The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution.


In this engaging and carefully argued account, philosopher Elisabeth Lloyd guides her readers through one of the most fascinating controversies in evolutionary theory. The interest in evolutionary accounts of female orgasm goes back to the early sex research of Alfred Kinsey and has continued into the present through the work of evolutionary biologists, anthropologists, sociobiologists, and sex researchers. Given the broad range of disciplines and approaches involved, one might be led to think that this issue has been well and carefully treated; au contraire argues Lloyd.

In this book, the author follows up on an argument she began making nearly 20 years ago, which was subsequently championed by Stephen Jay Gould. Essentially, consistent with the earlier work of Donald Symons, Lloyd argued that the most well-supported evolutionary explanation of female orgasm was the byproduct account. In the intervening decades, she has exhaustively reevaluated the claims made in support of various adaptationist accounts of the evolution of female orgasm and found them to be exceedingly problematic. The difficulties plaguing some of the earlier accounts include ignored evidence, androcentric bias, and flawed reasoning. Some readers might be inclined to think that these kinds of errors have been relegated to a former era and, therefore, Lloyd’s criticisms are outdated. The penultimate chapter on sperm competition accounts developed in the mid-1990s puts this criticism to rest. The author exposes some deeply troubling shortcomings in this contemporary hypothesis. According to Lloyd’s analysis, Baker and Bellis (authors of the sperm competition account) fail to demonstrate the three necessary components of their hypothesis. First, they fail to show that female orgasm is tied to uterine upsuck; second, they provide insufficient evidence to demonstrate that uterine upsuck is tied to increased fertility; and, finally, they make no connection between increased fertility and reproductive success. The fact that this work is commonly cited in support of evolutionary explanations of female orgasm as an adaptation bespeaks the need for Lloyd’s careful treatment.

The final chapter of the book provides an excellent synopsis of the challenges presented to evolutionary biologists when developing hypotheses for complicated phenomena. The author is at her best as she suggests where the problems lie and how to address them. Here she outlines some of the frequently reoccurring evidentiary problems with evolutionary accounts of female orgasm: she describes four background assumptions (adaptationism, androcentrism, procreative focus, and human uniqueness) that have, through tacit acceptance, had a negative influence on the development of a robust evolutionary account. Finally, Lloyd focuses on the conceptual commitments of evolutionary theorists involved in the debate. Here she distinguishes between various types of adaptationism and the ways in which these commitments shape a particular theorist’s work. I found this section to be wonderfully useful in explaining the persistence of these debates.

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Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution.


The central thesis of this book is that socially transmitted culture is crucial for a full understanding of human behavior, while at the same time human culture has a biological basis and can be considered an evolutionary system in its own right. This pluralistic approach, emphasizing both cultural