Darwin's Conjecture: The Search for General Principles of Social and Economic Evolution

Geoffrey M. Hodgson, Thorbjoslash;rn Knudsen
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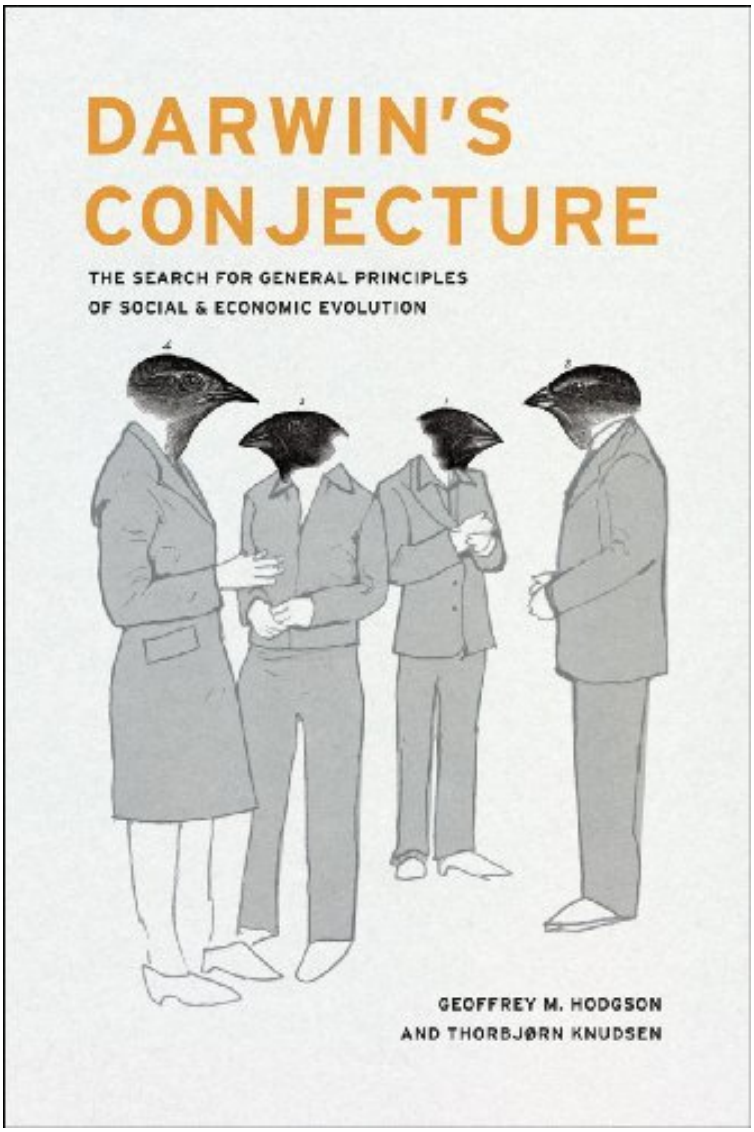

#752138 in eBooks 2010-12-15 2010-12-15File Name: B004L62GUG | File size: 31.Mb

Geoffrey M. Hodgson, Thorbjoslash;rn Knudsen : Darwin's Conjecture: The Search for General Principles of Social and Economic Evolution before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Darwin's Conjecture: The Search for General Principles of Social and Economic Evolution:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Darwinism generalized only as far as social evolutionBy Tim TylerThis is a fine book on the important but much-neglected topic of universal Darwinism - or "generalized Darwinism" as these authors prefer.The authors both come from an economics background - and the book is slanted

towards this subject area.The authors are clearly well read and start out with an interesting and useful history of the subject area.I wholeheartedly endorse the application of Darwin's ideas to social and economic evolution. This book makes essential reading for anyone who shares this interest. Nonetheless, I found that I had many points of disagreement with the authors:Though promoting "generalized Darwinism", these authors fail to expand the domain of Darwinism beyond social and cultural evolution and into the domain of inorganic physics and chemistry. This seems like a massive missed opportunity to me.The authors are enthusiasts for the idea of group selection. I though their chapter about it was terrible. Not only do they fail to make a case for using group selection (as opposed to the competing kin selection framework), they fail to even mention kin selection. In my opinion, this indicates that they don't really understand the issues involved.They criticize dual inheritance theory - on the grounds that "dual inheritance models must be expanded to at least six levels of inheritance". While it is true that there's more to inheritance than just culture and nucleic acids, their ideas about "levels of inheritance" don't make much sense.I didn't get on with the authors preferred terminology either. They use the 'replicator' terminology, but don't defend it well against the criticism that the 'replica' prefix implies high fidelity copying - which they agree is an inappropriate connotation. I can cope with the "replicator" terminology - but the confusion this terminology has caused is pretty massive.The authors defend a definition of "selection" that involves a combination of cross-generational copying and a choice from alternatives - citing George Price's posthumously published 1995 article titled "The Nature of Selection". I far prefer a simpler and narrower definition of "selection" which confines it to a simple choice among alternatives. This is what Price called "subset selection". "Selection" is an ordinary English word. In my opinion, biologists should not redefine the term to mean something counter-intuitive, when there's no good reason for doing so. The authors stick to Price's broad conception of "selection" that includes copying. They coin their own term for this: "successor selection". I find the idea that "selection" includes "subset selection" and "successor selection" to be needlessly complex: selection is one thing, copying is something else and there's no good reason to muddle these ideas together.Lastly, I didn't like these authors laying into the "meme" concept. They claim that memetics is "insufficiently Darwinian" and says that the memetics literature suffers from "conceptual confusion". Apparently, "the idea of the meme has stultified rather than stimulated research". They say that memes as ideas leads to "an untenable dualism" while memes as neural states "procreate viruses of doubt that eventually undermine the whole memetics project". Basically, I thought that their criticisms were a bunch of nonsense. Meme enthusiasts have been some of the main promoters of universal Darwinism. You would think that these authors would recognize them as fellow travelers and try for a sympathetic interpretation. Instead the meme gets a bunch of bogus technical objections and an uncompromising rejection. It was disappointing to find that these authors had failed to understand memetics. It is their loss.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A social evolution primerBy R. MuttI have read a few "lite" books on evolution but usually steered away from its applications to the social realm simply because there were too many polarized options, nothing looked like it would walk me through the ideas without preaching them at me or condemning them. This seemed to be a good book to cover this gap, and I was right.Basically this book provides a fairly sophisticated analysis of social and cultural evolution in the light of the most influential works on the topic. We find out what arguments are for and against it, how we can sanely use the world "evolution" without implying radical change or improvement, and how we can explain both culture and biology using general principles can come from Darwin's empirical observations and relatively basic hypotheses.In some ways this book was more than I bargained for, and it doesn't take a very straight-forward approach to its topics. I sometimes felt like I had to struggle to understand what, in retrospect, turned out to be a simple concept. Am I dumb or did the book confuse the topic? Who knows. I did find that the glossary was very helpful, and reading it several times to tie all the concepts together into a single interlink system of ideas was an incredibly powerful way to make sense of everything else. If you're not new to any of these ideas, you can just read the book straight through with few problems.In all I feel like I got what I came here for, and don't feel like I need to spend much more time figuring out the fundamentals. I am now reading a couple social history books and can see the ideas taking better shape. A definite recommendation before embarking on more empirical studies wherein the theoretical ideas become useful if not necessary.18 of 22 people found the following review helpful. More powerful than I had anticipated...A definite must read.By CustomerThis is an incredibly powerful book (and that's not hyperbole). The authors state in the opening, "The core Darwinian principles involve variation, selection, and inheritance (or replication). The claim that Darwinism applies to social evolution must rest on a clear picture of what these concepts mean. Otherwise, the arguments and counterarguments become lost in a fog. Consequently, much of this work is devoted to clarifying concepts and refining definitions at a fairly abstract level...The primary aim of this book is to show that the core Darwinian mechanisms of variation, selection, and replication apply to social entities and processes, and we give some examples of how they pertain to business and other social phenomena." Now, given that this book has apparently been somewhat (erroneously) advertised as a business/economics book (I base this on the blurbs above, i.e. Marion Blue and the Financial Times), I can only say that this manuscript is much more than some Gordon Gekko manifesto - it only loosely applies to economic matters.In order to keep this review as short as possible let me skip to the chase. The authors begin with a historical account of several individuals who attempted to harness Darwinism (what the author's later call `Generalized Darwinism'), which

is simply the application of Darwinism to social phenomenon; the two most discussed individuals are David George Ritchie and Thorstein Veblen. Also, the authors are quick to point out that this is not `Social Darwinism' in the traditional sense of the term (for more information on that path I would suggest reading: Eugenics and the Nature-Nurture Debate in the Twentieth Century (Palgrave Studies in the History of Science and Technology)). The authors then move towards explaining the confusion between the `Detail Level' and the `Abstract Level': "While the biological and the social are different levels of the same world, the detailed ontology of (say) genes is different from the detailed ontology of (say) the immune system, and both are very different from the detailed ontology of the human social world. A generalized Darwinism proposes that, despite these real and severe ontological differences at the level of detail, there are, nevertheless, also common ontological features at an abstract level. Precisely because it abstracts from detailed ontological differences, a generalized Darwinism cannot explain everything." Next, the authors discuss why some alternative theories are deficient (the problem of human intentionality, principles of self-organization, the "continuity hypothesis," and Lamarckism). Another great contribution this book makes is explaining exactly where Richard Dawkins (the 800-pound gorilla) has gone wrong in his works [e.g. The Selfish Gene: 30th Anniversary Edition--with a new Introduction by the Author]. They do this by drawing upon works by other heavy-hitters such as David Sloan Wilson [Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives] and Elliot Sober [Evidence and Evolution: The Logic Behind the Science]. Furthermore, the authors detail the reasons why the concept of the "meme" and the science of "memetics" never panned out [e.g.: Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science]. So, once the authors have cleared the drawing board by explaining what they don't believe is useful, Hodgson and Knudsen begin to lay the groundwork for a much more robust explanatory generalized Darwinism. And this is where the book really takes off.First, they give a detailed account of what the analogs to the genotypes and phenotypes are, which are the `Generative Replicator' and the `Interactor'. Also, they detail the conditions that must be met in order for an entity to be considered a Replicator or Interactor. This is quite substantial in-and-of itself; however, as I was reading I found a great deal of explanatory power in the book that wasn't explicitly mentioned by the authors. Here are three examples: 1. "Habit replication also often relies on imitation, which need not be fully conscious and can involve some "tacit learning." Imitation can result from an instinctive propensity that has itself evolved for efficacious reasons among social creatures." This is, which the authors don't mention, what I believe is exactly what `Mirror Neurons' do. This is explored by others such as Antonio Damasio in Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain and Marco Iacoboni in Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others.2. "[Sidney] Winters argues that, although tacit or other knowledge must reside in the nerve or brain cells of a set of human beings, its enactment depends crucially on the existence of a structured context in which individuals interact with each other. More broadly, much of the information that is used and transmitted in a culture is embedded in social structures and organizations, in the sense that its existence and transmission depend on them." This is, which the authors don't mention, what I believe is exactly what the `Extended/Embedded/Embodied Cognition' is all about. This is explored by others such as Lawrence Shapiro in Embodied Cognition and Richard Menary in The Extended Mind (Life and Mind: Philosophical Issues in Biology and Psychology).3. "Through a shared language, one person can access the mental model of another. This transmission of mental models is improved by close interaction with error correction. By means of gestures and questions, agents establish joint attention that increases the accuracy of transmission of mental models and establishes mutual understandings. Language is a vital link in this causal chain. Without language, it would be much more difficult to communicate mental models and develop shared understandings at a detailed level. Habits of thought satisfy all four of our conditions for a generative replicator. They constitute conditional generative mechanisms that are essential to a generative replicator." This is, which the authors don't mention, exactly what John R. Searle discusses (especially his concept of a "Status Function Declaration" in his book Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization. In fact, I found that Searle's book and Darwin's Conjecture overlap to a great, and advantageous, extent. I would strongly recommend reading both books together.In sum, the premise is very simple. Human instincts are grounded in our genetics (Genotype/ Replicator) which is "hosted" in our body (Phenotype/ Interactor). Our instincts are then subverted by our habits and reason (which are Generative Replicators), which we gain through exosomatic and symbolic systems. This is described in the last section of the book, where Hodgson and Knudsen detail historically and chronologically, how generalized Darwinism works through Replicators and Interactors on the `Genetic,' `Cultural,' and `Organizational' levels (there is also a great chart that shows this). For me, this book has filled a tremendous explanatory gap; I was able to place many different things into the model that the authors have devised. And there is more in the book (i.e. how group selection really works) that I don't have the time or the space to include. Suffice it to say that this book is exceedingly important and I hope it receives the attention it deserves by everyone, not just economists or business management types. Lastly, I found it much more beneficial than, Evolution--the Extended Synthesis, which tries to accomplish what Hodgson and Knudsen have done here. This is a fantastic book; I highly recommend it.

Of paramount importance to the natural sciences, the principles of Darwinism, which involve variation, inheritance, and selection, are increasingly of interest to social scientists as well. But no one has provided a truly rigorous account

of how the principles apply to the evolution of human societymdash;until now.In Darwinrsquo;s Conjecture, Geoffrey Hodgson and Thorbjoslash;rn Knudsen reveal how the British naturalistrsquo;s core concepts apply to a wide range of phenomena, including business practices, legal systems, technology, and even science itself. They also critique some prominent objections to applying Darwin to social science, arguing that ultimately Darwinism functions as a general theoretical framework for stimulating further inquiry. Social scientists who adopt a Darwinian approach, they contend, can then use it to frame and help develop new explanatory theories and predictive models.This truly pathbreaking workat long last makes the powerful conceptual tools of Darwin available to the social sciences and will be welcomed by scholars and students from a range of disciplines.

ldquo;In Darwinrsquo;s Conjecture, Hodgson and Knudsen join numerous scholars from Darwinrsquo;s day to the present in attempting to extend Darwinrsquo;s analysis of selection to cover other sorts of phenomena, including socioeconomic evolution. The reader of this carefully and clearly written book will come away bereft of the usual superficial objections to selection outside gene-based biological evolution.rdquo;--David Lee Hull, Northwestern University (David Lee Hull)ldquo;One of the most accomplished institutional economists of our time and his coauthor argue for a generalized Darwinism for the social sciences. They are far from alone in thinking that the time is right!rdquo;--Marion Blute, University of Toronto (Marion Blute)"A book that business people should read in order to understand business. It isnbsp;a scholarly and profound work of relevance to all the social sciences."mdash;Financial Times