

## BOOK REVIEW

### The politically correct monkey

#### The Monkey in the Mirror: Essays on the Science of What Makes us Human

I Tattersall

Oxford University Press, New York. 2002; 203 pp.  
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Reviewed by M Changizi

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The title of this short, easy-to-read, book of essays by Tattersall refers to one of the more reasonable tests of self-awareness: secretly place paint on a primate's face, and test whether the primate notices (eg, by attempting to remove the paint) when it sees itself in the mirror. However, the title is also a metaphor for the more general topic of the book, which is human evolution. Tattersall takes up a number of issues in his eight essays, including the key evolutionary innovations for humans (which he believes are upright posture, tool use, and modern body form), the fate of the neanderthals, intelligence and self-consciousness, criticisms of evolutionary psychology, and a discussion of the improbability of future human evolution (short of an apocalypse). Tattersall does well at emphasizing hominid diversity and the blind phylogenetic alleys – there was no linear progression from monkey to man – as well as highlighting the stability of hominid morphology, with relatively rare punctuations.

If there is a single thesis one can extract, it is that the rise of behaviourally modern humans occurred much too recently, and much too suddenly, to be due to natural selection. Instead, it is probably the invention of language that triggered the long-anatomically modern humans to become modern humans. He writes, '...it is to this extraordinary event [ie, language] that we should direct our attention in the effort to understand our uniquenesses and their origins, rather than to conven-

tional Darwinian natural selection and to our long and undeniably fascinating evolutionary trudge' (pp 182–183). Tattersall's central point, if properly argued, is a serious challenge to evolutionary psychology, but his argumentation style is sloppy and he undercuts his credibility by his political correctness. First, he is stubbornly unwilling to make nearly *any* substantive generalization about human behaviour. 'Humans – individually or corporately – can be characterized by virtually any pair of antitheses that you could care to think of. Which human characteristics you consider to be the most significant often boils down to a choice among those antitheses; and such choices, of course, will never get us very far in understanding ourselves' (pp 183–184). While it would, indeed, be difficult to characterize human behaviour by simply choosing one from each pair of antitheses, surely there are better methods by which scientists may characterize human behaviour and contrast it with other primates. Tattersall provides no argument or demonstration that evolutionary psychologists actually engage in this poor kind of characterization technique. Second, Tattersall tacitly suggests that evolutionary psychologists do what they do because it allows them to 'scientifically' defend their prejudices (p 176). One might have thought that these kinds of reactions to sociobiology had gone out of vogue since the Marxists lambasted Edward O. Wilson. And, third, he accuses evolutionary psychologists of morally defending rape, when their claims that rape is an adaptive behaviour are only an attempted *explanation* of why males of many species rape, not a moral justification at all.

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