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A BLOG AROUND SCIENCE, RELIGION, LIFE AND THE UNIVERSE (BUT NOT EVERYTHING!)

wednesday, march 23, 2011

NTW vindicated against all comers

Well the counterblasts to NTW are up and as expected they are pretty feeble.

- Abbot et al (lead-authored by Stewart West) boils down to saying that relatedness is often very important and can sometimes explain a lot (which no-one denies). The references are mainly 3 books, one by West himself. It's not clear how many of the co-authors has a strong mathematical background: there is at least one very good scientist (Tim Clutton-Brock FRS, but he is no mathematician, quite old school) and one very bad one (Jerry Coyne). It's also amazing that anyone can be so naive and dogmatic as to write "Natural selection explains the appearance of design in the living world, and inclusive fitness theory *explains what this design is for*" (! my italics)
- Boomsma et al make the specific point that all hymenopteran clades that fit the standard definition of eusociality evolved from life-time monogamous ancestors (I blogged about this paper when it came out I think). Again this misses the point that NTW are not saying relatedness is irrelevant, merely that it is not all-important as inclusive fitness fanatics (eg Abbot et al!) claim.
- Strassman et al again absurdly over-claims that "Organisms overwhelmingly direct costly assistance, and all true altruism, towards kin" - citing a paper in *Science* by Griffin and West which shows nothing of the kind - merely that there is a statistically significant correlation.

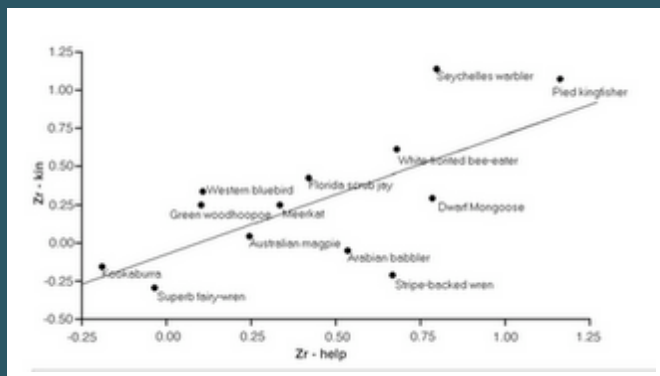


Fig 2 from Griffin and West - only a moderate correlation

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about me

starcourse
 I'm webmaster of starcourse.org and polkinghorne.net. IRL I'm a social philosopher/ strategy consultant, have 3 children and 4 grandchildren. My 2009 book "Questions of Truth" with John Polkinghorne is still generally in the top 100 on Science & Religion in Amazon.co.uk and .com

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- Ferriere and Michod recognise the point that whereas inclusive fitness has generated many valuable insights it is a very incomplete description of evolutionary processes (esp it gives no insights into evolutionary dynamics) and suggest that it needs to be replaced by the concept of Invasion Fitness. They are thus effectively supporting the key point of NTW - Inclusive Fitness is a rule of thumb, it is not a fundamental principle (still less the dogmatic absurdity of "what this design is for"). It will be interesting to see how far and under what conditions "Invasion Fitness" tracks proper and careful Evolutionary Dynamic calculations.

NTW respond by saying that "The authors of the five comments offer the usual defence of inclusive fitness theory, but do not take into account our new results" and making some helpful detailed points - conceding only a minor re-wording of one claim. They don't discuss Ferriere and Michod who seem to me in fact to be largely agreeing with NTW.

PS Coyne comments on the fact that Dawkins wasn't asked to sign any of the letters. Coyne says "I think this was simply an oversight, because all of us simply assumed that Richard would be penning his own criticism" - nothing to do with the fact that Dawkins stopped contributing to the primary science literature in 1980 then! Coyne then posts Dawkin's attempt to rebut NTW which boils down to: "rB > C: ...If you think, as Nowak et al. do, that 'Hamilton's rule almost never holds', that simply means you haven't been measuring B and C carefully enough." A splendid example of blind faith. Basically, poor Dr Dawkins is stuck in a 1970s time-warp and new developments in science and mathematics in this area seem to have passed him by.

I also note that Coyne in his previous post permitted himself to "feel sorry for co-author Corina Tarita, a young scientist with splendid qualifications, for this paper will always cast a shadow over her career." This sounds really nasty - as though Coyne and his powerful friends, who cannot touch Nowak and Wilson, will try to block Corina's. Fortunately Corina is well beyond the reach of mediocrities like Coyne - elected to the Harvard Society of Fellows and publishing her first paper in Nature in her mid 20s - Coyne managed his at 43. Unless and until someone finds a major flaw in Corina's mathematics, her reputation is perfectly safe. No-one has, and Coyne and his motley crew are incapable of doing so.

Despairing, cursing rage, attends their rapid fall

posted by starcourse at 7:27 pm 

labels: evolution, martin nowak, nature

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