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Football crazy: can Chelsea football supporters be seen as “bees in a hive” in terms of darwinian evolution?

Selling evolution

Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives

by David Sloan Wilson

Delacorte Press: 2007. 400 pp. \$24

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Evolutionary biologists — those enthusiastic foot-soldiers of Darwin's grand notion that life evolves by a process of descent with modification — cannot understand why so many people reject the great man's theory, and often in favour of some form of creationist account of the existence and diversity of life on Earth. In the opening pages of David Sloan Wilson's new popular-science book, hopefully entitled *Evolution for Everyone*, we discover that 54% of adults in the United States prefer to believe that humans did not evolve from some earlier species. What makes this figure surprising is that it is up from 46% in 1994.

Where have the evolutionists gone wrong? One answer is staring them in the face but not often noticed. A double irony is that it derives from their own theory: if people differ in the strength or conviction of their religious beliefs, if children tend to acquire religious beliefs from their parents, and if religious people, for whatever set of reasons, tend to have more children, then it follows from Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection that religious belief will spread: *quod erat demonstrandum*.

The other answer is the one that evolutionary biologists, including Sloan Wilson, prefer and it provides him with the impetus for this agreeable little book: that if the evidence for darwinian evolution is presented clearly enough and often enough, any reasonable person will come around to the darwinian view. What is there to say? The usual answer, that we share

more than 98% of our genes with chimpanzees, is becoming hackneyed. It is the strangeness of human behaviour that really puts the darwinian view to the test. And here there is much to discuss. We have enormous brains that make us shrewd beyond belief in comparison to other animals, we have the only fully developed symbolic language on the planet, we cooperate with and engage in elaborate task-sharing and reciprocal relations with people we don't know, we help the elderly, give money to charities, put on matching silly shirts to attend football matches, obediently wait in queues, die for our countries or even sometimes for an idea, and we positively ripple and snort with righteousness and indignation when we think others don't do some of these things. We even have a word for this sense of how others ought to behave — morality. Chimpanzees, and for that matter other animals, aren't like this. No wonder the creationists don't believe the darwinian account.

A popular view among students of human evolution is that special ideas may be needed to explain what is sometimes called our 'extreme sociality' — the helping, reciprocity and morality. Sloan Wilson is among the principal advocates of the view that humans have evolved by a process of 'group selection' in which groups of people — our hunter-gatherer or early tribal ancestors — worked together in ways that allowed them to outcompete other groups. Over time, this process moulded our psychology and social behaviour so that we became, as Sloan Wilson puts it, like cells in a body, or bees in a hive, devoted to the well-being of our group. Laughter, music, dance and religion are interpreted as aids to promoting a sense of group membership and mutual well-being. Sloan Wilson pays particular attention to ways in which religions prohibit murder and other

antisocial behaviour within the group but offer rewards for those who use it against people outside the group.

The group-selection account is seductive, explanatory and may even be right, but what about our tendencies to cheat, deceive, manipulate and coerce? Why do we need so many laws, police forces, jails, speed cameras and tax offices? Why do we gossip incessantly about others' behaviours and reputations? Why do we compete so strenuously to get ahead and pay so much to get our children educated? Cells in our bodies and bees in hives are much better behaved, and don't have big brains like we do. Might it just be that the 3.5 billion years of selfish darwinian natural selection that preceded the invention of humans bequeathed us a legacy — of a species whose behaviours are largely driven by the selfish desire to promote ourselves and our offspring? Could it be that we humans acquired our supreme intelligence at least in part to manipulate social systems in ways that promote our individual reproductive success?

The intellectual ravine separating these two camps rises on the one side to a view of human behaviour as being for the good of the group and on the other to the view that it makes use of the group for individual benefit. It is a delicate and subtle debate and Sloan Wilson's popular accounts in *Evolution for Everyone* make for enjoyable and thoughtful reading. But perhaps even Sloan Wilson should not expect to change people's minds about religion. If our minds evolved to help us wade through the complexity of social life, to use groups for our own gain, and to help us rebound from 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', which set of beliefs, on balance, will be more useful, religious ones (whether true or not) or a belief in natural selection? ■

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