

# WHY EVOLUTION IS TRUE

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## Bertrand Russell and expert opinion

by Greg Mayer

Jerry has posted a few times ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) about a paper in *Nature* by Nowak, Tarnita and Wilson which claims that kin selection is a concept of little or no value. Several critiques of this paper are now in press in *Nature*, including one by Abbot et al., of which Jerry is a coauthor, along with 136 others. In mentioning his paper [here](#) at WEIT, Jerry wrote

The list of authors and their institutions, which occupies two pages of the three-page letter, reads like a Who's Who of social evolution. It's telling that nearly every major figure in the field lined up against Nowak et al.

WEIT reader Dr. I. Needtob Athe commented on this that

I'm confident that you're on the right side of this dispute, but still, that argument is uncomfortably reminiscent of an infamous book titled "[Hundert Autoren gegen Einstein](#)" (Hundred authors against Einstein) [1931.]

The commenter implies that the number of people supporting a proposition is not an argument in its favor, which logically, of course, it isn't. It's the well-known logical fallacy of *argumentum ad populum*. As Jerry rightly pointed out, that doesn't mean the proposition is wrong, either (which commenters humorously denoted the *argumetum contra populum* or *argumentum nonpopulum*).

The more interesting issue to my mind though is that there is a pragmatics, as well as a logic, of argument. Most of what we hold to be well supported propositions are based not on arguments or evidence directly examined by us, but are based on evidence or experience of others.

I've never been to London. If pressed, though, I could put together a pretty good case for its existence. Much of my case would depend upon the use of expert or reliable sources. While logically such arguments do not compel assent, they are nonetheless valuable, and provide a pragmatic guide to assessing claims. [Bertrand Russell](#), I think, got the pragmatics of assessing expert opinion right in *Let the People Think* (1941):

(1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; (2) that when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert; and (3) that when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment.

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Bertrand Russell from Wikipedia.

Note that Russell advises us on how to apportion our doubt, rather than our belief– a pragmatics of skepticism, rather than belief.

We must also ask who is an expert. Maria Reichenbach, in an introduction to her husband, [Hans Reichenbach's](#), *The Theory of Relativity and A Priori Knowledge* (U. Cal Press, 1965), writes of *100 Autoren gegen Einstein* this way:

In contrast to philosophers sympathetic to Einstein's ideas were philosophers of the more speculative bend who tried to refute his theory. A collection of articles pretending to disprove the theory of relativity is entitled *100 Autoren gegen Einstein*. The tenor and content of these "contributions" sound unbelievable if not intentionally funny from our present viewpoint.

So, the hundred authors are not physicists, but mostly philosophers. But expertise in one area does not necessarily translate into expertise in all (think [William Shockley](#)).

The take home message then is not that Jerry and 136 other evolutionary biologists are right by virtue of their numbers; but rather that the fact that (nearly) all experts agree means that we cannot hold the contrary view (that of Nowak et al.) to be certain.

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Abbot, P. et al. 2011. Inclusive fitness theory and eusociality. *Nature* 471: in press. ([abstract only](#))

Nowak, M. A., C. E. Tarnita and E. O. Wilson. 2010. The evolution of eusociality. *Nature* 466: 1057-1062. ([abstract only](#))

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1. [NewEnglandBob](#)  
Posted March 28, 2011 at 1:36 pm | [Permalink](#)

(1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain;

Unfortunately, in today's multi-media'd environment, this is a weak statement and it gets torn apart by the obfuscators and spin-

Meisters.

Reply



Jimbo

Posted March 28, 2011 at 2:24 pm | [Permalink](#)

Yes. The 'present both sides' position or 'equal time' provisions confirm this. What passes for "expert" in the media now primarily consists of someone who recently wrote a book (i.e. to promote it) on a subject rather than actual expertise. There a many, many crappy books out there!

Reply

2.



James Sweet

Posted March 28, 2011 at 2:03 pm | [Permalink](#)

I think it's a little more subtle than all that... 136 or whatever evo-biologists sharing the opinion doesn't prove it's a *majority* (see also, various petitions in favor of ID), and even then, the majority can on rare occasion turn out to be dead wrong (see also, continental drift) ... but the general point, I think, is valid: When a large number of people with expertise in *the proper field* (no philosophers on relativity, or engineers on evolution, please) all hold the same opinion, it becomes problematic for a non-expert to argue against it.

Reply

3.



Ben Goren

Posted March 28, 2011 at 2:22 pm | [Permalink](#)

There's also the matter of the basis for the claims made by both sides.

If those hundred co-authors questioning Einstein had pointed to a version of the Michelson-Morley experiment that gave results contrary to what the results actually were, one would have been wise to give them some consideration.

However, in both that case and the one on kin selection, the evidential results are in line with the orthodox position. In order to take either Relativity or kin selection as debunked, the opponents would have to demonstrate phenomena that do not fit the accepted model or that are a better fit for a simpler model; as best I'm aware, such is not the case.

Of course neither model is perfect, but the limits of both are well-known; more to the point, the challengers aren't proposing any way to deal with the parts of the universe that lie outside the scope of the models.

Cheers,

b&

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