SCIENTIFIC
AMERICAN

Adaptation

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Source: *Scientific American*, Vol. 239, No. 3 (September 1978), pp. 212-231

Published by: Scientific American, a division of Nature America, Inc.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24955807

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Adaptation

The manifest fit between organisms and their environment is a major outcome of evolution. Yet natural selection does not lead inevitably to adaptation; indeed, it is sometimes hard to define an adaptation

by Richard C. Lewontin

The theory about the history of life that is now generally accepted, the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection, is meant to explain two different aspects of the appearance of the living world: diversity and fitness. There are on the order of two million species now living, and since at least 99.9 percent of the species that have ever lived are now extinct, the most conservative guess would be that two billion species have made their appearance on the earth since the beginning of the Cambrian period 600 million years ago. Where did they all come from? By the time Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 it was widely (if not universally) held that species had evolved from one another, but no plausible mechanism for such evolution had been proposed. Darwin's solution to the problem was that small heritable variations among individuals within a species become the basis of large differences between species. Different forms survive and reproduce at different rates depending on their environment, and such differential reproduction results in the slow change of a population over a period of time and the eventual replacement of one common form by another. Different populations of the same species then diverge from one another if they occupy different habitats, and eventually they may become distinct species.

Life forms are more than simply multiple and diverse, however. Organisms fit remarkably well into the external world in which they live. They have morphologies, physiologies and behaviors that appear to have been carefully and artfully designed to enable each organism to appropriate the world around it for its own life.

It was the marvelous fit of organisms to the environment, much more than the great diversity of forms, that was the chief evidence of a Supreme Designer. Darwin realized that if a naturalistic theory of evolution was to be successful, it would have to explain the apparent perfection of organisms and not simply their variation. At the very beginning of the *Origin of Species* he wrote: "In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist... might come to the conclusion that each species... had descended, like varieties, from other species. Nevertheless, such a conclusion, even if well founded, would be unsatisfactory, until it could be shown how the innumerable species inhabiting this world have been modified, so as to acquire that perfection of structure and coadaptation which most justly excites our admiration." Moreover, Darwin knew that "organs of extreme perfection and complication" were a critical test case for his theory, and he took them up in a section of the chapter on "Difficulties of the Theory." He wrote: "To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree."

These "organs of extreme perfection" were only the most extreme case of a more general phenomenon: adaptation. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was meant to solve both the problem of the origin of diversity and the problem of the origin of adaptation at one stroke. Perfect organs were a difficulty of the theory not in that natural selection could not account for them but rather in that they were its most rigorous test, since on the face of it they seemed the best intuitive demonstration that a divine artificer was at work.

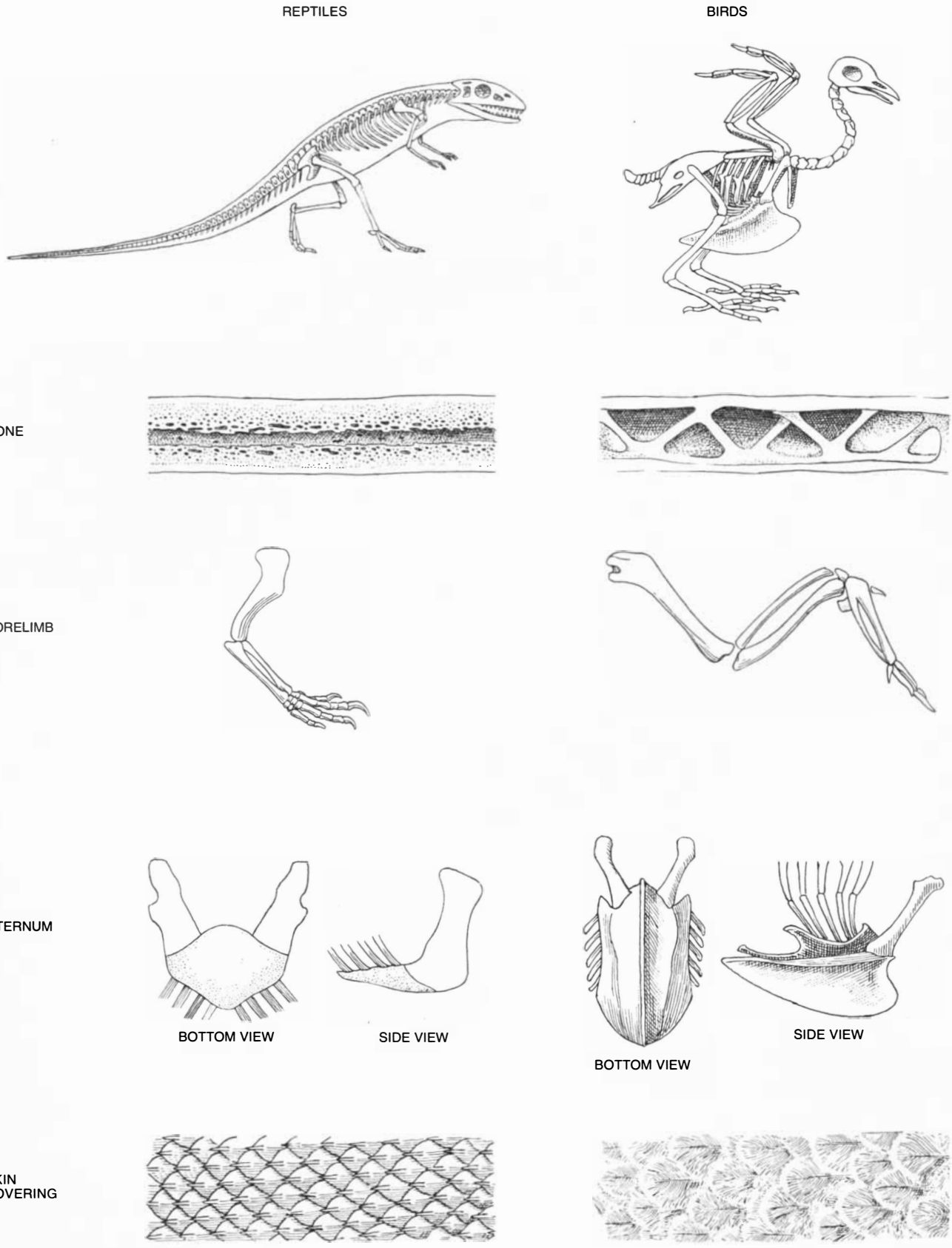
The modern view of adaptation is that the external world sets certain "problems" that organisms need to "solve," and that evolution by means of natural selection is the mechanism for creating these solutions. Adaptation is the process of evolutionary change by which the organism provides a better and better "solution" to the "problem," and the end result is the state of being adapted. In the course of the evolution of birds from reptiles there was a successive alteration of the bones, the muscles and the skin of the forelimb to give rise to a wing; an increase in the size of the breastbone to provide an anchor for the wing muscles; a general restructuring of bones to make them very light but strong, and the development of feathers to provide both aerodynamic elements and lightweight insulation. This wholesale reconstruction of a reptile to make a bird is considered a process of major adaptation by which birds solved the problem of flight. Yet there is no end to adaptation. Having adapted to flight, some birds reversed the process: the penguins adapted to marine life by changing their wings into flippers and their feathers into a waterproof covering, thus solving the problem of aquatic existence.

The concept of adaptation implies a preexisting world that poses a problem to which an adaptation is the solution. A key is adapted to a lock by cutting and filing it; an electrical appliance is adapted to a different voltage by a transform-

ADAPTATION is exemplified by "industrial melanism" in the peppered moth (*Biston betularia*). Air pollution kills the lichens that would normally colonize the bark of tree trunks. On the dark, lichenless bark of an oak tree near Liverpool in England the melanic (*black*) form is better adapted: it is better camouflaged against predation by birds than the light, peppered wild type (*top photograph on opposite page*), which it largely replaced through natural selection in industrial areas of England in the late 19th century. Now air quality is improving. On a nearby beech tree colonized by algae and the lichen *Lecanora conizaeoides*, which is itself particularly well adapted to low levels of pollution, the two forms of the moth are equally conspicuous (*middle*). On the lichened bark of an oak tree in rural Wales the wild type is almost invisible (*bottom*), and in such areas it predominates. The photographs were made by J. A. Bishop of the University of Liverpool and Laurence M. Cook of the University of Manchester.

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EVOLUTION OF BIRDS from reptiles can be considered a process of adaptation by which birds "solved" the "problem" of flight. At the top of the illustration the skeleton of a modern pigeon (*right*) is compared with that of an early reptile: a thecodont, a Triassic ancestor of dinosaurs and birds. Various reptile features were modified to become structures specialized for flight. Heavy, dense bone was restructured to become lighter but strong; the forelimb was lengthened (and its muscles and skin covering were changed) to become a wing; the reptilian sternum, or breastbone, was enlarged and deepened to anchor the wing muscles (even in *Archaeopteryx,* the Jurassic transition form between reptiles and birds whose sternum is pictured here, the sternum was small and shallow); scales developed into feathers.

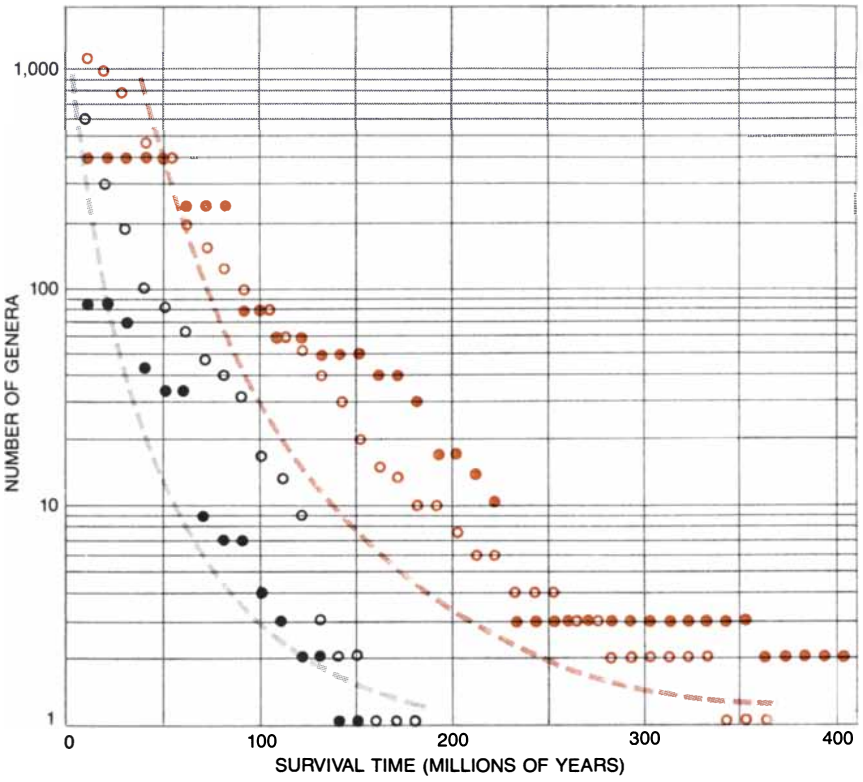
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er. Although the physical world certainly predated the biological one, there are certain grave difficulties for evolutionary theory in defining that world for the process of adaptation. It is the difficulty of defining the "ecological niche." The ecological niche is a multidimensional description of the total environment and way of life of an organism. Its description includes physical factors, such as temperature and moisture; biological factors, such as the nature and quantity of food sources and of predators, and factors of the behavior of the organism itself, such as its social organization, its pattern of movement and its daily and seasonal activity cycles.

The first difficulty is that if evolution is described as the process of adaptation of organisms to niches, then the niches must exist before the species that are to fit them. That is, there must be empty niches waiting to be filled by the evolution of new species. In the absence of organisms in actual relation to the environment, however, there is an infinity of ways the world can be broken up into arbitrary niches. It is trivially easy to describe "niches" that are unoccupied. For example, no organism makes a living by laying eggs, crawling along the surface of the ground, eating grass and living for several years. That is, there are no grass-eating snakes, even though snakes live in the grass. Nor are there any warm-blooded, egg-laying animals that eat the mature leaves of trees, even though birds inhabit trees. Given any description of an ecological niche occupied by an actual organism, one can create an infinity of descriptions of unoccupied niches simply by adding another arbitrary specification. Unless there is some preferred or natural way to subdivide the world into niches the concept loses all predictive and explanatory value.

A second difficulty with the specification of empty niches to which organisms adapt is that it leaves out of account the role of the organism itself in creating the niche. Organisms do not experience environments passively; they create and define the environment in which they live. Trees remake the soil in which they grow by dropping leaves and putting down roots. Grazing animals change the species composition of herbs on which they feed by cropping, by dropping manure and by physically disturbing the ground. There is a constant interplay of the organism and the environment, so that although natural selection may be adapting the organism to a particular set of environmental circumstances, the evolution of the organism itself changes those circumstances. Finally, organisms themselves determine which external factors will be part of their niche by their own activities. By building a nest the phoebe makes the availability of dried grass an important part of its niche, at the same time making the nest itself a component of the niche.



EXTINCTION RATES in many evolutionary lines suggest that natural selection does not necessarily improve adaptation. The data, from Leigh Van Valen of the University of Chicago, show the duration of survival of a number of living (*solid dots*) and extinct (*open circles*) genera of Echinoidea (*black*) and Pelecypoda (*color*), two classes of marine invertebrates. If natural selection truly fitted organisms to environments, the points should fall along concave curves (*broken-line curves*) indicating a lower probability of extinction for long-lived genera. Actually, points fall along rather straight lines, indicating constant rate of extinction for each group.

If ecological niches can be specified only by the organisms that occupy them, evolution cannot be described as a process of adaptation because all organisms are already adapted. Then what is happening in evolution? One solution to this paradox is the Red Queen hypothesis, named by Leigh Van Valen of the University of Chicago for the character in *Through the Looking Glass* who had to keep running just to stay in the same place. Van Valen's theory is that the environment is constantly decaying with respect to existing organisms, so that natural selection operates essentially to enable the organisms to maintain their state of adaptation rather than to improve it. Evidence for the Red Queen hypothesis comes from an examination of extinction rates in a large number of evolutionary lines. If natural selection were actually improving the fit of organisms to their environments, then we might expect the probability that a species will become extinct in the next time period to be less for species that have already been in existence for a long time, since the long-lived species are presumably the ones that have been improved by natural selection. The data show, however, that the probability of extinction of a species appears to be a constant, characteristic of the group to which it belongs but independent of whether the species has been in existence for a long time or a short one. In other words, natural selection over the long run does not seem to improve a species' chance of survival but simply enables it to "track," or keep up with, the constantly changing environment.

The Red Queen hypothesis also accounts for extinction (and for the occasional dramatic increases in the abundance and range of species). For a species to remain in existence in the face of a constantly changing environment it must have sufficient heritable variation of the right kind to change adaptively. For example, as a region becomes drier because of progressive changes in rainfall patterns, plants may respond by evolving a deeper root system or a thicker cuticle on the leaves, but only if their gene pool contains genetic variation for root length or cuticle thickness, and successfully only if there is enough genetic variation so that the species can change as fast as the environment. If the genetic variation is inadequate, the species will become extinct. The genetic resources

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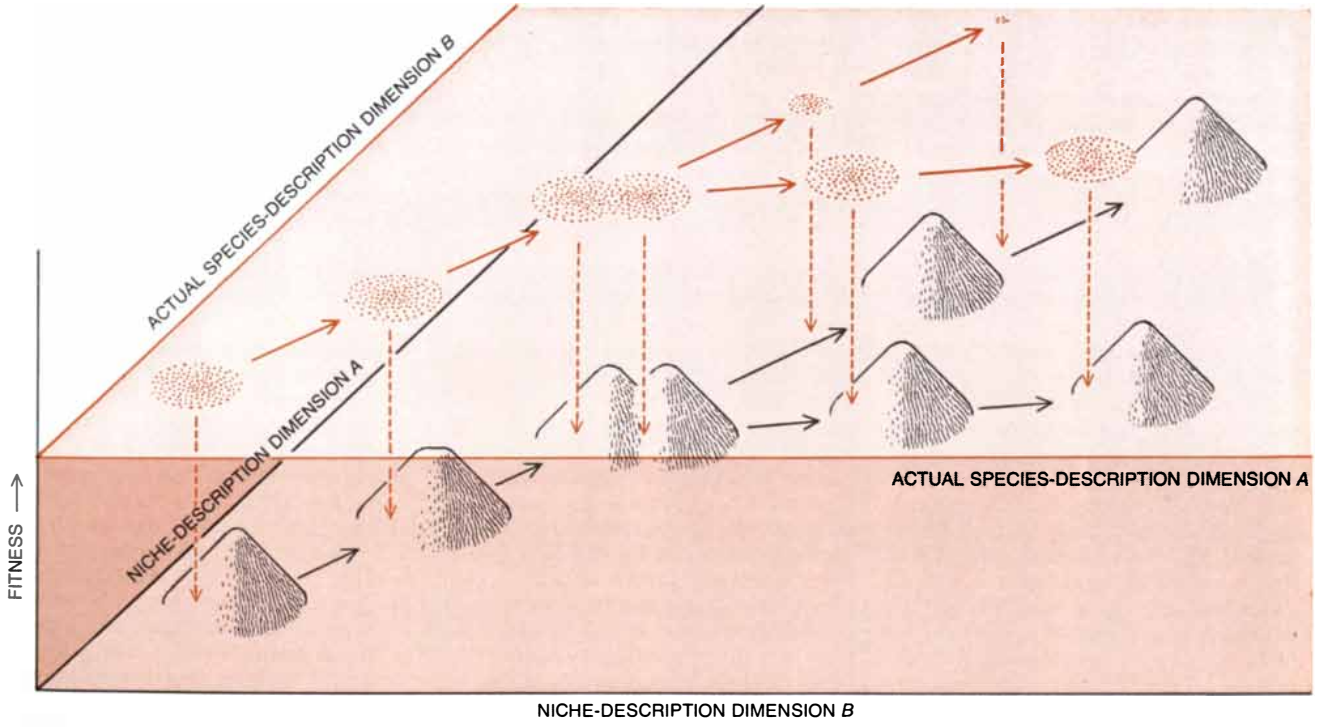
of a species are finite, and eventually the environment will change so rapidly that the species is sure to become extinct.

The theory of environmental tracking seems at first to solve the problem of adaptation and the ecological niche. Whereas in a barren world there is no clear way to divide the environment into preexisting niches, in a world already occupied by many organisms the terms of the problem change. Niches are already defined by organisms. Small changes in the environment mean small changes in the conditions of life of those organisms, so that the new niches to which they must evolve are in a sense very close to the old ones in the multidimensional niche space. Moreover, the organisms that will occupy these slightly changed niches must themselves come from the previously existing niches, so that the kinds of species that can evolve are stringently limited to ones that are extremely similar to their immediate ancestors. This in turn guarantees that the changes induced in the environment by the changed organism will also be small and continuous in niche space. The picture of adaptation that emerges is the very slow movement of the niche through niche space, accompanied by a slowly changing species, always slightly behind, slightly ill-adapted, eventually becoming extinct as it fails to keep up with the changing environment because it runs out of genetic variation on which natural selection can operate. In this view species form when two populations of the same species track environments that diverge from each other over a period of time.

The problem with the theory of environmental tracking is that it does not predict or explain what is most dramatic in evolution: the immense diversification of organisms that has accompanied, for example, the occupation of the land from the water or of the air from the land. Why did warm-blooded animals arise at a time when cold-blooded animals were still plentiful and come to coexist with them? The appearance of entirely new life forms, of ways of making a living, is equivalent to the occupation of a previously barren world and brings us back to the preexistent empty niche waiting to be filled. Clearly there have been in the past ways of making a living that were unexploited and were then "discovered" or "created" by existing organisms. There is no way to explain and predict such evolutionary adaptations unless a priori niches can be described on the basis of some physical principles before organisms come to occupy them.

That is not easy to do, as is indicated by an experiment in just such a priori predictions that has been carried out by probes to Mars and Venus designed to detect life. The instruments are designed to detect life by detecting growth in nutrient solutions, and the solutions are prepared in accordance with knowledge of terrestrial microorganisms, so that the probes will detect only organisms whose ecological niches are like those on the earth. If Martian and Venusian life partition the environment in totally unexpected ways, they will remain unrecorded. What the designers of those instruments never dreamed of was that the reverse might happen: that the nature of the physical environment on Mars might be such that when it was provided with a terrestrial ecological niche, inorganic reactions might have a lifelike appearance. Yet that may be exactly what happened. When the Martian soil was dropped into the nutrient broth on the lander, there was a rapid production of carbon dioxide and then—nothing. Either an extraordinary kind of life began to grow much more rapidly than any terrestrial microorganism and then was poisoned by its own activity in a strange environment, or else the Martian soil is such that its contact with nutrient broths results in totally unexpected catalytic processes. In either case the Mars life-detection experiment has foundered on the problem of defining ecological niches without organisms.

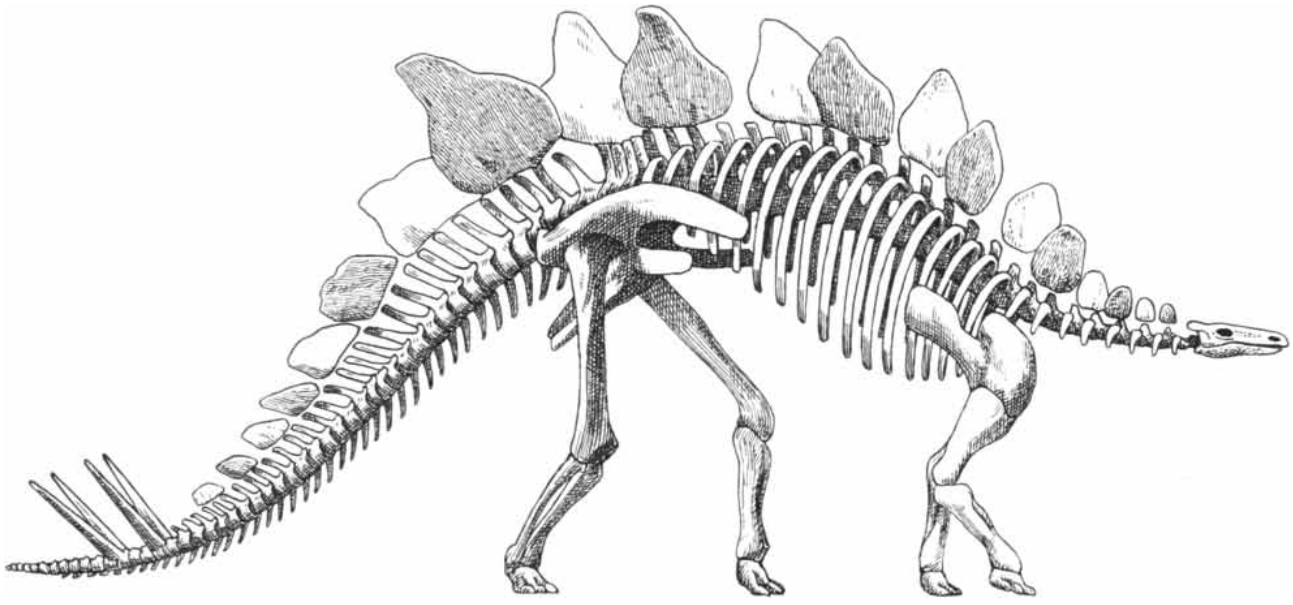
Much of evolutionary biology is the working out of an adaptationist program. Evolutionary biologists assume that each aspect of an organism's morphology, physiology and behavior has been molded by natural selection as a solution to a problem posed by the



SPECIES TRACK ENVIRONMENT through niche space, according to one view of adaptation. The niche, visualized as an "adaptive peak," keeps changing (moving to the right); a slowly changing species population (*colored dots*) just manages to keep up with the niche, always a bit short of the peak. As the environment changes, the single peak becomes two distinct peaks, and two populations diverge to form distinct species. One species cannot keep up with its rapidly changing environment, becomes less fit (lags farther behind changing peak) and extinct. Here niche space and actual-species space have only two dimensions; both of them are actually multidimensional.

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STEGOSAURUS, a large herbivorous dinosaur of the Jurassic period, had an array of bony plates along its back. Were they solutions to the problem of defense, courtship recognition or heat regulation? An engineering analysis reveals features characteristic of heat regulators: porous structure (suggesting a rich blood supply), particularly large plates over the massive part of the body, staggered arrangement along the midline, a constriction near the base and so on. This skeleton in the American Museum of Natural History is 18 feet long.

environment. The role of the evolutionary biologist is then to construct a plausible argument about how each part functions as an adaptive device. For example, functional anatomists study the structure of animal limbs and analyze their motions by time-lapse photography, comparing the action and the structure of the locomotor apparatus in different animals. Their interest is not, however, merely descriptive. Their work is informed by the adaptationist program, and their aim is to explain particular anatomical features by showing that they are well suited to the function they perform. Evolutionary ethologists and sociobiologists carry the adaptationist program into the realm of animal behavior, providing an adaptive explanation for differences among species in courting pattern, group size, aggressiveness, feeding behavior and so on. In each case they assume, like the functional anatomist, that the behavior is adaptive and that the goal of their analysis is to reveal the particular adaptation.

The dissection of an organism into parts, each of which is regarded as a specific adaptation, requires two sets of a priori decisions. First one must decide on the appropriate way to divide the organism and then one must describe what problem each part solves. This amounts to creating descriptions of the organism and of the environment and then relating the descriptions by functional statements; one can either start with the problems and try to infer which aspect of the organism is the solution or start with the organism and then ascribe adaptive functions to each part.

For example, for individuals of the same species to recognize each other at mating time is a problem, since mistakes about species mean time, energy and gametes wasted in courtship and mating without the production of viable offspring; species traits such as distinctive color markings, special courtship behavior, unique mating calls, odors and restricted time and place of activity can be considered specific adaptations for the proper recognition of potential mates. On the other hand, the large, leaf-shaped bony plates along the back of the dinosaur *Stegosaurus* constitute a specific characteristic for which an adaptive function needs to be inferred. They have been variously explained as solutions to the problem of defense (by making the animal appear to be larger or by interfering directly with the predator's attack), the problem of recognition in courtship and the problem of temperature regulation (by serving as cooling fins).

The same problems that arose in deciding on a proper description of the ecological niche without the organism arise when one tries to describe the organism itself. Is the leg a unit in evolution, so that the adaptive function of the leg can be inferred? If so, what about a part of the leg, say the foot, or a single toe, or one bone of a toe? The evolution of the human chin is an instructive example. Human morphological evolution can be generally described as a "neotenic" progression. That is, human infants and adults resemble the fetal and young forms of apes more than they resemble adult apes; it is as if human beings are born at an earlier stage of physical development than apes and do not mature as far along the apes' development path. For example, the relative proportion of skull size to body size is about the same in newborn apes and human beings, whereas adult apes have much larger bodies in relation to their heads than we do; in effect their bodies "go further."

The exception to the rule of human neoteny is the chin, which grows relatively larger in human beings, whereas both infant and adult apes are chinless. Attempts to explain the human chin as a specific adaptation selected to grow larger failed to be convincing. Finally it was realized that in an evolutionary sense the chin does not exist! There are two growth fields in the lower jaw: the dentary field, which is the bony structure of the jaw, and the alveolar field, in which the teeth are set. Both the dentary and the alveolar fields do show neoteny. They have both become smaller in the human evolutionary line. The alveolar field has shrunk somewhat faster than the dentary one, however, with the result that a "chin" appears as a pure consequence of the relative regression rates of the two growth fields. With the recognition that the chin is a mental construct rather than a unit in evolution the problem of its adaptive explanation disappears. (Of course, we may go on to ask why the dentary and alveolar growth fields have regressed at different rates in evolution, and then provide an adaptive explanation for that phenomenon.)

Sometimes even the correct topology of description is unknown. The brain is divided into anatomical divisions corresponding to certain separable

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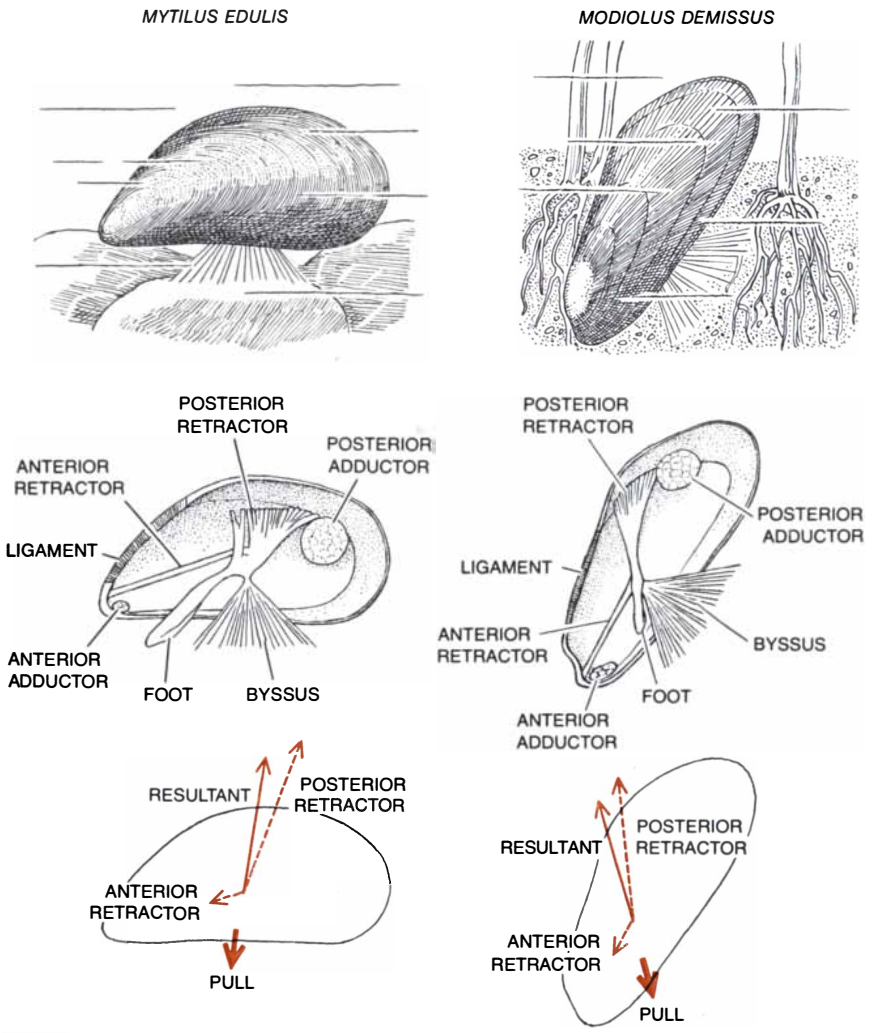
nervous functions that can be localized, but memory is not one of those functions. The memory of specific events seems to be stored diffusely over large regions of the cerebrum rather than being localized microscopically. As one moves from anatomy to behavior the problem of a correct description becomes more acute and the opportunities to introduce arbitrary constructs as if they were evolutionary traits multiply. Animal behavior is described in terms of aggression, division of labor, warfare, dominance, slave-making, cooperation—and yet each of these is a category that is taken directly from human social experience and is transferred to animals.

The decision as to which problem is solved by each trait of an organism is equally difficult. Every trait is involved in a variety of functions, and yet one would not want to say that the character is an adaptation for all of them. The green turtle *Chelonia mydas* is a large marine turtle of the tropical Pacific. Once a year the females drag themselves up the beach with their front flippers to the dry sand above the high-water mark. There they spend many hours laboriously digging a deep hole for their eggs, using their hind flippers as trowels. No one who has watched this painful process would describe the turtles' flippers as adaptations for land locomotion and digging; the animals move on land and dig with their flippers because nothing better is available. Conversely, even if a trait seems clearly adaptive, it cannot be assumed that the species would suffer in its absence. The fur of a polar bear is an adaptation for temperature regulation, and a hairless polar bear would certainly freeze to death. The color of a polar bear's fur is another matter. Although it may be an adaptation for camouflage, it is by no means certain that the polar bear would become extinct or even less numerous if it were brown. Adaptations are not necessary conditions of the existence of the species.

For extinct species the problem of judging the adaptive status of a trait is made more difficult because both the trait and its function must be reconstructed. In principle there is no way to be sure whether the dorsal plates of *Stegosaurus* were heat-regulation devices, a defense mechanism, a sexual recognition sign or all these things. Even in living species where experiments can be carried out a doubt remains. Some modern lizards have a brightly colored dewlap under the jaw. The dewlap may be a warning sign, a sexual attractant or a species-recognition signal. Experiments removing or altering the dewlap could decide, in principle, how it functions. That is a different question from its status as an adaptation, however, since the assertion of adaptation implies a historical argument about natural selection as the cause of its establishment. The large dorsal plates of *Stegosaurus* may have evolved because individuals with slightly larger plates were better able to gather food in the heat of the day than other individuals. If, when the plates reached a certain size, they incidentally frightened off predators, they would be a "preadaptation" for defense. The distinction between the primary adaptation for which a trait evolved and incidental functions it may have come to have cannot be made without the reconstruction of the forces of natural selection during the actual evolution of the species.

The current procedure for judging the adaptation of traits is an engineering analysis of the organism and its environment. The biologist is in the position of an archaeologist who uncovers a machine without any written record and attempts to reconstruct not only its operation but also its purpose. The hypothesis that the dorsal plates of *Stegosaurus* were a heat-regulation device is based on the fact that the plates were porous and probably had a large supply of blood vessels, on their alternate placement to the left and right of the midline (suggesting cooling fins), on their large size over the most massive part of the body and on the constriction near their base, where they are closest to the heat source and would be inefficient heat radiators.

Ideally the engineering analysis can be quantitative as well as qualitative and so provide a more rigorous test of the



FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS indicates how the shape and musculature of two species of mussels are adapted to their particular environments. *Mytilus edulis* (*left*) attaches itself to rocks by means of its byssus, a beardlike group of threads (*top*). Its ventral, or lower, edge is flattened; the anterior and posterior retractor muscles are positioned (*middle*) so that their resultant force pulls the bottom of the shell squarely down to the substratum (*bottom*). *Modiolus demissus* (*right*) attaches itself to debris in marshes. Its ventral edge is sharply angled to facilitate penetration of the substratum; its retractor muscles are positioned to pull its anterior end down into the marsh. The analysis was done by Steven M. Stanley of Johns Hopkins University.

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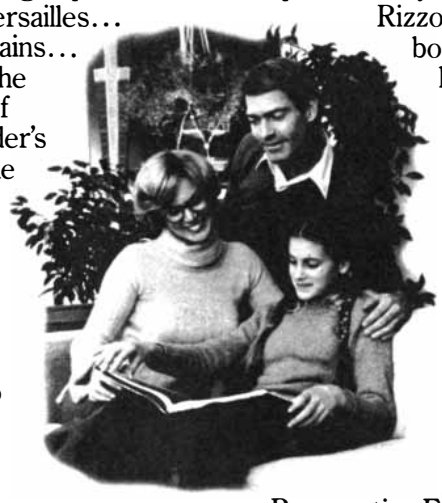
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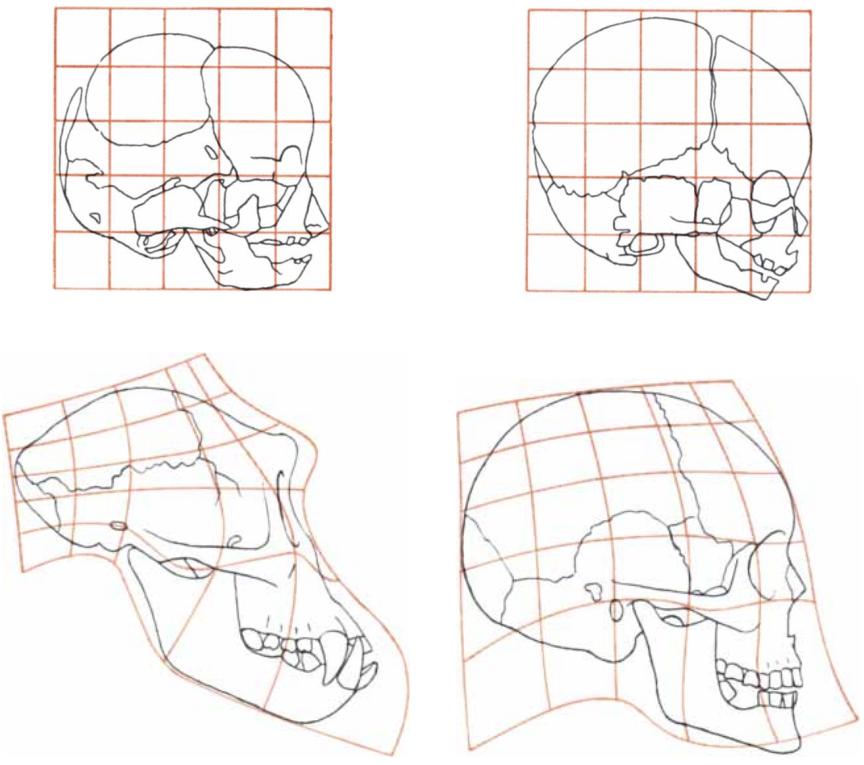
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adaptive hypothesis. Egbert G. Leigh, Jr., of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute posed the question of the ideal shape of a sponge on the assumption that feeding efficiency is the problem to be solved. A sponge's food is suspended in water and the organism feeds by passing water along its cell surfaces. Once water is processed by the sponge it should be ejected as far as possible from the organism so that the new water taken in is rich in food particles. By an application of simple hydrodynamic principles Leigh was able to show that the actual shape of sponges is maximally efficient. Of course, sponges differ from one another in the details of their shape, so that a finer adjustment of the argument would be needed to explain the differences among species. Moreover, one cannot be sure that feeding efficiency is the only problem to be solved by shape. If the optimal shape for feeding had turned out to be one with many finely divided branches and protuberances rather than the compact shape observed, it might have been argued that the shape was a compromise between the optimal adaptation for feeding and the greatest resistance to predation by small browsing fishes.

Just such a compromise has been suggested for understanding the feeding behavior of some birds. Gordon H. Orians of the University of Washington studied the feeding behavior of birds that fly out from a nest, gather food and bring it back to the nest for consumption ("central-place foraging"). If the bird were to take food items indiscriminately as it came on them, the energy cost of the round trip from the nest and back might be greater than the energy gained from the food. On the other hand, if the bird chose only the largest food items, it might have to search so long that again the energy it consumed would be too great. For any actual distribution of food-particle sizes in nature there is some optimal foraging behavior for the bird that will maximize its net energy gain from feeding. Orians found that birds indeed do not take food particles at random but are biased in the direction of an optimal particle size. They do not, however, choose the optimal solution either. Orians' explanation was that the foraging behavior is a compromise between maximum energy efficiency and not staying away from the nest too long, because the young are exposed to predation when they are unattended.

The example of central-place foraging illustrates a basic assumption of all such engineering analyses, that of ceteris paribus, or all other things being equal. In order to make an argument that a trait is an optimal solution to a particular problem, it must be possible to view the trait and the problem in isolation, all other things being equal. If all other things are not equal, if a change in a trait as a solution to one problem changes the organism's relation to other problems of the environment, it becomes impossible to carry out the analysis part by part, and we are left in the hopeless position of seeing the whole organism as being adapted to the whole environment.



NEOTENY OF HUMAN SKULL is evident when the growth of the chimpanzee skull (*left*) and of the human skull (*right*) is plotted on transformed coordinates, which show the relative displacement of each part. The chimpanzee and the human skulls are much more similar at the fetal stage (*top*) than they are at the adult stage (*bottom*). The adult human skull also departs less from the fetal form than the adult chimpanzee skull departs from its fetal form, except in the case of the chin, which becomes relatively larger in human beings. The chin is a mental construct, however: the result of allometry, or differential growth, of different parts of human jaw.

The mechanism by which organisms are said to adapt to the environment is that of natural selection. The theory of evolution by natural selection rests on three necessary principles: Different individuals within a species differ from one another in physiology, morphology and behavior (the principle of variation); the variation is in some way heritable, so that on the average offspring resemble their parents more than they resemble other individuals (the principle of heredity); different variants leave different numbers of offspring either immediately or in remote generations (the principle of natural selection).

These three principles are necessary and sufficient to account for evolutionary change by natural selection. There must be variation to select from; that variation must be heritable, or else there will be no progressive change from generation to generation, since there would be a random distribution of offspring even if some types leave more offspring than others. The three principles say nothing, however, about adaptation. In themselves they simply predict change caused by differential reproductive success without making any prediction about the fit of organisms to an ecological niche or the solution of ecological problems.

Adaptation was introduced by Darwin into evolutionary theory by a fourth principle: Variations that favor an individual's survival in competition with other organisms and in the face of environmental stress tend to increase reproductive success and so tend to be preserved (the principle of the struggle for existence). Darwin made it clear that the struggle for existence, which he derived from Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population,* included more than the actual competition of two organisms for the same resource in short supply. He wrote: "I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense.... Two canine animals in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of the desert

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is said to struggle for life against the drought."

The diversity that is generated by various mechanisms of reproduction and mutation is in principle random, but the diversity that is observed in the real world is nodal: organisms have a finite number of morphologies, physiologies and behaviors and occupy a finite number of niches. It is natural selection, operating under the pressures of the struggle for existence, that creates the nodes. The nodes are "adaptive peaks," and the species or other form occupying a peak is said to be adapted.

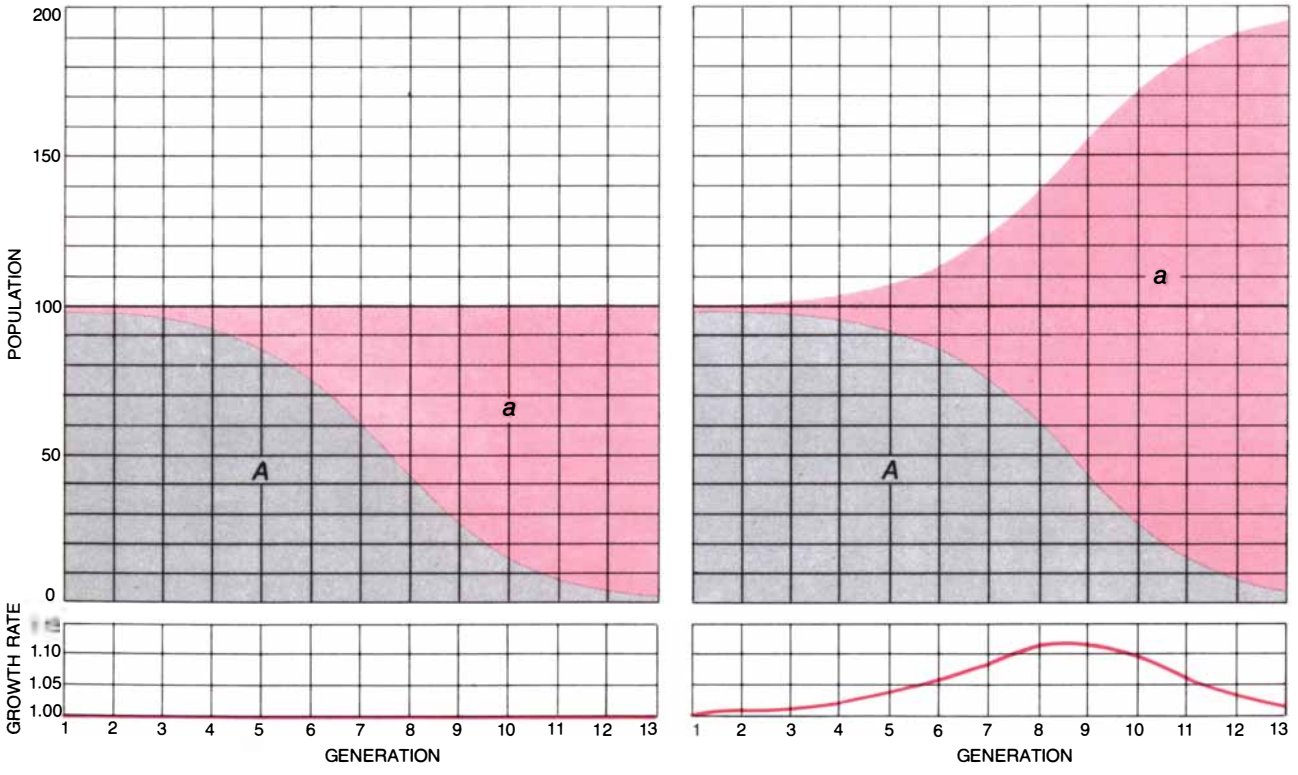
More specifically, the struggle for existence provides a device for predicting which of two organisms will leave more offspring. An engineering analysis can determine which of two forms of zebra can run faster and so can more easily escape predators; that form will leave more offspring. An analysis might predict the eventual evolution of zebra locomotion even in the absence of existing differences among individuals, since a careful engineer might think of small improvements in design that would give a zebra greater speed.

When adaptation is considered to be the result of natural selection under the pressure of the struggle for existence, it is seen to be a relative condition rather than an absolute one. Even though a species may be surviving and numerous, and therefore may be adapted in an absolute sense, a new form may arise that has a greater reproductive rate on the same resources, and it may cause the extinction of the older form. The concept of relative adaptation removes the apparent tautology in the theory of natural selection. Without it the theory of natural selection states that fitter individuals have more offspring and then defines the fitter as being those that leave more offspring; since some individuals will always have more offspring than others by sheer chance, nothing is explained. An analysis in which problems of design are posed and characters are understood as being design solutions breaks through this tautology by predicting in advance which individuals will be fitter.

The relation between adaptation and natural selection does not go both ways. Whereas greater relative adaptation leads to natural selection, natural selection does not necessarily lead to greater adaptation. Let us contrast two evolutionary scenarios. We begin with a resource-limited population of 100 insects of type *A* requiring one unit of food resource per individual. A mutation to a new type *a* arises that doubles the fecundity of its bearers but does absolutely nothing to the efficiency of the utilization of resources. We can calculate what happens to the composition, size and growth rate of the population over a period of time [*see illustration below*]. In a second scenario we again begin with the population of 100 individuals of type *A*, but now there arises a different mutation *a*, which does nothing to the fecundity of its bearers but doubles their efficiency of resource utilization. Again we can calculate the population history.

In both cases the new type *a* replaces the old type *A*. In the case of the first mutation nothing changes but the fecundity; the adult population size and the growth rate are the same throughout the process and the only effect is that twice as many immature stages are being produced to die before adulthood. In the second case, on the other hand, the population eventually doubles its adult members as well as its immature members, but not its fecundity. In the course of its evolution the second population has a growth rate greater than 1 for a while but eventually attains a constant size and stops growing.

In which of these populations, if in either, would the individuals be better



TWO DIFFERENT MUTATIONS have different demographic results for a resource-limited population of 100 insects. In one case (*left*) a mutation arises that doubles the fecundity of its bearers. The new type (*a*) replaces the old type (*A*), but the total population does not increase: the growth rate (*bottom*) remains 1.00. In the other case (*right*) a mutation arises that doubles the carrier's efficiency of resource utilization. Now the new population grows more rapidly, but only for a short time: eventually the growth rate falls back to 1.00 and the total population is stabilized at 200. The question is: Has either mutation given rise to a population that is better adapted?

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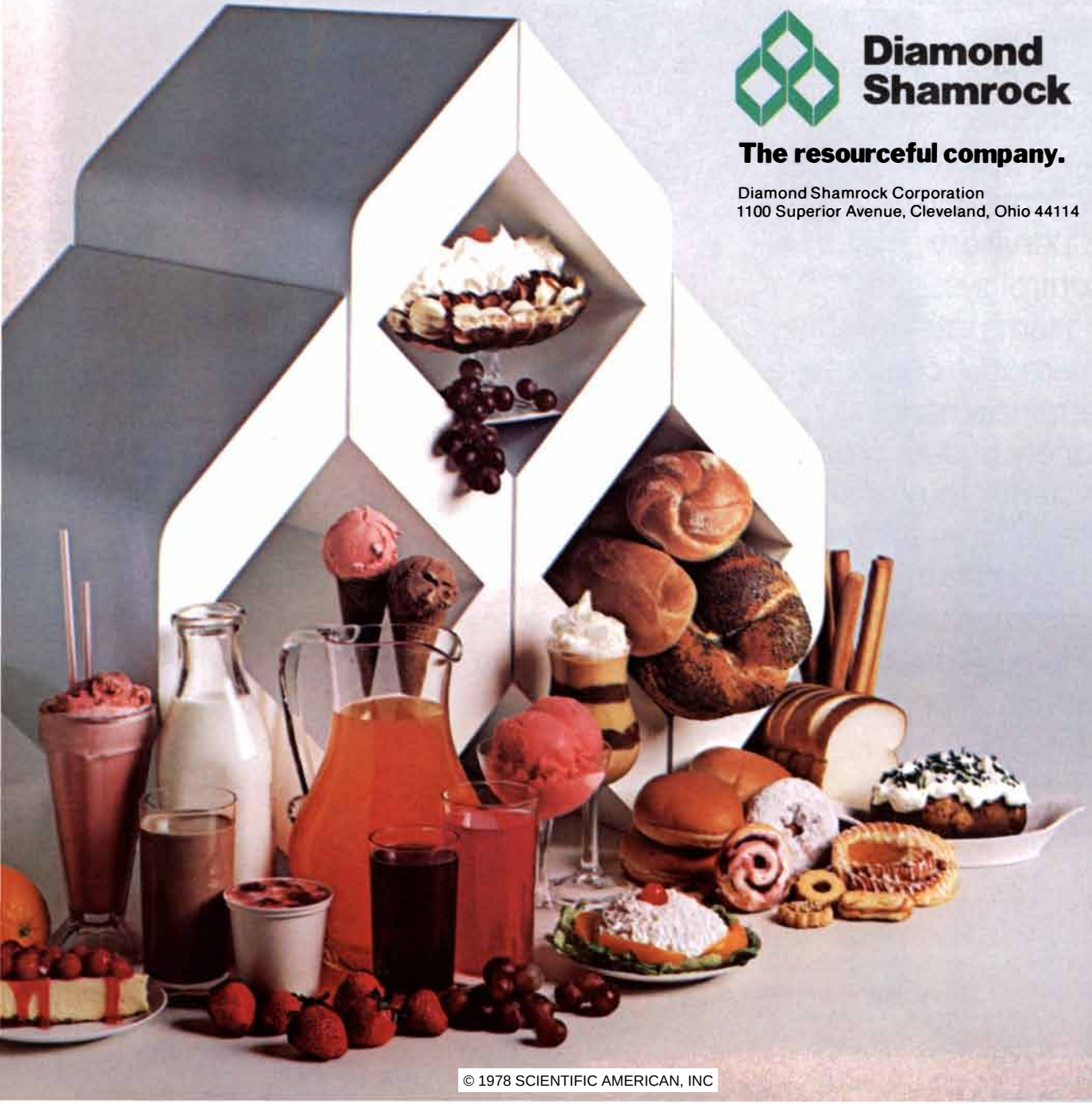
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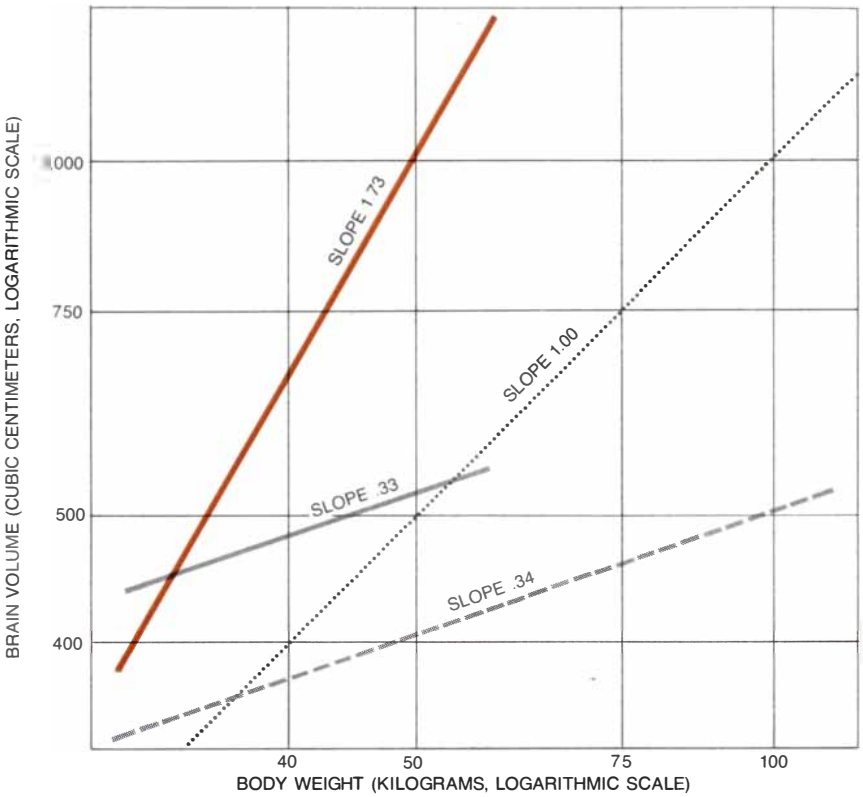
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adapted than those in the old population? Those with higher fecundity would be better buffered against accidents such as sudden changes in temperature since there would be a greater chance that some of their eggs would survive. On the other hand, their offspring would be more susceptible to the epidemic diseases of immature forms and to predators that concentrate on the more numerous immature forms. Individuals in the second population would be better adapted to temporary resource shortages, but also more susceptible to predators or epidemics that attack adults in a density-dependent manner. Hence there is no way we can predict whether a change due to natural selection will increase or decrease the adaptation in general. Nor can we argue that the population as a whole is better off in one case than in another. Neither population continues to grow or is necessarily less subject to extinction, since the larger number of immature or adult stages presents the same risks for the population as a whole as it does for individual families.

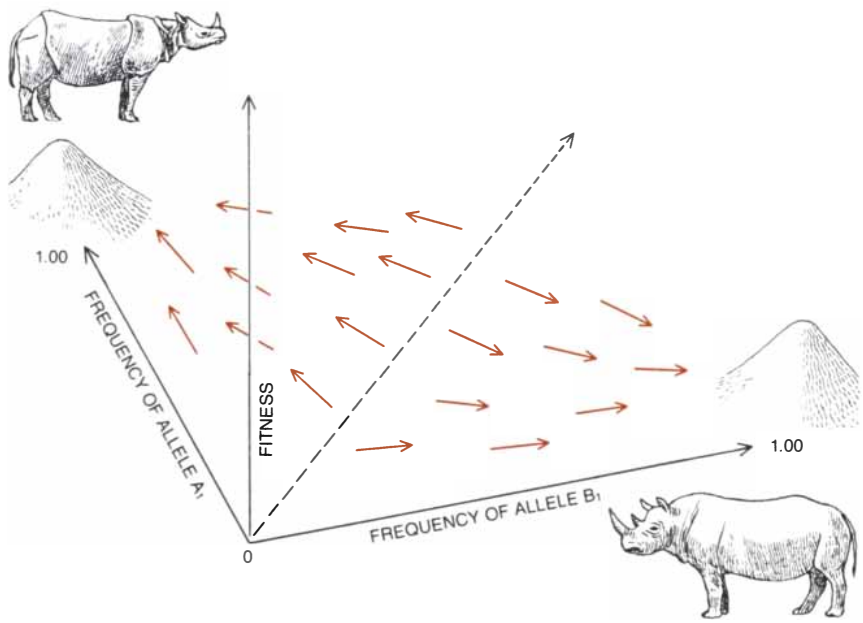
Unfortunately the concept of relative adaptation also requires the ceteris paribus assumption, so that in practice it is not easy to predict which of two forms will leave more offspring. A zebra having longer leg bones that enable it to run faster than other zebras will leave more offspring only if escape from predators is really the problem to be solved, if a slightly greater speed will really decrease the chance of being taken and if longer leg bones do not interfere with some other limiting physiological process. Lions may prey chiefly on old or injured zebras likely in any case to die soon, and it is not even clear that it is speed that limits the ability of lions to catch zebras. Greater speed may cost the zebra something in feeding efficiency, and if food rather than predation is limiting, a net selective disadvantage might result from solving the wrong problem. Finally, a longer bone might break more easily, or require greater developmental resources and metabolic energy to produce and maintain, or change the efficiency of the contraction of the attached muscles. In practice relative-adaptation analysis is a tricky game unless a great deal is known about the total life history of an organism.

Not all evolutionary change can be understood in terms of adaptation. First, some changes will occur directly by natural selection that are not adaptive, as for example the changes in fecundity and feeding efficiency in the hypothetical example I cited above.

Second, many changes occur indirectly as the result of allometry, or differential growth. The rates of growth of different parts of an organism are different,



ALLOMETRY, or differential growth rates for different parts, is responsible for many evolutionary changes. Allometry is illustrated by this comparison of the ratio of brain size to body weight in a number of species of the pongids, or great apes (*broken black curve*), of *Australopithecus*, an extinct hominid line (*solid black*), and of hominids leading to modern man (*color*). A slope of less than 1.00 means the brain has grown more slowly than the body. The slope of more than 1.00 for the human lineage indicates a clear change in the evolution of brain size.

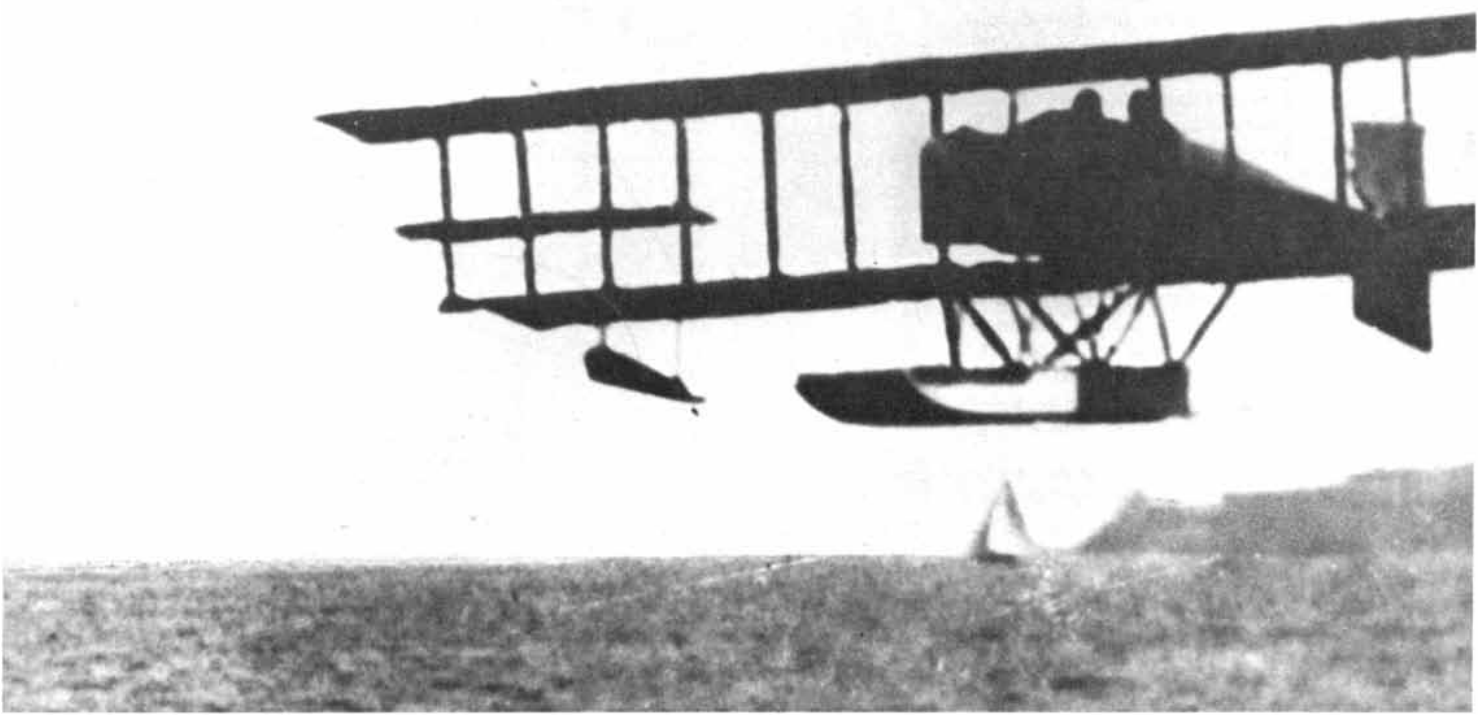


ALTERNATIVE EVOLUTIONARY PATHS may be taken by two species under similar selection pressures. The Indian rhinoceros has one horn and the African rhinoceros has two horns. The horns are adaptations for protection in both cases, but the number of horns does not necessarily constitute a specifically adaptive difference. There are simply two adaptive peaks in a field of gene frequencies, or two solutions to the same problem; some variation in the initial conditions led two rhinoceros populations to respond to similar pressures in different ways. For each of two hypothetical genes there are two alleles: A_1 and A_2, B_1 and B_2. A population of genotype A_1B_2 has one horn and a population of genotype A_2B_1 has two horns.

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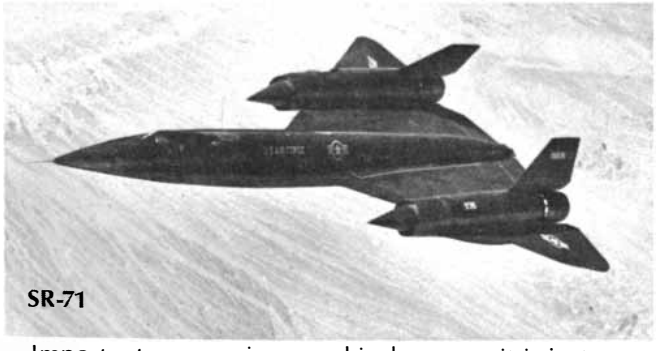
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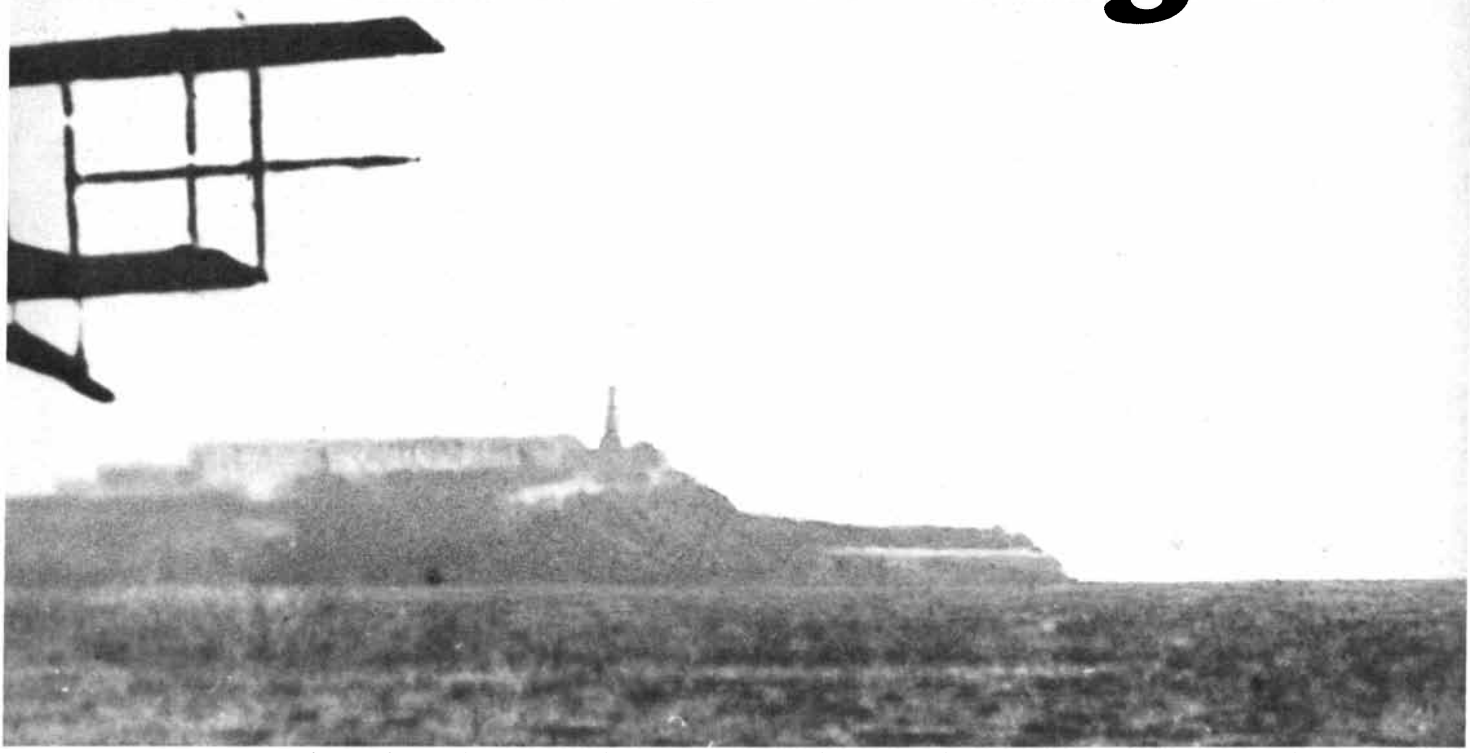


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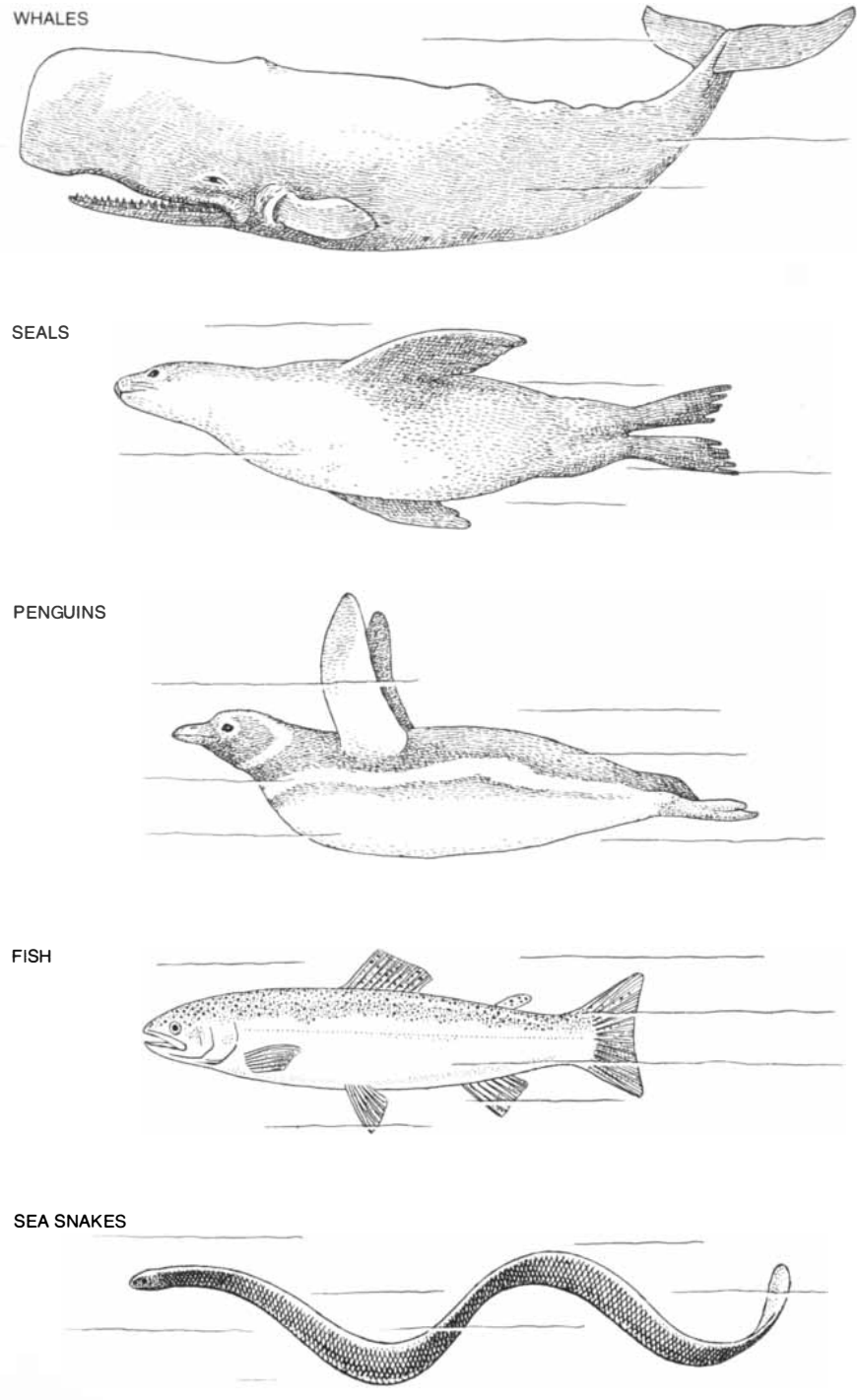
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so that large organisms do not have all their parts in the same proportion. This allometry shows up both between individuals of the same species and between species. Among primate species the brain increases in size more slowly than the body; small apes have a proportionately larger brain than large apes. Since the differential growth is constant for all apes, it is useless to seek an adaptive reason for gorillas' having a relatively smaller brain than, say, chimpanzees.

Third, there is the phenomenon of pleiotropy. Changes in a gene have many different effects on the physiology and development of an organism. Natural selection may operate to increase the frequency of the gene because of one of the effects, with pleiotropic, or unrelated, effects being simply carried along. For example, an enzyme that helps to detoxify poisonous substances by converting them into an insoluble pigment will be selected for its detoxification properties. As a result the color of the organism will change, but no adaptive explanation of the color per se is either required or correct.

Fourth, many evolutionary changes may be adaptive and yet the resulting differences among species in the character may not be adaptive; they may simply be alternative solutions to the same problem. The theory of population genetics predicts that if more than one gene influences a character, there may often be several alternative stable equilibriums of genetic composition even when the force of natural selection remains the same. Which of these adaptive peaks in the space of genetic composition is eventually reached by a population depends entirely on chance events at the beginning of the selective process. (An exact analogy is a pinball game. Which hole the ball will fall into under the fixed force of gravitation depends on small variations in the initial conditions as the ball enters the game.) For example, the Indian rhinoceros has one horn and the African rhinoceros has two. Horns are an adaptation for protection against predators, but it is not true that one horn is specifically adaptive under Indian conditions as opposed to two horns on the African plains. Beginning with two somewhat different developmental systems, the two species responded to the same selective forces in slightly different ways.

Finally, many changes in evolution are likely to be purely random. At the present time population geneticists are sharply divided over how much of the evolution of enzymes and other molecules has been in response to natural selection and how much has resulted from the chance accumulation of mutations. It has proved remarkably difficult to get compelling evidence for changes in enzymes brought about by selection, not to speak of evidence for adaptive changes; the weight of evidence at present is that a good deal of amino acid substitution in evolution has been the result of the random fixation of mutations in small populations. Such random fixations may in fact be accelerated by natural selection if the unselected gene is genetically linked with a gene that is undergoing selection. The unselected gene will then be carried to high frequency in the population as a "hitchhiker."



REALITY OF ADAPTATION is demonstrated by the indisputable fact that unrelated groups of animals do respond to similar selective pressures with similar adaptations. Locomotion in water calls for a particular kind of structure. And the fact is that whales and seals have flippers and flukes, penguins have paddles, fish have fins and sea snakes have a flat cross section.

If the adaptationist program is so fraught with difficulties and if there are so many alternative explanations of evolutionary change, why do biologists not abandon the program altogether?

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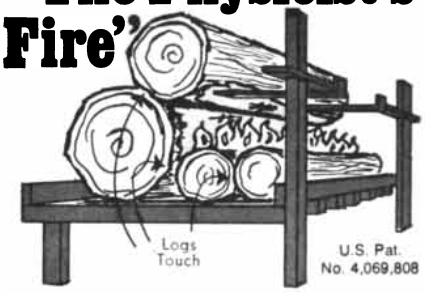
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There are two compelling reasons. On the one hand, even if the assertion of universal adaptation is difficult to test because simplifying assumptions and ingenious explanations can almost always result in an ad hoc adaptive explanation, at least in principle some of the assumptions can be tested in some cases. A weaker form of evolutionary explanation that explained some proportion of the cases by adaptation and left the rest to allometry, pleiotropy, random gene fixations, linkage and indirect selection would be utterly impervious to test. It would leave the biologist free to pursue the adaptationist program in the easy cases and leave the difficult ones on the scrap heap of chance. In a sense, then, biologists are forced to the extreme adaptationist program because the alternatives, although they are undoubtedly operative in many cases, are untestable in particular cases.

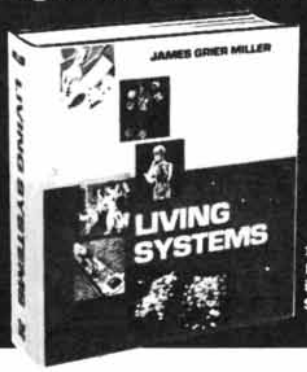
On the other hand, to abandon the notion of adaptation entirely, to simply observe historical change and describe its mechanisms wholly in terms of the different reproductive success of different types, with no functional explanation, would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Adaptation is a real phenomenon. It is no accident that fish have fins, that seals and whales have flippers and flukes, that penguins have paddles and that even sea snakes have become laterally flattened. The problem of locomotion in an aquatic environment is a real problem that has been solved by many totally unrelated evolutionary lines in much the same way. Therefore it must be feasible to make adaptive arguments about swimming appendages. And this in turn means that in nature the ceteris paribus assumption must be workable.

It can only be workable if both the selection between character states and reproductive fitness have two characteristics: continuity and quasi-independence. Continuity means that small changes in a characteristic must result in only small changes in ecological relations; a very slight change in fin shape cannot cause a dramatic change in sexual recognition or make the organism suddenly attractive to new predators. Quasi-independence means that there is a great variety of alternative paths by which a given characteristic may change, so that some of them will allow selection to act on the characteristic without altering other characteristics of the organism in a countervailing fashion; pleiotropic and allometric relations must be changeable. Continuity and quasi-independence are the most fundamental characteristics of the evolutionary process. Without them organisms as we know them could not exist because adaptive evolution would have been impossible.

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by James Grier Miller, M.D., Ph.D.

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- ineffective organizations can function better when distorted communications in them are corrected

This far-ranging general theory has potential, very specific applications to engineering . . . medicine . . . management science . . . the law . . . energy systems . . . environmental systems . . . health delivery systems . . . urban systems . . . industrial systems . . . communication systems . . . computer systems . . . and other types of living or technological systems.

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Stanford Professor of International Peace, Harvard University

Leading scientists talk about *Living Systems*

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Margaret Mead, *anthropologist*
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"*Living Systems* is an epochal book. It is elegant in style and approach and possesses a conceptual and integrative lust that manages to revive in the reader a sense of what the behavioral sciences are all about. This is . . . a classic that will influence the behavioral sciences far longer than the lifetime it took Miller to write it."

Warren Bennis, *social scientist*
former President of the University of Cincinnati

The man behind the theory

James Grier Miller, a founder of systems science, is President of the University of Louisville. He was educated at Harvard University and has served on the faculties at Harvard, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and Johns Hopkins University. At Chicago he was Chairman of the Committee on Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Psychology. At Michigan he founded and directed the Mental Health Research Institute.

The man who first used the phrase "behavioral science" in its modern sense, Dr. Miller has written or coauthored eight books and published over 100 scientific and scholarly articles.

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