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The Evolution of Costly Traits

Darwin has given us a background about how beneficial traits shape up in natural populations, but one is led to wonder about the manner of development of costly traits. Two theories have tried to address this challenge – the theory of hitchhiking and theory of kin selection.

The theory of hitchhiking has indicated that genes which present a cost to their bearer can become frequent in natural populations when they "hitch a ride" with healthier genes that are being preferred by natural selection. On the contrary, the theory of kin selection indicates that costly traits are preferred, if they result in gains for relatives of the bearer, who also carry the gene.

"Animal traits are not always independent. For example, people with blond hair are more likely to have blue eyes," explains Andy Gardner (Oxford University). "This is a nuisance for natural selection, which could not, for instance, favor blond hair without also indirectly favoring blue eyes, and this is the idea of genetic hitchhiking."

Kin selection is similar, but here the genetic associations are between different individuals: "If I have a gene that makes me more altruistic, then I can also expect my relatives to carry it. So while

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the immediate effect of the gene is costly for me, I would benefit by receiving altruism from my relatives, and so the gene is ultimately favored," Gardner explains.

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