

## BIOLOGIST'S FORMULAS INCREASE AFFECTION

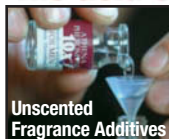


Created by  
**Winnifred Cutler,**  
Ph.D. in biology from  
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Stanford.

Co-discovered human  
pheromones in 1986  
(Time 12/1/86; and  
Newsweek 1/12/87)

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discovering how to make skin cells  
into stem cells. Building on the dis-  
covery, scientists plan to take cells  
from the skin of a long-dead northern  
white rhino—a critically endangered  
subspecies—and conjure up rhino  
sperm. In the future, such advances  
may allow us to revive recently extinct  
species like the passenger pigeon. And  
woolly mammoths may yet be cloned  
from cells frozen for thousands of years  
in permafrost. The rhino embryos  
could be grown in the wombs of Asian  
elephants. But what of woolly mam-  
moth culture? Elephant culture is so-  
phisticated, and every bit as vital for  
survival as their genes. Would we need  
to teach baby mammoths how to live  
in Siberia? How would we know what  
to teach them?

Ackerman's achievement is not with-  
out flaws. "The most successful scien-  
tist," E. O. Wilson says in *The Meaning  
of Human Existence*, "thinks like a  
poet—wide-ranging, sometimes  
fantastical—and works like a book-  
keeper." Ackerman is clearly fascinated  
by etymology, but she sometimes gets  
things wrong. *Orangutan* does not mean  
"orange forest people" in Bahasa Indo-  
nesia, but simply "forest person." Such  
peccadilloes are a small price to pay for  
the beauty of her language. But else-  
where Ackerman's failure to work like a  
bookkeeper has more serious conse-  
quences. Is it really true that 10 percent  
of women have fallen victim to ovarian  
cancer in recent decades? The Ovarian  
Cancer National Alliance says that the  
lifetime risk is just 1 in 72. And can it  
possibly be that more than twice as  
many pregnant women infected with  
toxoplasma give birth to boys? If so, then  
countries such as France and Germany,  
which Ackerman claims have toxo-  
plasma infection rates of 80 to 90 per-  
cent, must have serious sex-ratio imbal-  
ances. She finishes her book on a note  
that one suspects is meant to be reassur-  
ing: "[O]ur mistakes are legion, but our  
talent is immeasurable." Indeed.

Ackerman's optimistic take does  
leave us with a kind of hope.  
She eschews the moralistic  
boundaries that define "natural" as  
something separate from us and "un-  
natural" as the work of man. She, like  
Wilson, argues that our actions in the  
world are neither good nor bad—

they're merely human—and if our self  
is not entirely separate from the rest of  
the world, or the rest of nature, then  
our self-interest can't be, either.

Neither book, of course, quite de-  
livers on the promise of explaining  
the meaning of human life, or the  
meaning of any individual human  
life. While evolutionary theory can  
tell us why we are the way we are, it  
cannot tell us what sort of person  
we should strive to be. For that,  
Wilson argues, we must look to an-  
other source. "It is within the power  
of the humanities and the serious  
creative arts within them to express  
our existence in ways that begin at  
last to realize the dreams of the En-  
lightenment," he writes. He envi-  
sions a marriage of science and the  
humanities in our near future: "If a  
species can be said to have a soul, it  
lives in the humanities." It's an ar-  
gument subtly advanced by both of  
these profound works, which to-  
gether illustrate that our greatest  
achievements, as well as the solu-  
tions to our species' greatest prob-  
lems, lie not solely in our techno-  
logical advances but in our study of  
ourselves and in our enduring  
search for meaning. ■

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