



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*On the Nature of Human Plasticity.* by Richard M. Lerner  
Martin Daly

*The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 61, No. 1. (Mar., 1986), pp. 154-155.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-5770%28198603%2961%3A1%3C154%3AOTNOHP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

*The Quarterly Review of Biology* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

ligion has always claimed — to higher forms. . .” (p. 339).

Second, the author offers no novel reason for drawing support for humanism from evolution. She points out, for example, that seeing human nature as a determinant of culture vitiates extreme forms of cultural determinism with their implications of human helplessness (e.g., Leslie White’s views), and that the indeterminate nature of future evolution (both biological and cultural) supports in some ways a view similar to the traditional notion of free will. None of the arguments, however, are new, nor are they presented especially effectively.

Third, the book skirts the difficult issues. For example, current evolutionary theory sees the interests of all individuals as fundamentally in conflict (genetically identical individuals aside). Unless one believes that group selection at the species level overwhelms selection at the individual level, it is hard to accept as unproblematic the view that *we* are responsible for human destiny.

WILLIAM IRONS, *Anthropology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

TRIUMPH OF THE INTELLIGENT: THE CREATION OF *Homo sapiens sapiens*. *The Evolution of Human Intelligence, Volume 2*.

By Seymour W. Itzkoff. *Paideia, Ashfield (Massachusetts)*. \$16.00. 210 p. + 7 pls.; ill.; index. 1985.

This is Volume 2 of an intended four-volume opus, “The Evolution of Human Intelligence.” According to the dust jacket, the author is a professional musician and sometime philosopher. Human evolution, it seems, is a topic open to all.

How can one convey in a brief review the sustained dreadfulness of this ill-informed, incoherent book? Its style is execrable, its message garbled:

The big successful guys fall hard. Life has had a succession of them. Even the vaunted redwoods, of an incredibly ancient floral line, have come a cropper to the ultimate enemy, man. Over the eons it has paid *not* to be too big a winner; better just hang on, for with each millenium comes another round of opportunity. Nature may offer the big break (p. 28).

It is vacuous:

250,000 years ago, *Homo erectus* was straining at the bit, roaming, struggling, surviving. Perhaps he was experiencing in these last, anxious, pregnant centuries the thumping

birth pangs of his successors’ impatience to take up the challenge” (p. 102).

It is racist:

Examples of failed paedomorphosis can be found in the platypus (monotremes) and even in dwarfed humans, especially the highly paedomorphized Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert (p. 109).

That such a book can be written (and published) is testimony to the continuing scandal of biological illiteracy.

MARTIN DALY, *Psychology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*

ON THE NATURE OF HUMAN PLASTICITY.

By Richard M. Lerner. *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York*. \$49.50. xiv + 208 p.; ill.; author and subject indexes. 1984.

This book by a developmental psychologist reviews a wide range of material to support a “life-span perspective.” The essence of this view is apparently that organismic development can be influenced throughout life by any number of “interventions,” and that the causal webs linking organism and environment are complex. It is repeatedly implied that most students of development are nasty “determinists” who doubt these propositions. (S. J. Gould is one of Lerner’s heroes, T. C. Schneirla another.) As an example of the bad old way of thinking, Lerner quotes pediatricians Klaus and Kennell: “Early events have long-lasting effects. Anxieties a mother has about her baby in the first few days after birth, even about a problem that is easily resolved, may affect her relationship with the child long afterward” (p. 14). I was curious to see how Lerner would debunk this seemingly unexceptionable claim. Having finished his book, I still am.

Life-span developmentalists, like all good scientists, believe in “causality.” Determinists, by contrast, believe in “constraints,” which is very pessimistic. Lerner is nothing if not optimistic. He reviews molecular biology and recombinant DNA technology (from “News & Views” pieces in *Science* prior to 1981) to arrive at a cheery prediction of imminent “gene therapy.” He reviews the neurosciences (from the same source), happily looking forward to “brain transplants” and new chemical treatments to control stress. Every chapter contains enthusiastic assertions about opportunities for “interventions” that will “enhance human development,” but nowhere is there a critical look at the question of what constitutes “enhancement.” Lerner’s upbeat outlook seems to be untouched by

the thought that interests may conflict so that interventions that appeal to the powerful will not necessarily be benevolent.

In his penultimate chapter, Lerner proposes that positive developmental outcomes "are most likely when a person's physical and behavioral characteristics are consonant with the demands of the physical and social developmental context" (p. 150). "Children whose characteristics (e.g., in terms of physical attractiveness, behavioral style, or temperament) are consonant with contextual pressures (for example, attitudes, values, or expectations of their parents, peers, or teachers) will evoke positive reactions in these others and receive favorable feedback" (p. 151). "If a person's characteristics match (or 'fit') the demands of a particular setting, adaptive outcomes in that setting will accrue. Those people whose characteristics match most of their contexts should receive supportive or positive feedback and should show evidence of the most adaptive behavioral development. In turn, of course, mismatched people, whose characteristics are incongruent with one or more contexts, should experience maladaptive developmental outcomes" (p. 152). Accordingly, our objective must be "interventions aimed at enhancing goodness of fit" (p. 158). It is ironic that this value-laden book, so opposed to "determinism" and in favor of "human potential," should espouse a chillingly totalitarian conception of healthy development.

MARTIN DALY, *Psychology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*

#### HUMAN NATURE: DARWIN'S VIEW.

By Alexander Alland, Jr. Columbia University Press, New York. \$25.00. xi + 242 p. [All selections in this book are taken from the second, revised, John Murray editions.] 1985.

This is a collection of excerpts from *Journal of Researches*, *The Descent of Man*, and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, selected to document Darwin's position on race, the nature-vs.-nurture problem, and related issues. In the 24-page Introduction the compiler gives his own thoughtful interpretation of Darwin's views.

GEORGE C. WILLIAMS, *Ecology & Evolution, State University of New York, Stony Brook, New York*

#### BIOLOGY OF MENOPAUSE. *The Causes and Consequences of Ovarian Ageing.*

By R. G. Gosden. Academic Press, London and Orlando (Florida). \$37.50. xv + 188 p.; ill.; index. 1985.

The menopause is a peculiarly human phenome-

non, perhaps a consequence of artificially induced longevity. Few other mammals and no primates are known to experience ovarian failure in mid-life, as do women. For the rest, ovarian activity in some form or other persists into old age.

The cessation of menses is a clear event. Less clear are the reasons for eventual menstrual failure and for the hormonal changes which precede it during the menopausal transition. There seems little doubt that it is over-simplistic to ascribe these changes solely to ovarian failure. Studies of ovarian ageing in the human are beset by practical difficulties, not the least being the long reproductive life of women and the unpredictable appearance first of irregular menstrual cyclicity at the start of the menopausal transition and then of menstrual failure. Ethical considerations impede experimentation.

In this book R. G. Gosden provides an introduction to the subject which is useful and will be of particular interest to scientists. There is excellent basic information on the complex relationships between the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland and follicular development in the normal ovary, with a sufficient indication of the complexities to ensure clarity but not so many as to confuse. Age-related changes are discussed in relation to follicular dynamics, fertility, menstrual cyclicity and hormone secretion. The paucity of much of the human data is emphasized by review sections on rodents, Gosden's particular area of expertise. Despite his reservations about the relevance of these findings for human studies, they give valuable pointers to the processes which may be occurring in women. There are in addition brief sections on medical problems associated with the menopause and on the arguments for and against hormone replacement therapy.

In summary, although much has been written about the mechanism of ovarian ageing in women, little is known with any certainty. If I have a reservation about Gosden's book it is that he is sometimes insufficiently critical about fundamental gaps in our knowledge. I give two simple examples. For the first, establishing the age of the menopause in a population is difficult, partly because women do not know that it has occurred until long after the event and partly because the memory of past events is notoriously unreliable. We needed Gosden to state clearly the minimum criteria consistent with a valid estimate of menopausal age and to comment critically on the reports to which he refers. For the second example, follicle counts in the human ovary are so laborious they are rarely undertaken; they are basic, however, to any discussion of the effect of age on ovarian function. We