

## Re: Book recommendation

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**From:** Anon. (bob.ohara\_at\_NOSPAM.helsinki.fi)

**Date:** 03/03/05

Date: Thu, 3 Mar 2005 16:35:23 -0500 (EST)

Larry Moran wrote:

> On Wed, 2 Mar 2005 23:01:19 -0500 (EST),

> name\_and\_address\_supplied@hotmail.com

> <name\_and\_address\_supplied@hotmail.com> wrote:

>

> [snip]

>

>

>>Yes, Gould opposed evolutionary psychology. I'm not a fan myself. Yes,

>>Cosmides and Tooby are evolutionary psychologists. Yes, this is almost

>>certainly what motivated this review. But, still, their discussion of

>>Gould's place in evolutionary biology is, in my experience,

>>representative of the consensus view of the field. Cosmides and Tooby

>>quote Maynard Smith on Gould, and even if you ignore the remainder of

>>the essay on the basis that it comes from crack-pot evolutionary

>>psychologists, you still have JMS's remarks, which are unequivocal:

>>

>>"Because of the excellence of his essays, he has come to be seen by

>>non-biologists as the preeminent evolutionary theorist. In contrast,

>>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."

>>

>>and

>>

>>"[Gould] is giving non-biologists a largely false picture of the state

>>of evolutionary theory"

>>

>>and the late Ernst Mayr, on Gould and his cronies:

>>

>>"[they] quite conspicuously misrepresent the views of [biology's]

>>leading spokesmen."

>>

>>I've lifted these straight from the essay. It is definitely worth a

>>read.

>

>

> *There are two separate issues here.*

>

And I'm afraid I'm going to come across as being rather partisan, but this is in response to Larry's comments which are similarly partisan. So, in the interests of full disclosure, I am naturally inclined towards the British school of evolutionary biology that grew from the likes of Fisher and Haldane being (a) British, and (b) numerate.

> *1. Is Gould mostly correct when it comes to evolutionary theory?*

> *2. Do the majority of evolutionary biologists appreciate the contributions that Gould made?*

>

> *As far as I'm concerned the answer to the first question is "yes."*

>

I would give a different very different answer to the first question, and this then implies a different answer to the second.

I Gould pretty much irrelevant to my work as in evolutionary biology, and hence would not view his representation as correct. I can't recall ever having seen any scientific discussion of his ideas outside of the time he visited Helsinki.

It may be that his ideas are considered more seriously in the evo–devo or paleontology fields, but I don't inhabit either of them.

> *The second question is more difficult. It's clear that John Maynard Smith*

> *never understood the points that Gould was making and neither does his*

> *friend Richard Dawkins.*

I'm intrigued to see your evidence in this regard (especially with regards to JMS).

It's no surprise that these Ultra–Darwinians mostly

> *talk to people who agree with them. It's no surprise that those other*

> *evolutionary biologists also have difficulty understanding Gould's ideas.*

> *(As a group the Ultra–Darwinians consistently misrepresent and distort Gould.*

> *Daniel Dennett has been completely bamboozled by them.)*

>

> *However, I note that any discussion of modern evolutionary theory now*

> *includes a debate about adaptionism, the pros and cons of punctuated*

> *equilibria, the relevance of hierarchical theory, the importance of*

> *contingency, the role of ontogeny and development, and the illusion of*

> *progress. That's not a bad legacy for someone whose "ideas are so confused as*

> *to be hardly worth bothering with."*

>

Strange. Not one of these is in the index of Richard Fortey's "Life: An Unauthorised Biography". Are you suggesting then that this is not a discussion of modern evolutionary theory? Some (but not all) get into his book on trilobites (entitled "Trilobite!"). It may be that these issues are discussed in the US, but I'm not aware of them being important over here – indeed, I don't even know what you mean by

"hierarchical theory".

> *Are there any objective measures? Perhaps. I looked at the list of*  
> *references in the back of Futuyma's textbook. There are 16 with Gould as*  
> *first author, 19 for Maynard Smith, and 17 for Mayr. (Dawkins has 3.) Why*  
> *would there be 16 references to Gould if he's really giving everyone a false*  
> *image of the state of evolutionary theory?*

>

Because he's a fairly easy read, so is worth citing in a textbook, on those occasions when he says something correct? It might be interesting to make a similar survey of journals such as *Evolution*, *TREE* and *J. Evol. Biol.*, and see how often Gould, Maynard Smith, Mayr and Dawkins are cited.

Bob

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