DISTRACTIONS

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The Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin – I had been told – was a mecca for evolutionary biologists. In fact, some of the greatest evolutionary theorists, whose work still dominates the reference lists of my academic publications, were once Fellows at the Institute. Some still occasionally show up at dinner parties, workshops, and Wiko lunches.

The plan was to spend my six fellowship months working on the theory of conflict and cooperation in major evolutionary transitions and to explain why complex life is organized the way it is. The idea is that complexity in the biological world has evolved in seemingly discrete leaps, when individuals that had long enjoyed their lives as independent entities decided to form collectives that themselves evolved to become new types of

individuals. By choosing to do so, they decided to abandon some of their independence, to become a part of a larger collective that itself was now responsible for the future evolutionary trajectories of the former individuals.

A single-celled amoeba is an individual, for instance. A multicellular jellyfish is also an individual, but the single cells that it is made of are not. Single-celled bacteria are individuals too, but is a multicellular bacterial biofilm an individual? Honeybees are individuals, but is the honeybee colony an individual?

The tricky part, I thought, was explaining how selection on that higher level of organization evolves through evolutionary process on the lower level, where even independent individuals are involved in complex webs of social interactions, all of which have to be taken into account when constructing a theory of major transitions. I was looking for conditions that would make individuals want to abandon their own evolutionary individuality, and my feeling was that it all had to do with the strength of the interactions affecting their social fitness.

Physicists say that different theories describe the world on many different scales, depending on what goals the modeller has in mind. None of the theories is correct, some are just more useful than others. If the theory is constructed to explain the behavior of single cells within an animal body, for instance, single cells once again become evolutionary individuals, but the modeller then has to find a clever way to keep track of the multitudes of social interactions within the multicellular organism and between the cells. In other cases, it is more useful to construct a theory of the whole – ignoring the lives of individual cells and interactions between them – because working in the micro-space of cells and their interactions would be uninformative. So do individuals really lose their independence in evolutionary transitions, or do they just find ways to make better use of their social environments?

Drawing inspiration from fellow evolutionary biologists, I wanted to extend the concept to human societies and social norms. Biological hierarchies were definitely intriguing, but I was finding human behavior far more amusing. How great would it be if I could find a universal law governing behavior in human societies, building upon the universal principles of evolutionary biology?

I am still not convinced that evolutionary biologists think about human societies the same way I do, but to me the similarities were too great to be ignored. Just as, through an evolutionary process, cells abandoned some of their individuality to become part of an integrated multicellular collective, individuals in human societies choose to abandon some

of their individuality and independence to become governed by social norms, moral codes, and external institutions. I was set to explain, in my six-month Fellowship in Berlin, how these entities on a higher level of social organization emerge in the process of cultural evolution from the bottom up, that is, from personal normative views or independent moral beliefs, and how they end up governing individual behavior.

But the Kolleg, it turns out, is a place full of irresistible distractions. If you are not careful, the distractions will completely shatter all your hopes of being productive.

Wiko breakfast conversations are distracting. Fellows smarter than me chose to ignore common breakfasts, and I now realize that there was a very good reason for that. The croissants are just okay, the eggs are hit or miss, but the conversations are almost always too good to leave early. There is an added benefit of seeing the same Fellows every morning, so that, effectively, the same conversation could last for months.

The sociology section of the Wiko library is a horrible distraction too. I now blame Richard for sending me endless reading lists and for evidently using me as a test subject for his theories of sociological theorizing. This forced me to conclude that biology is sort of boring; sociology is boring too, of course, but it is also so messy and full of bizarre theories and puzzles that it is somehow simultaneously incredibly interesting. I still don't know anything about how human societies work, but I believe I know where to look for interesting questions to guide my future work. Sociologists, economists, psychologists, and evolutionary theorists think about the same processes in slightly different ways. Sociology, I think, could probably use some more rigorous evolutionary models. Likewise, biologists would be less boring if they thought about human sociality in the same way they think about sociality of cells, amoeboids, and insects.

Thursday colloquia, the lunch discussions that end up following you all the way into your office, informal gatherings, and the amazing Berlin food scene do not help with productivity, either. In a typical day at the Kolleg, the mind ends up exploring so many different avenues that going back to producing the same old familiar research becomes almost pointless. "It is a phase, it will end in a couple of months," they say, but it really doesn't, and some pleasant distractions only grow stronger over time.

And yet, because of being constantly distracted from my initial plans, I ended up knowing much better where I stand, where my research stands, and where I want it to go in the future. To me, "Gaining time to think" at Wiko's College for Life Sciences initially meant continual thinking about my own research agenda. Instead, I ended up exploring

an overwhelming number of completely unrelated research agendas. Together they provided much-needed context for my original plans and for their future growth. I ended up carving out a proper niche within which I am now establishing a productive and novel research program.

The Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin is a place full of irresistible distractions. If you are not careful, the distractions will shatter all your hopes of being productive, and if you are completely careless, they might end up transforming you. I recommend being completely careless.