

The Politician's Fear Of Group Selection

part 1: Scientific Content

Eugene Panferov

in response to
"The False Allure Of Group Selection" by Steven Pinker

1 Intro

In "The False Allure Of Group Selection" Pinker sacrifices all his scientific credibility to "destroy" E.O.Wilson. This seemingly scientific tedium is not scientific, because Pinker does not offer any science, he smears, strawmans, insinuates, and invents yet uncategorized fallacies.

I want to demonstrate how Pinker failed his task, of destroying E.O.Wilson and how utterly he destroyed his scientific credibility. In the first part I will address the scientific content (or rather anti-scientific) of "The False Allure" and show you how Pinker is wrong about biology that Wilson explains to him. In the second part I will address the ethical aspect of Pinker's demagoguery and show you how masterfully he weaves lies.

2 The Name

Traditionally by "Group Selection" people mean a somewhat teleological idea of "benefiting the group instinctively", as if there is an inexplicable urge to benefit a group. It was shown to be unscientific. This is NOT what Wilson means by "group selection". Wilson, without adding any axioms, builds a perfectly geneo-centric theory, which he calls "multilevel selection". Wilson uses the term "group selection" only to highlight the specific level of selection as opposed to other levels.

Wilson highlights that selection acts simultaneously on all manifestations of a gene: a body, a family, a clan, a tribe, a nation, and on the opposite end a cancerous cell against healthy cells. This is a very straightforward idea, there are no reasons for the objective physical process of selection to limit itself to bodies only.

3 The Place Of The Theory

Pinker opens his article with a deep and profound lie:

Human beings live in groups, are affected by the fortunes of their groups, and sometimes make sacrifices that benefit their groups. Does this mean that the human brain has been shaped by natural selection to promote the welfare of the group in

competition with other groups, even when it damages the welfare of the person and his kin? If so, does the theory of natural selection have to be revamped to designate "groups" as units of selection, analogous to the role played in the theory by genes?

In reality it is not required to revamp the theory in this clearly ridiculous way. In the Darwinian theory bodies are being selected, but we do not need to "revamp" the theory to make bodies analogous to genes – quite contrary – it is NECESSARY that bodies and genes play different strictly separate roles. Why would we need a unit of selection analogous to the genes? since we already have genes for the role of genes!

In the Pinker's own words:

Sexually reproducing organisms don't literally replicate themselves, Individual bodies are simply not passed down through the generations the way that genes are.

And the same is true for groups!

Genes are the only replicators in Wilson's view as well as in Pinker's and everybody else's. And genes are always selected by proxy: genes are never exposed to the direct effects of the selecting environment, but they die with the bodies, that are exposed to the selecting environment. And this logic holds perfectly intact when we step up from bodies to groups: under selective pressure groups die with their member-bodies who die with their genes. Thus genes are being simultaneously selected on multiple levels of selection: individual and group.

Genes DO effect traits of a group as well as traits of a body, since traits of a group are determined by its member-bodies. Thus, all necessary components for darwinian evolution are present in groups. What else do you need? Nothing.

4 Muh Culture

Pinker accentuates the "cultural" mantra several times:

...most of the groupwide traits that group selectionists try to explain are cultural rather than genetic. The trait does not arise from some gene whose effects propagate upward to affect the group as a whole, such as a genetic tendency of individuals to disperse ... Instead, they are traits that are propagated culturally, such as religious beliefs, social norms, and forms of political organization. Modern group selectionists are often explicit that it is cultural traits they are talking about, or even that they are agnostic about whether the traits they are referring to are genetic or cultural.

Note he implies that "cultural" is ALTERNATIVE to "genetic". There are two ways to disperse this false dichotomy.

First. We can either invent a culture or borrow it. In order to invent we need a genetically encoded brain.

In order to borrow we need: a brain capable of making THE DECISION of the borrowing (still genetically encoded); biological means for sustaining this culture (all those means are genetically encoded, you can not transfer an agriculture to spiders); and some cultural basis for this borrowing decision and sustaining of the culture (to this cultural basis we must apply the present reasoning recursively). Therefore a culture of any degree of complexity is always rooted in your physiology, in other words, your genetic composition.

Second. **There was a state of life where physiology and genetics existed and cultures did not. Today cultures exist. Therefore the cultural development**

was born from pure non-cultural physiology. In other words, any culture could be theoretically traced back to its physiological origin which is determined by genes. A culture is a continuation of a physiology – unless you invoke a god or aliens.

Perhaps some topics outside biology require cultural perspective and some phenomena are confined in a culture, thus the notion of culture isolated from biology is not void, but in a biological argument the opposition between culture and genetics is demagoguery.

You can not exclude a topic from a biological discussion by exclaiming: "it's cultural!" – because culture is contained within biology and requires a biological explanation not less than a leg or an arm or an eye.

5 Occam's Razor

If a person has innate traits that encourage him to contribute to the group's welfare and as a result contribute to his own welfare, group selection is unnecessary...

"Unnecessary" does not mean non-existent!

Pinker claims there are ways for a given trait to be explained without Group Selection, even if this is true, it does not disprove the physical phenomenon of Group Selection. In the presence of multiple mutually not-exclusive causes it is likely that most of them act. Therefore, in our reasoning, we may not use one against another.

You can not cut a physical phenomenon with Occam's razor!

Both group selection and kin selection are facts. The only theoretical problem is how much each of them contribute to shaping a given trait. Wilson reasonably argues that group selection is more important in most cases.

But Pinker's problem is the public awareness of the very existence of group selection – a purely political problem!

There's no need to complicate the theory of natural selection with a new "level of selection" in every case.

A case of what, Steven? The case of presence of yet another level of biological organisation that has no reason to be exempt from the process of selection!

It is not "complication" of a theory, it is application of the same unmodified theory to the new discovered fact of physical reality.

6 Altruism

If a person has innate traits that encourage him to contribute to the group's welfare and as a result contribute to his own welfare, group selection is unnecessary...

Note that this is a conditional statement. Even if we assume that the statement is true, we still have to answer if the condition is ever met in reality? Is it ever relevant to the world we are trying to examine? Pinker has no idea.

What is relevant though:

It's only when humans display traits that are disadvantageous to themselves while benefiting their group that group selection might have something to add.

This is exactly the case that Wilson addresses, and demonstrates that indeed group selection plays a crucial role in shaping such traits. To this Pinker offers

no refutation. He "debunked" group selectionist approach in a theoretical which has no relevance, and simply stated that in practical cases his "debunking" is not applicable. That's honest.

But we must complete his train of thought for scientific purpose. If a person has innate traits that encourage altruism, can the inclusive fitness theory explain it in a general case?

Let's assume the tribe in question is affected only by Kin Selection; and the altruistic act does not directly involve reproduction (so we can talk about material benefits of the act as true proxy for reproductive success). Then the altruistic act has to increase inclusive fitness of the altruist MORE than any other member of the tribe. Otherwise the altruist's genes representation in the tribal gene pool reduces. (Expanding the definition of inclusive fitness in this particular context it means: a compensation to the altruist for the cost of the act, plus the altruist (including his close relatives) receives a bigger share of the outcome of the act – anything less than that is DISADVANTAGEOUS for the altruist's genes.) And on top of it we have an unsolvable problem of establishing such a disparity of outcome (not only the altruist has to do good, but also take care to prevent others from benefiting from his deed more than himself).

So we have discovered a clear-cut threshold for the altruistic behaviour to increase altruistic genes representation in a setup without group selection: below this threshold altruism weeds out altruistic genes, above this threshold it is NO LONGER ALTRUISM, it is regular selfishness.

If we now allow for the group selection to act, then we must account for a combined gene pool of competing tribes, and we can see that the altruist's genes representation would be increased under much wider range of conditions way below the previously discovered threshold. Indeed, if the said altruism helps the entire group to eat a competitor group, no matter how much it damages the altruist's inclusive fitness within the tribe, the representation of the altruist's genes in the combined pool of both tribes almost doubles because the size of the pool has about been halved.

So the genetic success of altruism is mathematically more dependant on the group's genocidal success, rather than the individual (or kin) reproductive success of the altruist in question.

Thus, the inter-group competition allows for the altruism to be seriously damaging for altruists' personal reproduction, while maintaining evolutionary profit for their genes in a long run.

7 Intelligence

Equally importantly the selection processes on different levels are INDEPENDENT, **selective pressure on a group can be polar opposite to selective pressure on an individual within this group** – this gives to Multilevel Selection superior explanatory power that dwarfs inclusive fitness, because inclusive fitness is not independent from individual fitness, it includes individual fitness for almost all species.

Pinker reinforces this point with an example:

...the warrior may stay at the rear, or sneak off to the side, and let everyone else fight. In still others the outcome may be uncertain, but because selection works

on probabilities, he may play the odds, say, taking a one-in-ten chance of getting killed in a raid that promises a one-in-two chance of abducting a few extra wives. We should expect selection to favor traits that maximize the individual's expected reproductive output, given these tradeoffs.

Pinker admits that war creates a selective pressure in favour of the cowards and against the brave. Bravery puts your reproduction at risk, whereas cowardice is rewarded (as long as the entire tribe wins). According to the previous Pinker's admission, the group selection is required to explain the evolution of bravery. Exactly the Wilson's point.

Few paragraphs later Pinker asks:

Do humans in fact have adaptations that benefit the group at the expense of the self?

The greatest public speaker of the century has memory issues. He already answered this question: bravery and military valour. But this is not the only one and not the best one. There are: generosity, HONESTY, modesty, and above all of them INTELLIGENCE.

Only the lazy and the blind don't know that the intelligence hinders your reproduction like nothing else. Not all smart kids even survive the elementary school! Do we really need a massive database of observations to know that all people in human society meticulously select against intelligence? Schools, parents, other kids, teachers, educational programs and governments – they all try to exterminate smart kids, before during and after the school, and later in life all social institutions try to exclude smart adults from reproduction.

And there is no conspiracy at all, the explanation for such a massive phenomenon is simpler than you might have imagined! A hierarchy does value loyalty above anything else including intelligence, thus wherever you build a hierarchy, you weed out intelligence, and people build hierarchies everywhere – simple as that. Why is intelligence specifically suppressed by hierarchies (much more than all other qualities which are also suppressed to promote sheer loyalty)? Because intelligence tend to contradict loyalty, up to mutual exclusivity in very many cases. So that to build a stable hierarchy you must exterminate intelligence to the best of your ability.

And according to our own eyes unnecessarily aided with Pinker's books, the evolution in favour of intelligence in humans at large is apparent: guns, steel, antibiotics. This is where the group selection steps in. **Groups that were too good at killing their smart members, are no longer dominating this planet.**

Here is one simple and stunningly conclusive observation available for you and everybody: who had the most sexual access to almost all girls in your school? THE BOY WITH THE LONGEST CRIMINAL RECORD.

8 Buddhism

Suddenly Pinker dives into pure religiosity devoid of any scientific meaning:

Wilson wanted to contrast individual selfishness with something more altruistic, and wrote as if the only alternative to benefiting oneself is contributing to the competitive advantage of one's group. But the dichotomy ignores another possibility: that an individual can be virtuous by benefiting other individuals (in principle, all humans, or even all sentient creatures), whether or not he enhances the competitive prowess of the group to which he belongs.

Did Wilson ignore this "possibility"? Of course he did! He also ignored unicorns, space aliens, and a "possibility" of a god's intervention.

Wilson did not create a "dichotomy" he simply discusses options of increasing your genes representation. In the given context these options happen to be TWO: benefiting yourself, benefiting your group (a kin selectionist would add a third option: benefiting your relatives) – the *benefiting all sentient creatures* DOES NOT INCREASE YOUR GENES REPRESENTATION, therefore it is not on the list of relevant possibilities.

To this matter it is highly appropriate to quote Dawkins:

In practice it is convenient to limit 'extended phenotype' to cases where the effects influence the survival chances of the gene, positively or negatively.

9 Manipulation

Pinker rightfully argues that emotional mechanisms, by which the kin selection manifests, could be fooled by ideologies:

The recognition of kin among humans depends on environmental cues that other humans can manipulate. Thus people are also altruistic toward their adoptive relatives, and toward a variety of fictive kin such as brothers in arms, fraternities and sororities, occupational and religious brotherhoods, crime families, fatherlands, and mother countries. These faux-families may be created by metaphors, simulacra of family experiences, myths of common descent or common flesh, and other illusions of kinship.

So we can fool kin selection, in order to extend it, with an ideology. This explanation for a group loyalty poses a question: WHAT IS THE EVOLUTIONARY CAUSE OF THIS IDEOLOGY?

The group selection gives an answer. Pinker does not. Pinker gave us an unanswered question as an "explanation"

10 Justice

Pinker describes the game "Public Goods" played in a lab:

participants are allocated a sum of money and invited to contribute as much as they want to a communal pot, which is then multiplied by the experimenter and divided evenly among them. The optimum strategy for the group is for everyone to contribute the maximum; the optimum strategy for the individual is to contribute zero, thereby enjoying both the group dividend and his private stash. In a typical experiment with repeated rounds of play, free riding takes over and the public contribution dwindles to zero.

Pinker concludes that people were not subjected to a group selection (along their evolutionary trajectory). Whereas the only true conclusion is: *the evolution never offered this game to the people.* The behaviour of the players may only tell us (in the first approximation) how do they behave in this particular game, especially when the players are fully aware of the game and KNOW THEY ARE PLAYING. We do not have any reason to assume that this perfectly abstract game interferes with those payers' emotions that factor in their social interactions.

However, this experiment was made much more informative:

When people are given an opportunity to punish free riders by levying a fine on them, then free riding decreases and everyone's profit increases -no surprise there. The surprise is that: people will sometimes punish free-riders even if they have to pay for the privilege, and are assured by the experimenters that everyone is anonymous and no one will meet up with their partners again. Since the punishment is costly, and cannot even be rewarded by a reputation for civic-mindedness, it has been described as "altruistic," and has been touted as evidence for group-selected self-sacrifice.

It is important that the punishment component is not a mere update of the formal rules of the game – it does touch the emotional sphere of the players! – the game became LESS ABSTRACT for the players. This is in perfect harmony with the idea of group selection. This is perhaps why the experimenters interpreted it so generously in favour of their hypothesis. At this point I remain of the opinion that this game absolutely does not debunk the group selection hypothesis of altruism, and does not prove it either.

The major result of this experiment is: *people hate games in which they do not control the situation* In the original game payers could do literally nothing, so that they collectively collapsed the game. On the other hand, they are very engaged in the modified game that rewards them with TANGIBLE RESULTS OF THEIR ACTIONS.

Moreover, in this experiment the experimenter himself is a metaphor of an external factor that affects the success of the group (by enforcing the rules) which makes this experiment another bit more relevant to the group selection.

Still more to this! We can look at this experiment from another vantage point. These players used the pure selfish strategy in this abstract game in the lab setting. They showed some perfect logic.

THE VERY SAME PEOPLE act differently in real life!!! So that the experiment (if we include the real life of the players into the scope of our observation) highlighted a stunning contradiction between these people's REASONABLE IDEAL (that they exhibited in the lab) versus their actual behaviour in the wild – people do not choose perfectly logical selfish strategies in real life even if they are capable of doing so (as the experiment demonstrates). Therefore we need an evolutionary reason for them to act against their own idealistic views!

The experiment demonstrated how people think they SHOULD BEHAVE, but we know they behave altruistically in real life. In real life they betray their reason in favour of group benefits. And this is the evidence of group selection!

11 Other Failures

Group selection fails to predict that human altruism should be driven by moralistic emotions and reputation management.

Even if it does (which is NOT shown by Pinker) So what?! The group selection also fails to predict legs, ears, and opposable thumbs. And so does kin selection too.

Pinker rightfully notices that the reputation forgery is SECONDARY in relation to the true reciprocity:

...humans are language-using creatures who need not discriminate reciprocators from exploiters only by direct personal experience, but can also ask around and find out their reputation for reciprocating with or exploiting others. This in turn creates incentives to establish and exaggerate one's reputation (a feature of human psychology that has been extensively documented by social psychologists), and to attempt to see through such exaggerations in others. And one way to credibly establish one's reputation as an altruist in the probing eyes of skeptics to be an altruist, that is, to commit oneself to altruism...

Reciprocity creates reputation which creates incentives to forge reputation. And reciprocity BENEFITS the group! Therefore Pinker's argument is not against, but for the group selection because the reputation forgery NECESSITATES real reciprocity with real benefits to the group.

12 The Prominence Of Group Selection

It is worth noticing that many nominal opponents of the evil group selection, all celebrity scientists sin with it routinely without even noticing.

When we speak about evolutionary stable strategies, we inevitably imply group selection. What does it mean "evolutionary unstable"? It means that a population in which all members assume this strategy can't exist. Richard Dawkins talked multiple times about strategies of cheating as evolutionary unstable, he did it routinely, it is very basic insight for him. A population of altruists creates incentives for cheaters, but populations consisting of 100% cheaters do not exist, because they are not possible...

What is the exact physical meaning of this IMPOSSIBILITY? Of course the group's extinction.

Jared Diamond also sinned with group selection and remained unaware of that:

At the cost of a few society members who die in battle as soldiers, the whole society becomes much more effective at conquering other societies or resisting attacks.

13 Conclusion

Pinker claims that the group selection is alternative to the genocentric evolution (i.e. the group selection contradicts the gene selfishness). THIS IS LIBEL!

According to Wilson, selection applies to all manifestations of a gene regardless of the distance between the gene and the manifestation, and as long as this manifestation has effect on reproduction OF THE GENE ITSELF, then it is legit. This point is in perfect harmony with Dawkins's Extended Phenotype. Indeed, an organization of a group, a system of in-group relations perfectly fit the definition of the extended phenotype. Thus, Groups could be seen as manifestations of genes, as extensions of phenotype. Thus the group selection IS gen-o-centric, it extends the selfishness of the gene.