................................................. 1
DAVID LIVINGSTONE SMITH

1 Darwin and the Overdue Demise of Essentialism ............. 9
DANIEL C. DENNETT

2 Darwinism as Philosophy: Can the Universal Acid Be Contained? .......... 23
ALEXANDER ROSENBERG

3 Animal Evolution and the Origins of Experience .......... 51
PETER GODFREY-SMITH

4 Neurophilosophy ............................................................. 72
PATRICIA CHURCHLAND

5 Teleosemantics ............................................................... 95
DAVID PAPINEAU

6 The Methodological Argument for Informational Teleosemantics ............. 121
KAREN NEANDER

7 Nature’s Purposes and Mine .......................................... 141
RONALD DE SOUSA

8 Biology and the Theory of Rationality ......................... 161
SAMIR OKASHA

9 Evolution and Ethical Life .............................................. 184
PHILIP KITCHER

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Human Nature</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edouard Machery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A Postgenomic Perspective on Sex and Gender</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Dupré</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Biophilosophy of Race</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luc Faucher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>How Philosophers “Learn” from Biology – Reductionist and Antireductionist “Lessons”</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard N. Boyd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References: 302

Index: 342
Figures

1 A representation of some early branchings in the animal part of the tree of life with dates (in millions of years, not to scale) tentatively associated with some events. Names along the top designate some of the main groups within animals. The italicized and capitalized labels show the initial appearance of broad kinds of organisms important to this chapter. First is the evolution of metazoa, or animals; then neuralia, animals with nervous systems (or perhaps a subset of these animals [see the main text]); then bilaterians, animals with bilaterally symmetrical bodies, including ourselves.

2 Further events in animal evolution. Many groups are not included. The lower shaded band marks the Ediacaran (E), and the upper band marks the Cambrian (C). Genetic evidence suggests that various familiar animal groups branched off from each other in the Ediacaran, though we have little fossil record of them there.

3 Part of the animal branch of the tree of life, with the shading within branches on the left showing the location of high levels of sensorimotor and cognitive complexity within some groups in those lineages. (Other groups are omitted to simplify the figure.) The brackets mark the Ediacaran (E) and the Cambrian (C).
Contributors

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Acknowledgments

This volume has been a long time coming. As a child growing up in southwest Florida, I was passionately interested in the local fauna and wanted nothing more than to become a herpetologist until life diverted me along a different pathway. Many years further down the road, I stumbled into philosophy after a previous career as a psychotherapist. Jim Hopkins, my Doktorvater at Kings College London, rekindled my biological interests by introducing me to the work of Ruth Garratt Millikan. I owe Jim a huge debt of gratitude both for introducing me to philosophy and (most pertinently here) for pointing me in such a richly rewarding philosophical direction. Ruth initially signed on to contribute a chapter but sadly had to withdraw for reasons of ill health. Nonetheless, her intellectual fingerprints are all over this book. In fact, the book’s subtitle, New Foundations for Naturalism, is intended as a homage to her groundbreaking 1984 volume, Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism. Thank you, Ruth. Your work is a gift that keeps on giving.

Profound thanks are due to the stellar band of philosophers who took time off from their busy professional lives to contribute original chapters on an astonishingly broad range of topics. Dan, Alex, Peter, Pat, David, Karen, Ronnie, Samir, Philip, Edouard, John, Luc, and Dick – I hope that you are all as delighted by the result of our collective efforts as I am. Thank you all for coming through with your chapters with only minimal badgering from me.

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Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Subrena Smith, with whom I have had literally hundreds of conversations about the relation between biology and philosophy. Our ongoing marriage of minds sparked the conception of this book and was crucial for bringing it to fruition. Thank you, Subrena, for your clarity, patience, commitment, and intellectual tenacity. I am unbelievably fortunate to have you in my life.