

DIALOGUES

## How To Deal With Fringe Academics

BY AUTHORS

FEB 02, 2000 • 9:30 PM

*Judith Shulevitz is the New York editor of **Slate** and writes the “[Culturebox](#)” column. John Tooby is a professor of anthropology and co-director of the Center for Evolutionary Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. **Slate** has invited them to discuss the academic fringe in general and Kevin MacDonald in particular. Alex Star, the editor of [Lingua Franca](#), is moderating. Click [here](#) to read his introduction and recap of the brouhaha over MacDonald.*

Dear Judith and Alex,

For reasons that will become clear, I’ve spent the last week, midnight to 6 a.m., searching through Web sites devoted to the Holocaust (and its denial), a sleepless, shifting mosaic of photographs, documents, testimony:

*Twenty-foot layers of human ash—shrunk heads—the industrial use of victims’ hair—piles of shoes, eyeglasses, gold teeth, bodies burned, bodies unburned—heaps of artificial limbs destined for new owners—medical experiments—the “technical achievement” of Auschwitz crematoria that could be run continuously—the voices of death camp survivors whose forms can hardly be told from the corpses—and the other voices, the voices of the officials speaking through surviving documents: “97,000 were processed using three vans, without any faults occurring in the vehicles. ... It seems that these lamps are hardly ever turned on, so the users have suggested that they could be done away with. Experience shows, however, that when the back door is closed and it gets dark inside, the load pushes hard against the door. ... This hampers the locking of the door. It has also been noticed that the noise provoked by the locking of the door is linked to the fear aroused by the darkness.”*

However difficult to read, there has perhaps never been more evidence about any set of interrelated historical events than about the Holocaust. Yet thanks to the forum provided by British libel law, David Irving now not only gets to sue scholars like Deborah Lipstadt who criticize him but he also makes headlines across the world in what the *Guardian* has called “the most far-reaching court case about the Holocaust since the execution of Adolf

Eichmann.” “Trains to the camps were ‘well provisioned,’ ” runs one. “Gas chambers ‘that never were,’ ” reads another. Irving is also a humorist, for example making scatological acronyms from “Auschwitz survivors, survivors of the Holocaust and other liars.” In a world where most skim headlines and know little history, Irving has raised doubts in the most public possible way.

In this trial, Kevin MacDonald, “a Judaism authority” according to the *Guardian*, or “an evolutionary psychologist” according to the two of you, has volunteered to testify on behalf of Irving. His theory is developed in elaborate detail in three volumes: that Jews are joined in a 2,000-year-old “” to spread their genes and to acquire wealth at the expense of Gentiles, as well as to eugenically breed themselves for competitive traits such as intelligence and ambition. According to MacDonald, anti-Semitism is a rational response by others to this Jewish genetic and project.

Judith, you raise the question, how are we to fight bad ideas? Choices include denouncing them (as immoral), showing them to be untrue, or ignoring them. European nations, despite the rumor that the Enlightenment originated there, presently provide us with other: arresting, fining, imprisoning—to which far less liberal societies and enterprising individuals add assaulting and murdering.

The first three are consistent with respect for human rights. These options each have different consequences and pitfalls, subtle and obvious, and—what is less appreciated—they are nearly mutually exclusive. Each is an act of social construction, shaping its share of the world, helping to create the social realities that we all have to live with and within. Over the past 30 years, sometimes I have chosen one, sometimes another, never with an easy heart, and never confident that I or others have made the right choice. Judith, you seem so much more confident than I do, not only about what you should do, but about what the rest of us should do. So, I will not be arguing that your choice was wrong—only that it has pitfalls.

In choosing moral denunciation, what have you done? Many things that MacDonald has not been able to do for himself. Through *Slate*, one of the Web’s premier news gateways, you have made the obscure and fringe famous and well-indexed. You have constructed him as the key figure in a scandal or affair—the kind of thing people enjoy reading about. You have publicized his theories, published statements from him and supporters, and become the major Web site to provide a link to his own Web page, so that the Web-enabled from Kabul to Kiev to Idaho to Gaza, looking for a theoretician for their views, can click on this new discovery. You did this without providing readers with a comparable place to click on to find a critical evaluation of MacDonald’s views. And while this may be unfair to you, to my eye, in order to make the “facts” build into more of a story, there has been a tendency at various

journalistic choice points for you to glamorize his professional identity and affiliations in a series of questionable or even fallacious characterizations.

This begins even in the title of your first article, “Evolutionary Psychology’s Anti-Semite.” Kevin MacDonald is not remotely an evolutionary psychologist, any more than B.F. Skinner was a Freudian psychoanalyst, or *Social Text* the leading physics journal of our time. With greater accuracy, as we’ll see tomorrow, the headline might have been *Richard Lewontin’s Anti-Semite*, or many other absurd choices. I and Leda Cosmides, in an act of social construction more than two decades ago, coined the term *evolutionary psychology*. We did this to distinguish a distinct set of factual claims and theoretical positions that several like-minded scholars were converging on from a much larger and more heterogeneous sea of opinions about the relationship between evolution and human behavior. Others, in standard references and elsewhere, subsequently ratified our definition, whether they agreed with the viewpoint or not. In contrast, the theoretical viewpoint expressed in MacDonald’s books stands in the most extreme contradiction to nearly every contentful core claim of evolutionary psychology. MacDonald himself does not even list the term in the index of any of his books. While he may now be calling himself an evolutionary psychologist, this is what journalism—investigative or not—is for: not to take people’s claims about themselves at face value. If you don’t believe him about the nature of Judaism, why believe him in?

My favored choice is using logic and evidence to winnow errors—an approach that carries its own moral world. (Or more accurately, ignoring errors until they begin to play a significant role in a field or in public life, and then exposing the fallacies.)

In this world, the statement that something is immoral is entirely worthless, as is the claim that it is untrue—unless you guide readers to the reasons for your conclusion. That is the deep ethic of the scientist and the scholar, and why I will end today with two links. One question that must be addressed, now that it has been raised, is what really happened in the Holocaust. The best single Web site I have been able to find is the *Nizkor Project* (*Nizkor* means “We will remember,” in Hebrew). Its best [subpage](#) takes a central pamphlet of questions and answers written by the leading Holocaust deniers, and devastatingly annotates it with additional information in a way that only the Web can do. True to the morality of this path, they say: “Nizkor believes that truth has no need for secrecy. We present the material of the Holocaust-deniers unaltered and completely openly, with links back to their Web sites so that the reader may examine exactly what they say. And if and when they have a response to our work, we will of course cross-link to it, so that the reader may examine that response.” On an infinitely more trivial note, our debunking of MacDonald’s books will appear on the [Center for Evolutionary Psychology](#) Web page, under the *CriticalEye* section, as soon as it can be drafted.

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BY AUTHORS

FEB 03, 2000 • 3:30 AM

Dear John,

I predict that this will be a short exchange, since we're in agreement about all the big things—that the Holocaust happened, that Judaism is not a “group evolutionary strategy” to take over the world, even, I suspect, although you've only hinted at this position, that it is wrongheaded to criminalize Holocaust denial. We also agree that if we aren't going to outlaw ideas we think are bad, we still have a duty to refute them, if we can. Our disagreements amount to a quibble over strategy and terms: whether it was smart of me to profile MacDonald and whether I accurately employed a phrase coined by you and your wife, Leda Cosmides.

To take these in order: Should I have drawn attention to MacDonald and his theories? The answer to that one is easy: Yes. Vigorous discussion is always preferable to scornful silence. I'll concede that if this guy were just some nut posting on the Internet from his cabin in Montana, it might be silly to waste time on him. But Kevin MacDonald is a full professor at an accredited university. He holds three executive positions in a professional organization you and Leda helped found. He has published three books in a scholarly series. I'm not even the one responsible for bringing him before the public. It is David Irving who named MacDonald as an expert witness in a trial that is the focus of international attention.

The story of MacDonald is actually a cautionary tale about what happens when you ignore ideas you strongly disagree with: They take root and flourish. MacDonald's works have been given respectful consideration on at least one academic Internet discussion group I know of. Some of those scholars may teach his books in their classes, recommend them to their colleagues—anything is possible. For a few days in January before MacDonald flew off to England, he took over another scholarly Internet discussion group, this one devoted to the topic of anti-Semitism. He posted voluminous messages in which he argued that anti-Semitism in postwar Poland was a reasonable response to the fact that the Jews ran the Communist government. To make this point, he had to cite extensively from the works of a

historian. The historian himself weighed in to argue—convincingly, I thought—that MacDonald’s reading of his work was preposterous, but some people sided with MacDonald anyway, because MacDonald’s scientific jargon intrigued and (I thought) confused them.

Which brings me to our second quibble, to my mind the more interesting of the two: whether I was right to identify Kevin MacDonald as an evolutionary psychologist. It is slightly misleading of you to say that he never calls himself that, since he dances right up to the term and clearly wants to be understood as working within the discipline. In his letter responding to my article, he described his theories as grounded in “evolutionary biology and evolutionary social psychology.” In the preface of *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy*, MacDonald describes his approach in the following manner: “The fundamental paradigm derives from evolutionary biology, but there will also be a major role for the theory and data derived from several areas of psychology, including especially the social psychology of group behavior.” I think you overstate the case when you say that calling MacDonald an evolutionary psychologist is as off-base as calling Skinner a Freudian. MacDonald associates himself with the field and can back up that claim by being an active member of your association. I haven’t looked this up, but I doubt Skinner ever belonged to a psychoanalytic organization founded by Freud.

And here we get to the crux of our discussion—the important and difficult what-is-to-be-done question. Should one censor a MacDonald, censure a MacDonald, kick a MacDonald out of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, or do nothing about a MacDonald? Are you comfortable with this guy as secretary, archivist, newsletter editor, and executive board member of HBES? If not, what do you mean to do about it? If you do something about it, how do you explain that decision to colleagues who feel that MacDonald *is* an evolutionary psychologist and would presumably argue that he deserves an active role in HBES? (In a letter to ***Slate***, for instance, David Sloan Wilson embraced MacDonald as a respected colleague and argued that his position on the Jews is a) consistent with Wilson’s own work and b) practically indistinguishable from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s view of Judaism.) But if you do nothing about MacDonald and HBES, how can you blame the outside world for considering him a member of your group?

I’m approaching my word limit, so over to you.

Best,

Judith

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Dear Judith,

I’m going to deviously duck your tough questions for today, because these issues cut far deeper than one individual and HBES, and they touch on a grand hoodwinking that has been perpetrated by us academics as a group on journalists and the public about the nature of scholarly authority, as well as what it is to be “fringe” as opposed to “respected” and “authoritative.”

First some fact-checking and investigative journalism, then on to bigger things:

Fact ( ): The [Human Behavior and Evolution Society](#) is the scholarly association ( ) for anyone who thinks there is a connection between evolution and human behavior (potentially including Gould, Lewontin, Chomsky, the Leakeys, and indeed all non-creationists) and who also pays dues (which eliminates most of the aforementioned). It is not the professional organization of evolutionary psychologists. The Society does comprise an amazingly diverse collection of people from dozens of fields, such as ecology, philosophy, medicine, law, literature, biology, and anthropology, with fiercely conflicting views on the relationship between evolution and behavior). On either your expansive (anyone who implies s/he is, is) or the accepted definition of *evolutionary psychologist*, evolutionary psychologists are only a small minority on the governing board and the Society’s journal’s editorial board. So HBES member does not equal evolutionary psychologist, and MacDonald’s “claim” for being one is not “backed up” by his being a member of “your association,” as you put it.



Fact: Behaviorists were members of the American Psychological Association when Freudians were president, and Freudians were members when behaviorists like Skinner were president. That does not make Freudians behaviorists, or behaviorists Freudians. For future reference, like “Freudian” and “behaviorist,” “evolutionary psychologist” describes a commitment to a specific theoretical stance—one, as it turns out, that MacDonald violently disagrees with, and so he cannot qualify as an evolutionary psychologist ().

You are completely right that he “dances right up to the term” and “clearly wants to be understood” to be an evolutionary psychologist, just as subjects of other profiles want to be understood as having made cancer cures from apricot pits, or as having co-written Howard Hughes’ autobiography. It was an entirely natural error to make, coming new to the field as you did, but it does serve as an example about why journalists might want to read their proposed copy to the scientists they cover so that major mistakes like this can be flagged and discussed. Ask a native.

So, there were many choices for titles: “Developmental Psychology’s Anti-Semite,” or “Environmental Science’s ...,” “Cal State’s ...,” “Psychology’s ...,” “HBES’s ...” (which still thoroughly implicates me in his crime, if that appeals to you), “The APA’s ...” (most of his publications are in APA journals, none in HBES’s), or more appropriately “Group Selection’s ...,” or even “Richard Lewontin’s ...” The only flat-out 100 percent semi-boneless wrong title is the one that was used and has not yet been corrected: “Evolutionary Psychology’s Anti-Semite.”

I know this sounds like me beating up on you, and I meant our conversation to go in a more interesting direction, and I promise I’ll stop now, but I do remain genuinely baffled at why you won’t accept either reference works or knowledgeable native informants on this point, but instead credit MacDonald’s (!) self-serving insinuations. (A correction would go a long way here, hint hint—this is the Web, not kiln-baked cuneiform impervious to change.)

Investigative journalism: According to the maniacal bean counters at the Institute for Scientific Information, the total number of times any of MacDonald’s books on Judaism have been cited by people other than himself since the first was published seven years ago is *two*: once by the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, and once in MacDonald’s own journal on environmental science (). This must be something of a record in terms of pages written per citation garnered. Your notion that this is a cautionary tale showing that ignored ideas necessarily “take root and flourish” does not seem particularly apt to me here. Still, I grant you that the Irving trial (although MacDonald’s testimony was something of a fizzle) might have changed this even without *Slate*’s help, particularly with an assist from chat rooms and the Internet mailing lists that you allude to.

And you are on to a far scarier story than you know: The world is overflowing with people who see one ethnic group or another as a threat, and these aggrieved are now, after 70 years' hiatus, being presented with respectable theoretical underpinnings. These are coming not from wicked sociobiologists or demented evolutionary psychologists but over their objections—from well-meaning, communitarian-oriented biologists. The floodgates are opening, and soon we will all be nostalgic for what will seem to us, in comparison, to be MacDonald's enchantingly tame early efforts. It is no accident that [David Sloan Wilson's book](#) citing MacDonald favorably received a [rave review](#) in the *New York Review of Books* from Richard Lewontin. Far more ominously, Lewontin weighed in with a ringing endorsement on the very point that (if true) would scientifically legitimize MacDonald-like theories to previously skeptical biologists, anthropologists, etc. (although still not to evolutionary psychologists, who have identified fallacies here beyond Lewontin's ken). This critical claim is, *Large groups can be important evolutionary units that accumulate competitive group properties because they cause intergroup differences in reproduction.* This claim, now read by thousands, will sound familiar to MacDonald's two or three devoted readers. Lewontin, many may recall, is a leftist Harvard biologist famous for his moralistic policing of the intellectual world and his scathing denunciations of the irresponsibility of sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, and others of their ilk. As Lewontin says in the *NYRB*, "it is important not to take too impoverished a view of what constitutes a group. ... Groups may be delimited by any shared property such as food preference, temporal pattern of activity, gender, social class, or e-mail list. Anything that sorts individual organisms will do, including kinship." I'm out of space, so over to you.

Best,

John

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Dear John,

I wish we could dial this down a bit, as they say back West at Microsoft. You feel that your job here is to defend your profession against cavalier treatment by journalists like me. But that’s not our mandate, as I understand it, nor will it result in anything useful to our readers. We’re here to talk about how to deal with fringe scholars, i.e., Kevin MacDonald and his ilk, and we haven’t really done that yet, nor have you refuted him, as I hoped you’d do.

Don’t worry—I’m not sidestepping your accusations, at least not the one I think it’s important to respond to. That’s the “Is Kevin MacDonald an evolutionary psychologist?” question. First, I think you’re being even more devious than you say. You’re trying to define the MacDonald problem away. Your syllogism is: *It is I who gets to say what an evolutionary psychologist is; I say Kevin MacDonald is not an evolutionary psychologist; therefore I am not responsible for Kevin MacDonald.* This just doesn’t work. Even if you invented the term, John, that does not make your definition the only one, or even the right one. Definition is not something that occurs by fiat, particularly in a community of intellectuals. Even Freud didn’t get to say what Freudianism is, nor Darwin Darwinism—though God knows they tried.

This question goes to the heart of our effort to sketch out an accurate ethnography of your academic culture, as you put it. How clear or fuzzy are the boundaries of the myriad social and natural sciences devoted to evolutionary thought? Is there really no debate about where to draw the lines between evolutionary biology, psychology, and anthropology? I’m not saying your lines are wrong, obviously—you’re more likely to be right about them than

others are, although some of your colleagues would strongly disagree with you. I'm saying the matter is much more contested than you are admitting here.

Here's an example of the problem. As it happens, I asked the natives. I called you, and your wife, and lots of other people with an interest in this field. Most of the natives didn't call back. You did, though, and you and Leda Cosmides generously shared hours of your time talking to me. At no time during any of our conversations—or my conversations with anyone else—was the statement made that Kevin MacDonald is not an evolutionary psychologist. You said Kevin MacDonald was muddle-headed and wrong, and you explained why, I thought brilliantly. But you didn't cast him out of the field. In fact, Leda told me that Kevin MacDonald's work (on child development, not Jews) was solicited for the anthology you asked us to read in your last post, *The Adapted Mind* (by the third editor on the book, not by you or Leda). This, it appears, is the defining text of the entire endeavor. MacDonald's contribution was found to be sub-par and rejected, but even so, why would he have been asked if his work weren't considered relevant? Is it that his work was legitimate evolutionary psychology then but isn't now? Why not say *that*, then, and explain why?

That's one reason I'm not going to issue a correction. Was the headline, *Evolutionary Psychology's Anti-Semite*, crude and inelegant? Absolutely. Was it hyperbolic, the way three-word headlines are? Yes. Was it wrong? No. You weren't disavowing his professional affiliation then, even if you are now. He was his colleagues' problem then, and in my opinion he remains his colleagues' problem. That's how he's your anti-Semite.

Wait a minute, you say. How am I my colleague's keeper if I don't think he's my colleague? For the purposes of argument, let's grant your premise that Kevin MacDonald *isn't* an evolutionary psychologist. If he's not but calls himself one and uses evolutionary and psychological terminology to make arguments that you find offensive and you suspect the rest of the world would, too, does that relieve you of the obligation to comment? As I understand it, it is the job of intellectuals to speak out about things that matter to them—which is why I wrote the piece, and why I criticized you for not having spoken out once the Hartung review appeared. It seems to me that what you're saying in response is, I'm not an intellectual, I'm just a specialist in my field, and since I say he's not in my field, I don't have to say anything else. Do you really want to go down that path?

Let me be clear: You have *always* and *unequivocally* disavowed MacDonald's ideas in your conversations with me. You think he's wrong, but you deemed it the better part of wisdom to keep silent about him. I think that's wrong, or at least wrong-headed. Once you knew what he was working on, your and your peers' total silence could all too easily be interpreted by the rest of the world as tacit agreement.

I'd like to turn now to the more interesting part of your post, which is the story that is far scarier than, supposedly, I know. Personally, I wish you'd stop the Lewontin-bashing, an activity aimed at your peers, not at **Slate** readers, and only tangentially relevant to what we're talking about here, and tell us exactly why you disagree with a) MacDonald and b) the ideas of "well-meaning, communitarian-oriented biologists" upon whose work you say he draws. At which point, it might be more useful for me to bow out, and for David Sloan Wilson, perhaps, if he would agree to, to step in.

Best,

Judith

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Dear Judith,

I, too, want to shift tone and focus to the bigger questions, since I have considerable sympathy with your positions on everything from [Günter Grass](#) to our misdeeds. (For those for whom my undeniable deviousness remains a burning concern, see.)

I admit to having a bit of fun proposing alternate-universe titles for your piece, but my “Lewontin-bashing” conceals deeply serious points. The first is, ideas—dangerous or not—are defined by their content. If, as you argue, scholars are morally culpable for ideas they legitimize, then surely the people who actually share and advance the views in question are more culpable than those who have a history of intellectually combating them. (Surely also they deserve to be described as such in press accounts.) The fringe idea that Lewontin, MacDonald, and Gould are working to legitimize— *that large groups of organisms function as biological competitors*—has been central for ideologies that once caused the deaths of tens of millions and may again in new guise. (For why Gould’s views are alarming, see.) Silence on this point is the one thing you cannot accuse evolutionary psychologists of: Evolutionary psychology has a consistent record (shared by the far larger community of adaptationist evolutionary scientists to which it belongs) of combating this hydra-headed fallacy. (Those interested in a result specifically from evolutionary psychology that falsifies a broad set of racist views can see.)

The second is: Academics, editors, journalists, and granting agencies make a regular practice of deploying their powers and sympathies toward ideas not on the basis of their

actual content (that requires a kind of close attention that is impractical for busy people), but instead on quick cues—e.g., the reputation for moralizing of the scientists involved, or lasting but often unfounded impressions about the drift of certain ideas caused by such public moral posturing. Moreover, it is such a part of the sad fabric of the world that doing what *appears* moral diverges so often and so sharply from doing what actually *is* moral that anyone who has, over his lifetime, acquired a widespread reputation for virtue is someone who has routinely been willing to inflict great damage on others because of his hunger for looking good. Specifically, the way scientific issues look *upclose*, both morally and intellectually, and the way they look or can be made to look *from a distance* are so frequently at odds that this opens up a major niche for fluent and well-credentialed academic arbitrageurs, who can troll for, exploit, or manufacture these bad appearances to acquire towering reputations for moral activism and intellectual insight. They inject consistent, major distortions into the public understanding of everything from economics to environmental science to neuroscience—and by “public,” I mean to include even professionals in the same discipline who are unfamiliar with the technical niceties of the subspecialties in question—but who still decide on the hiring, promotion, publishing, and funding of those in the targeted subspecialties.

Such figures—Gould and Lewontin are the type specimens—are granted formidable cultural power by gatekeepers (such as the editors of *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Scientific American*) eager to do the right thing, and so these arbitrageurs drown out the voices of the experts in the fields under discussion. However, God is in the details, and up close is where the focus has to be if critical scientific and moral issues are to have some chance of being intelligently and humanely addressed. Worse, because these voices are often the only ones most non-specialists ever get to hear (I’ve heard that Gould’s books sell far more than all other biologists’ put together), the temptation to cultivate an aura of daring originality—which is key to exciting deep admiration in science—becomes difficult to resist. This is done by advancing and elaborating offbeat, eccentric views (e.g., Gould’s self-description as pioneering “a new and general theory of evolution” or his entertaining claim that neo-Darwinism is “effectively dead, despite its persistence as textbook orthodoxy”) while at the same time keeping from readers the reasons why expert consensus discounts such views.

In short, there is a powerful dynamic guaranteeing that some of our most famous, most trusted, most authoritative scientific voices not only regularly misinform but also misrepresent fringe opinion as central. So the problem, Judith, is not so much fringe on the fringe—now that MacDonald’s views have come to light, they will quickly be debunked. The deeper problem is the fringe at the center, and the genuine human cost that comes from the



systematic legitimization of bad ideas. The humane and winning columns of Steve Gould, for example, frequently edge into outright fiction and contain inversions that are laugh-out-loud funny to those in the know. (For those admirable empiricists who want to evaluate such an improbable claim for themselves, read Gould's persuasive two-part attack on evolutionary psychology and adaptationism in the *NYRB* [here](#) and [here](#), and Leda Cosmides' and my reply [here](#).)

Gould is currently the president of the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, and so is arguably the nation's top scientist. Could he really be a fringe scientist? As John Maynard Smith, one of the world's top five evolutionary biologists said, Gould "is giving non-biologists a largely false picture of the state of evolutionary theory," and "the evolutionary biologists with whom I have discussed his work tend to see him as a man whose ideas are so confused as to be hardly worth bothering with, but as one who should not be publicly criticized because he is at least on our side against the creationists." Or as Harvard's Ernst Mayr, another of the five, says of Gould and his allies: They "quite conspicuously misrepresent the views of [biology's] leading spokesmen." For more see.

I'm out of space but speaking of central figures, I did want to ask you, given your experiences in Paul de Man's department at Yale, what lessons you draw from the de Man and Heidegger controversies on how to fight bad ideas.

Best,

John

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Dear John and Judith,

At this point in the dialogue, I agree we should turn to some other examples of fringe scholarship, preferably taken from outside the field of evolutionary biology.

For the record, I don't see much sense in comparing MacDonald to Lewontin and Gould simply because all these gentlemen show some interest in "group selection." Perhaps evolutionary change takes place at the level of the group; perhaps it doesn't. Either way, the more interesting question is how, when, and why we ought to understand a particular human behavior to be an evolutionary adaptation. In these terms, MacDonald gives what appears to be a highly adaptationist account of Jewish ritual as a (group) evolutionary strategy, just as others have recently given a highly adaptationist account of rape as an (individual) evolutionary strategy. Whatever their intellectual virtues or vices, neither Lewontin nor Gould is especially apt to discuss human behaviors as complex as religious ritual in terms of evolutionary strategies.

The problem still remains, however, of how to separate "fringe" scholarship from acceptable scholarship. There seems to be a clash of two admirable imperatives here. On the one hand, scholars believe that truth is the enemy of dogma; the best answers may be unpopular or uncomfortable answers, and finding them requires a principled refusal to rule out any hypotheses in advance. On the other hand, scholars believe that ideas have consequences; the effort to understand nature and society isn't just an edifying game, and one must carefully consider the implications of lending legitimacy to one provisional idea or another.

Judith, your argument seems to take the second imperative more seriously than the first. Shouldn't the sorting of good ideas from bad ideas be allowed to take place through the regular mechanisms of scholarly inquiry? Isn't the failure of his colleagues to cite his work on Judaism the most deafening and persuasive refutation MacDonald could possibly receive? Do we want to hold all intellectual interventions to the highest standards of moral accountability, as if advancing an idea were the equivalent of raising a knife? Must anyone

who wishes to make use of de Man or Heidegger's work first come to a definite view of how their onetime fascist sympathies affected their ideas, and then make that view known to the public, before going on to cite them?

Over to you,

Alex

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BY AUTHORS

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*Judith Shulevitz is the New York editor of **Slate** and writes the “[Culturebox](#)” column. John Tooby is a professor of anthropology and co-director of the Center for Evolutionary Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. **Slate** has invited them to discuss the academic fringe in general and Kevin MacDonald in particular. Alex Star, the editor of [Lingua Franca](#), is moderating. Click [here](#) to read his introduction and recap of the brouhaha over MacDonald.*

Dear John,

That was quite a long and complicated letter—2,771 words by my count. That’s much too much for me to take on in a responsible fashion, so I’m going to skip over a number of things. I want to go right to your “gotcha” points: Heidegger and de Man. Heidegger is easy. We agree that he was an unrepentant Nazi and anti-Semite. We disagree about how important this is for his work. You say: Heidegger is the authority on his own philosophy. He praised the Nazi movement, even after the war. Therefore his philosophy must be Nazi philosophy. I say: There’s a lot of debate about this, and only a minority of philosophers believe we have to write off Heidegger’s main ideas about Being, Time, and so forth, because of his Nazism.

De Man is tougher. You accuse me of underplaying de Man’s Nazism, and on reflection, I think you have a point. He wrote several pieces for *Le Soir*, a collaborationist newspaper, which I should have said, and his ugly declaration about expelling the Jews from Europe, made in service of an argument about the de-Judaification of literature (which I did mention) should have been stressed. Lest your readers think me guilty of deliberate misstatement rather than understatement, here’s a quote from a review by Ze’ev Sternhell in the *New Republic*, which is not a publication known for making light of Nazi collaboration. (The book under discussion is a collection of de Man’s wartime articles.) Sternhell writes: “‘The Jews in Contemporary Literature’ is the only anti-Semitic article by Paul de Man so far known, and it does not really amount to much. The point, however, is that it was just one of a few dozen articles by de Man with which Nazi propaganda could not have failed to be

pleased.” (For Sternhell’s summary of the article in question, see. For Sternhell’s assessment of the relative severity of de Man’s collaborationism, see.)

I would never defend (and haven’t defended) de Man’s behavior as a junior intellectual churning out obliquely pro-Nazi–though with one exception, not anti-Semitic–reviews in order to please his Nazi bosses. I just don’t believe you can reduce all of his later and brilliantly argued system of critical thought to a mere rationalization of his earlier behavior. You disagree. You say you see certain key de Manian concepts as self-justifying. You pull out a short passage of *Allegories of Reading* and interpret it as having a hidden biographical meaning. That’s a legitimate opinion–indeed, it’s the majority opinion. I happen to think it’s wrong.

How are readers to sort all this out? The answer is, on the basis of what we’ve written here, they can’t. We’re having a meta-discussion here. We’ve stated our points without really defending them. We’ve signaled where the actual argument lies, and hinted at what we *would* say, if only time and space, etc. We haven’t marshaled the relevant philosophical arguments for and against Heidegger. We haven’t worked through the textual evidence upon which de Man’s criticism rests. We’ve staked out our territory and waved some flags around.

I stress this because it goes to the heart of one of the two important claims in your letter–that moral judgment and scientific refutation are mutually incompatible. (The other claim–that silence is the best course of action when dealing with noxious ideas–I addressed in my last letter.) Before considering the implications of this interesting and troubling belief, I can’t resist pointing out an obvious irony: In your letter, you take the side of truth-seeking against the uttering of unjustified pronouncements, and yet you begin the letter by denouncing Heideggerian and de Manian thought as morally unsound without mounting a rigorous defense of your point of view.

Back to your point. Is moral judgment really at odds with science? To make this case, you must resort to some fairly extreme rhetoric. First, you divide the world into “the culture of truth-seeking” and “the culture of moralizing.” Then you say (in another footnote): “Denouncing also subverts refutation–since it implies that the real motive for the refutation is not honest evaluation but the pre-rational defense of a foregone conclusion.” In other words, there is truth and there is attitudinizing, and attitudinizing shuts the door on truth.

That’s a pretty dismissive way for an anthropologist to talk about the entire domain of non-empirically-verifiable ethical thought and discourse. I agree that they’re two distinct worlds, but do you really think that science is legitimate and ethics isn’t? That the one cancels the

other out? How far would you push this? In your ideal universe, would no one be allowed to express judgments about the ethical implications or relative merits of this or that idea except for people in a position to argue their case before a panel of experts? In other words, no meta-discussions like this one. Nothing but the words of Ph.D.s on subjects they are credentialed to discuss. No comments by anthropologists on Heidegger and de Man, and no journalism, either.

I think what you're really trying to say is that journalists like me should just shut up, because we're not qualified to pass judgment on the likes of you or MacDonald. Which brings us to the second irony of the day, because my criticism of *you* has always been that you and your colleagues are in a better position than I am to refute MacDonald and yet declined to acknowledge the existence of his theories on Jews until two weeks ago. (For the record, I never said his views were false; I've said they were ugly, anti-Semitic, and similar to those held by Nazis. I also said in the "Fray" that I thought that the part of his scholarship I knew a little about—his Jewish scholarship—was shoddy and intellectually dishonest.)

As for what you were and were not aware of when you and your colleagues elected MacDonald to be secretary of HBES in 1995, a graduate student in your field has written in to draw my attention to some commentary written by MacDonald and published in 1994. It was part of a round of comments following an article by David Sloan Wilson and Elliott Sober in a prominent journal on the subject of group selection (D.S. Wilson and E. Sober, "Reintroducing group selection to the human and behavioral sciences," *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* 17 (1994): 585-684. Click [here](#) to read it.) The student writes, "This article has, more than any other, rehabilitated group selection as a legitimate subject of discussion in evolutionary biology; it's been cited 82 times in the journal literature alone (according to the Science Citation Index). Both Wilson and Sober and several of the commentators cite work by Tooby & Cosmides or Cosmides & Tooby. It is perfectly impossible that John Tooby had not seen it, or that most of the other serious scholars in his organization had not as well."

The student has requested anonymity for fear of angering a prominent member of his or her field, but we don't have to take his/her word. If we look up the article for ourselves, we see that among those contributing to the issue were many eminent figures in this field, including Richard Dawkins and Daniel C. Dennett. This supports the contention that the article was an important intervention. In footnote No. 25, Wilson and Sober mention MacDonald in a list they say is of "evolutionary psychologists." I believe this proves my earlier point that his correct professional identification is a matter of some dispute within the discipline.

The juicy part, though, is this passage by MacDonald:

This facultative response to external threat has often been manipulated by Jewish authorities attempting to inculcate a stronger sense of group identification among Jews by exaggerating the threat of anti-Semitism. Strategizing groups are thus able to manipulate social environments in ways that trigger evolved psychological mechanisms related to group functioning. On the other hand, there are several important historical examples where increased levels of resource competition between Jews and gentiles have triggered reactive processes among gentiles, resulting in gentiles developing highly cohesive anti-Semitic group strategies in opposition to Judaism—what I term ‘reactive racism.’ (K. MacDonald, “Group evolutionary strategies: dimensions and mechanisms [commentary on D.S. Wilson & E. Sober, “Group Selection”],” *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* 17 (1994): 629-630, p. 630.)

It’s all there: those scheming Jews, the evolutionary justification for anti-Semitism. I look forward to reading the refutation forthcoming on your [Web site](#).

Best,

Judith

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