Title

GAS doesn't 'turn the engine' when states are sequential or context-dependent

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Commentary on David L. Hull, Rodney E. Langman & Sigrid S. Glenn (2001). A general account of selection: Biology, immunology, and behavior. BBS 24(3):511–573.

Abstract of the original article: Authors frequently refer to gene-based selection in biological evolution, the reaction of the immune system to antigens and operant learning as exemplifying selection processes in the same sense of this term. However, as obvious as this claim may seem on the surface, setting out an account of "selection" that is general enough to incorporate all three of these processes without becoming so general as to be vacuous is far from easy. In this target article, we set out such a general account of selection to see how well it accommodates these very different sorts of selection. The three fundamental elements of this account are replication, variation and environmental interaction. For selection to occur, these three processes must be related in a very specific way. In particular, replication must alternate with environmental interaction so that any changes that occur in replication are passed on differentially because of environmental interaction.

One of the main differences among the three sorts of selection that we investigate concerns the role of organisms. In traditional biological evolution, organisms play a central role with respect to environmental interaction. Although environmental interaction can occur at other levels of the organizational hierarchy, organisms are the primary focus of environmental interaction. In the functioning of the immune system, organisms function as containers. The interactions that result in selection of antibodies during a lifetime are between entities (antibodies and antigens) contained within the organism. Resulting changes in the immune system of one organism are not passed on to later organisms. Nor are changes in operant behavior resulting from behavioral selection passed on to later organisms. But operant behavior is not contained in the organism because most of the interactions that lead to differential replication include parts of the world outside the organism. Changes in the organism's nervous system are the effects of those interactions. The role of genes also varies in these three systems. Biological evolution is gene-based (i.e., genes are the primary replicators). Genes play very different roles in operant behavior and the immune system. However, in all three systems, iteration is central. All three selection processes are also incredibly wasteful and inefficient. They can generate complexity and novelty primarily because they are so wasteful and inefficient.

GAS doesn't "turn the engine" when states are sequential or context-dependent

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Abstract: Selection theory requires *multiple, simultaneously-actualized* states. In cognition, each thought changes the "selection pressure" against which the next is evaluated; they are not simultaneously selected amongst. Cognitive change occurs not through selection among discrete "neural configurations," but through interaction between conceptual web and *context*. This introduces a non-Kolmogorovian probability distribution, hence a classical formalism (e.g., selection theory) cannot be used.

Hull et. al. (2001) wait until the last sentence of their response to commentators to invite us to refer to their General Account of Selection as GAS. I will do so, although – insightful and provocative though it is – I am not completely convinced it is the highest octane stuff around.

One problem with their attempt to unite biology, immunology, and behavior under the same umbrella is, as many commentators pointed out, the failure to identify what constitutes a "replicator" in operant learning. Since this is something I have addressed in detail elsewhere (Gabora, 2004), here I address the problem of the conditions under which selection theory is applicable. Pepper & Knudsen (2001) point out that the mathematical formulation of selection theory requires that at any given iteration there be "multiple concurrent replicators that differ in their replication rate" (p. 550). Okasha (2001) makes the same point (p. 549):

Comment: "operant" as meant?

> The authors note a significant disanalogy between operant learning and standard examples of Darwinian selection. In the latter, the variants on which selection operates are present at the same time, while in the former the variants form a temporal sequence, each one existing for a moment, before being replaced by another. The authors do not think this disqualifies operant learning from qualifying as a Darwinian process, but I am less sure.

Okasha then reasons that in attempting to apply selection theory to such a temporal sequence, whether or not something gets se-

lected depends arbitrarily on how you break up the sequence. Hull et al. respond that things are not so tidy in biology either, and asked (p. 566) "what might 'the same time' mean in the case of organic evolution?"

There is a fairly straightforward answer to this question, which is intimately tied to their concept of iteration. In biology, there exist multiple entities at any one time and, although the selective pressure undergone by them will never be *identical,* they all at least constitute part of the *same iteration.* So by "same time" we mean there are multiple entities undergoing the selective pressure of a given iteration. However, this is not the situation where a sequence of thoughts is concerned. Because each instant of thought contributes to the context in which the next is evaluated, never do two thoughts or cognitive states undergo the same "selective pressure"; they are not being "selected amongst." Pepper & Knudsen (2001) suggest that, despite their reservations, the enterprise can be salvaged as follows (p. 551):

> If replicators consist of specific neural configurations that produce tendencies or proclivities for certain behaviors, it is not hard to imagine a population of such replicators that compete for the opportunity to be expressed as behaviors (interactors) and to be therefore strengthened or weakened according to their relative "success" (e.g., in eliciting positive affect). It is also not hard to envision that stronger neural configurations would be more likely to persist and to spawn variants.

However, the distributed, overlapping, contextually-elicited nature of memories and concepts prohibits there being multiple, distinct neural configurations from among which to choose. The conceptual network is a weblike structure; on what basis can one say it divides itself up into different "neural configurations" and selects one? This would require enough space to store, prefabricated in advance, every thought or idea one could possibly have! Surely the mind exists in a state of *potentiality,* and the situation or circumstance provides the *context* that actualizes a particular thought or cognitive state. Why is this a crucial issue as far as GAS is concerned? Because if there are multiple *preexisting,* fully actualized states from which some are *selected,* then this is a deterministic process that can be described by a classical probability theory such as selection theory. However, it has been proved that in situations where a state of potentiality can only be resolved through interaction with a context, the change of state is nondeterministic, and this introduces a non-Kolmogorovian probability

model on the state space; a classical probability model cannot be used (Accardi & Fedullo 1982; Aerts 1986; Aerts & Aerts, 1997 Piron 1976; Pitowski 1989; Randall & Foulis 1976).

Because it is not the different possible pre-specified neural configurations that are being selected amongst, but the different possible *contexts* that the entire conceptual network could encounter, each of which would give rise to a different interaction dynamics, to describe the relevant change of state requires a nonclassical probability model (Gabora & Aerts 2002; in press; Aerts & Gabora 2005a, b;). Selection theory, a classical formalism, is inappropriate for the description of cognitive change, and because operant behavior rests on cognitive processes, it is not able to provide a complete description of that either. But this need not dash all hopes of a unifying theory of evolution. There is no a priori reason such a theory has to be Darwinian or even involve selection except as a special case. In one such approach, evolution is viewed as the context-driven actualization of potential or CAP (Gabora & Aerts 2005a, b). Different forms of evolution vary with respect to the degree of indeterminism due to context, the degree of context independence, and the degree to which context-driven change is retained in future lineage(s). The approach gives us a glimpse of what a theory of change that applies across the social, psychological, biological, and physical sciences might look like (though only time will tell if CAP gets us further down the road than GAS). It should be noted that physicists use the word "evolution" without implying that any sort of selection is involved. As I see it, it is only because Darwinian evolution received so much attention as such an *unusual* form of evolution that it eventually cornered the word "evolution."

Finally, although my critique applies to the section on operant behavior, I think it is this section that generated the most fruitful discussion, and it is this section that may have the greatest impact on future "lineages of thought." One doesn't go too far out on a limb proposing that selection is important in biology. Given Hull's previous writings, it is a bit surprising that the authors of the target article didn't just take the biological account of these phenomena as more or less right as far as biology is concerned and have Hull focus on culture. In fact, given the BBS readership, it might have been more useful to replace the immunology section with a section on culture. But this is all after the fact, and I applaud Hull et al. for bringing these important issues onto the table. GAS may not replicate, but it certainly provides fuel for thought.

Authors' Response[1]

Multiply concurrent replication

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Abstract: If selection is interpreted as involving repeated cycles of replication, variation, and environmental interaction so structured that environmental interaction causes replication to be differential, then selection in gene-based biological evolution and the reaction of the immune system to antigens are relatively unproblematic examples of selection processes. Operant learning and cultural evolution pose more serious problems. In this response we deal with operant learning as a selection process.

As the title of our target article (Hull et al. 2001) indicates, we tried to set out a General Account of Selection (GAS) for three sorts of phenomena: gene-based selection in biological evolution, the reaction of the immune system to antigens, and operant learning. **Gabora** is more interested in a fourth sort of phenomenon: social learning. Most of her paper concerns thoughts, cognitive states, memories, concepts, culture, and the like. In this response we do not discuss social learning as a selection process because we did not treat it in our original BBS target article. However, as Gabora notes, one of us has in the past discussed sociocultural evolution as a selection process (Hull 1988) and another has used GAS to explore the role of operant learning in the emergence of cultural interactors (Glenn 2003). Quite obviously we would like to see GAS extended to selection in sociocultural evolution, but unfortunately any attempt to deal with selection in sociocultural evolution in this response would require too much space and depart too radically from our target article. Instead, we will deal with Gabora's objections to our treating operant learning as a selection process.

As we mentioned in our target article, theories of operant learning come in a variety of forms. We chose to investigate what we thought was one of the best versions of this theory. We did not claim that operant learning involves nothing but selection, only that selection processes play a role in learning, an important role. Nor are we claiming that all behavioral phenomena involve operant learning. The issue is not how adequate or comprehensive operant theory is but whether it incorporates a selection process. B. F. Skinner, the father of operant learning, thought so, but he might well have been mistaken.

The most fundamental and pervasive problem with respect to our general account of selection stems from the fact that it is an instance of conceptual analysis. Some of the earlier commentaries on our target article wanted our analysis to be more stringent; others wanted it to be less so. Unfortunately, no cut-and-dried methods exist for making such choices. One begins with what one hopes are the most clear-cut cases and proceeds from there. For a long time, gene-based biological evolution was the main example of a selection process and it was treated as such. Any departures from selection in gene-based biological evolution counted against any additional examples. Too often, however, peculiarities of this paradigm example were treated as if they were essential. Our increased knowledge of the immune system has helped to rectify that bias. The reaction of the immune system to antigens is as good an example of selection as is traditional gene-based selection in biology. We now have two paradigm examples of selection.

Gabora's main objection to operant learning as a selection process is that it does not include anything that might be treated as a replicator; and even if it did, it does not allow for multiple concurrent replicators that differ in their replication rates. In this response, we deal with four questions: (a) Does selection require replicators? (b) If so, can replicators be discerned in operant learning? (c) Can these replicators be construed as multiply concurrent? and, finally, (d) Must they be?

In our target article, we characterized selection as consisting of "repeated cycles of replication, variation, and environmental interaction so structured that environmental interaction causes replication to be differential" (p. 513; italics deleted). We then discussed each of these entities

and processes in greater detail. **Gabora** does not object to our analysis of variation or environmental interaction. She restricts her criticisms to replication. Therefore, the issue turns from analyzing selection in general to analyzing replication in particular.

We defined replication in terms of information, copying, and descent. From the outset we admitted how problematic information is. None of the current analyses of information seemed adequate for our purposes. If an analysis of "information" can be produced which turns out to do what we need it to do, then that counts *for* GAS. If no such analysis of information is forthcoming, that counts against it. We also committed ourselves to copying and descent. In gene-based biological evolution and the reaction of the immune system to antigens, copying does occur and variations in the copying process get passed along via descent. Some other mechanisms may turn up that can accomplish these same ends, but so far all we have to go on are possible counterexamples and they are not persuasive enough to cause us to modify our analysis.

Since **Gabora**'s main objection to GAS concerns operant learning, a few words need to be said about this process. The recurrence of operant responses in lineages over time is not just a theoretical possibility but a reliably observed phenomenon. Further, the role of reinforcement in maintaining the recurrence of those responses and accounting for change over time in their characteristics is abundantly clear. These facts alone allow the term "selection" to be applied *metaphorically* to the operant case. However, in our target article we had a much broader aim in mind – to produce a General Analysis of Selection that applies equally to all three sorts of selection. As Pepper and Knudsen (2001) and Okasha (2001) noted in their commentaries, the locus of replication in operant learning is the nervous system.

Because empirical work on the neural activity involved in overt operant responding is scarce and not typically conceptualized in terms of selection processes, our account is necessarily more speculative than we would like. It rests on reasoning as follows. Because the responses (interactors) constituting any particular lineage of responses are only intermittently instantiated in a learner's behavior stream, the effects of previous fits between interactors of that lineage and successive selecting environments must be presented materially in the learner's nervous system, where they remain available for instantiation given the appropriate circumstances. "When an organism exposed to a set of contingencies of reinforcement is modified by them and as a result behaves in a different way in the future . . . what is 'stored' is a modified organism" (Skinner 1969). The observed result of the contingencies of reinforcement is the replication-with-a-minor-variation of responses that previously resulted in reinforcers.

The question at hand, then, appears to be this: Does that which is preserved ("stored") function as a replicator? Both sexual and asexual organisms evolve in ways that incorporate selection. So do single-celled and multi-celled organisms. However, for the sake of simplicity, biologists frequently discuss selection as it functions in lineages of single-celled organisms that reproduce asexually. The results are then expanded to include more complex cases. We will do the same in our discussion of operant learning. As Hull (1988) has pointed out, one advantage of such generic terminology as "replicators," "interactors," and "lineages" is that one and the same entity can perform more than one

function. For example, in narrowly biological contexts, genes can function as both replicators and as interactors. In our target article on GAS, examples of operant behavior were limited to lineages of single-component responses that were comparable to single-celled organisms in asexual species (i.e., key pecks and lever presses). We continue this emphasis in our response.

Can neural replicators be construed as multiply concurrent? Our answer is that replicators may be multiply concurrent even though operant interactors rarely, if ever, are. We suggested above that the changes in operant behavior that constitute learning are materially encoded in a learner's nervous system. They are what remain after the response becomes history. Therefore, what is required for operant behavior to be multiply concurrent is multiple variants of the neural coding for responses belonging to the same lineage. We take the problem of their multiple concurrency to be similar to the problem of multiple concurrency in lineages of single-celled organisms in asexual species. In the biological case, when a bacterium is in an environment where it can survive, it may replicate. The result is two bacteria. If the genomes of the two bacteria differ in some way that makes one bacterium more suited to the selecting environment than the other, that genome will be more likely to replicate. As replication and interaction continue, many genomic variants of the lineage exist, each following its own selection path. Imagine such a lineage in an environment where only one bacterium at a time can interact with its environment but where all the other genomic variants that have survived to the present exist in a dormant state. That is the kind of world where operant behavior lives. The result of differential interaction of responses having varying neural features with the selecting environment is the differential preservation of some neural coding. That coding, along with coding for all responses in the lineage that have been reinforced, is conserved materially and remains available for replication.

However, we must admit that it seems very unlikely that the contingencies of selection ever constrained biological evolution in the way that we suggest replication in operant lineages is constrained. If nothing else, our article has forced those of us who think that operant conditioning provides an unproblematic paradigmatic example of selection to admit that we are mistaken. We could not have reached this conclusion without taking GAS seriously. Whether or not future research supports the suggestion that a history of reinforcement for responses in an operant lineage results in concurrently existing neural variants, it is not clear that there is a logical necessity for replicators to always exist concurrently. Although it is apparently the case that replicators in biological lineages exist concurrently, phenomena in any domain are constrained by the environment in which they exist. If a general account of phenomena in different domains is possible, it will likely entail significant differences in any two exemplar cases. As mentioned earlier, we share **Gabora**'s interest in viewing cultural level phenomena in terms of selection processes. Although she prefers an alternative to our GAS even for biological evolution, we prefer at this time to continue to explore evolutionary processes in the terms we used in our original article.

NOTE
1. The authors regretfully inform readers that since the publication of our target article in 2001, one of our coauthors, Rod Langman, has died.

Continuing Commentary

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[The letter "r" before author's initials stands for Response to CC references]

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Commentary on **O'Regan & Noë (2001). A sensorimotor account of vision and visual consciousness. BBS 24(5):939–1031.**

Abstract of the original article: Many current neurophysiological, psychophysical and psychological approaches to vision rest on the idea that when we see, the brain produces an internal representation of the world. The activation of this internal representation is assumed to give rise to the experience of seeing. The problem with this kind of approach is that it leaves unexplained how the existence of such a detailed internal representation might produce visual consciousness. An alternative proposal is made here. We propose that seeing is a way of acting. It is a particular way of exploring the environment. Activity in internal representations does not generate the experience of seeing. The outside world serves as its own, external, representation. The experience of seeing occurs when the organism masters what we call the governing laws of sensorimotor contingency. The advantage of this approach is that it provides a natural and principled way of accounting for visual consciousness, and for the differences in the perceived quality of sensory experience in the different sensory modalities. Several lines of empirical evidence are brought forward in support of the theory, in particular: evidence from experiments in sensorimotor adaptation, visual "filling in," visual stability despite eye movements, change blindness, sensory substitution, and color perception.

Violations of sensorimotor theories of visual experience

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Abstract: Although the sensorimotor account is a significant step forward, it cannot explain experiences of entoptic phenomena that violate normal sensorimotor contingencies but nonetheless are perceived as visual. Nervous system structure limits how they can be interpreted. Neurophysiology, combined with a sensorimotor theory, can account for space constancy by denying the existence of permanent representations of states that must be corrected or updated.

Motor theories have a long history in psychology. Early psychologists thought that identification of form might depend on hand or eye movements, for instance visually fixating the vertices of a triangle to identify and characterize it. The theories were demolished in some of the first visual experiments, where objects could be identified from only a short spark-illuminated presentation. Later, Noton and Stark (1971) proposed a more sophisticated motor theory, with a particular motor scanpath (a sequence of saccadic eye movements) associated with each image experienced. The difficulty with this and related models is that the scanpath must itself be remembered, even though the mechanism that generated the sequence of saccades in the first exposure to the image could potentially generate the same scanpath again. Scanpaths could be seen experimentally only if normal strategies of parallel processing were discouraged, for example by using large, low-contrast images that forced fixation at many locations for identification.

The O'Regan & Noë (O&N) (2001) view, though less dependent on overt motor action, runs into similar difficulties. Visual sensorimotor contingencies, for example, can be violated without canceling the essentially visual nature of the resulting experience.