

Re: Darwin's Dangerous Idea

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- *From:* "Entertained by my own EIMC" <write_to_eimc@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Wed, 19 Dec 2007 13:53:04 -0500 (EST)
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"MattDP" <matt_thrower@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in message
[news:fk91jt\\$15pu\\$1@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](news:fk91jt$15pu$1@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

The issue is this – Dennet characterises adaptionism as the
belief

that **all** characteristics of an organism can be explained in terms of
maximal evolutionary advantage (my emphasis is important). This
seems to me to be self evidently and obviously false

You are right, this is an obviously both false and kooky claim.

The first sample he gives is that of the appearance of structures
clearly related to reptilian jawbones in the mammalian ear. While I am
of course entirely happy to accept that the obvious inference one
draws from this is that those structures are evolutionary adaptations
of the reptile jaw, how can they be said to be **optimal**? Can one
seriously argue that a structure which evolved from much more humble
and less elaborate beginnings, or even from some other bone, might not
have served the purpose better and provided for the potential for more
acute hearing?

Agree such an argument is shot – your instinct is not.

The second example is the flatfish. He makes it clear that he believes
the fact that a flatfish is actually a fish lying on its side with one
eye moved halfway round its head is a prime example of adaptionism.
Again, I find it hard to understand that he's seriously arguing that
this way of "making" a flatfish is in some way more optimal than
having the fish lie on its stomach with its eyes on the top of its
head.

Re: Darwin's Dangerous Idea

For a flat fish, having no way of keeping an eye on what's below – in order to spot sea–floor features to forage for or environmental factors to fear and avoid that can be found there, seems to me quite obviously less of an optimal functural (or structional) survival strategy than being a flat fish that has the anatomy of a flatfish. :-)

(I was not just trying to be jovial.)

My confusion reached tipped point and prompted me to write this post in the chapter on Chomsky. Here, Dennett outline three positions, all of which are given out of context and without evidence and so are difficult to assess. Chomsky, he claims, says that language cannot be a characteristic which has evolved.

Gould is pictured as saying

language is a characteristic that might not have evolved (i.e. been selected for) but might have been a by–product of something else, such as increased processing capacity in the brain. Steven Pinker is then presented as having the viewpoint that language must have evolved, a view which Dennett heartily endorses. What bugs me about this is that although it seems both plausible and likely that language is an advantageous feature which could be a product of selection, how can Dennett – or anyone – so completely dismiss the suggestion that it (or any other aspect of an organism) could have come about as a by–product of selection for something else?

Looking back on the family tree and phylogeny of fauna (and especially of folk – in respect of language):

I can imagine that BOTH incremental increases of crude functional complexity AND additions of new and discretely functural features (including language–enabling such) is how (it can be rationally–philosophically understood how) our lineage persisted or was naturally pruned (selected) "in" as if from likewise naturally "sprouted" Darwinian "selectees".

[Apropos which, "Darwinian selectees" are far more definitionally diffuse yet also more easy to concEPTualize than John Edser (who, BTW, I consider to be a relatively good s.b.e.–specific friend of mine) can accEPT :>.]

I'd be grateful if anyone could help shed some light on these issues for me. Incidentally, am I the only person who, on reading his parable of "Twin Earth" and the evolution of meaning, thought he'd left open the back door to allow a valid a postmodern critique of science?

I am only commenting on your post. I could not be bothered ploughing through books that I probably would find too boring to bother with. %-/

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Anyhow, and in all honesty, I see you as having a fairly good intuition about what deserves your skepticism.

Personally I am not addicted to skepticism; only to being (approximately) a 'scEPTic'; Which is, to me, something distinctly different. %-)

Cheers,
P

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