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The remarkable discreteness of being

Bahram Houchmandzadeh

*Univ. Grenoble 1 / CNRS, LIPhy UMR 5588, Grenoble, F-38041, France**

Life is a discrete, stochastic phenomena : for a biological organism, the time of the two most important events of its life (reproduction and death) is random and these events change the number of individuals of the species by single units. These facts can have surprising, counter-intuitive consequences. I review here three examples where these facts play, or could play, important roles : the spatial distribution of species, the biodiversity and the (Darwinian) evolution of altruistic behavior.

I. INTRODUCTION.

Many quantities of the physical world are continuous and measured by real numbers: positions, speeds, concentrations, weights, ... In many areas of science however, it was realized that complex patterns can be explained by supposing the existence of discrete underlying levels. In chemistry, the various laws of composition of elements known around 1800 AD led Dalton to formulate the atomistic theory and give a simple, elegant explanation for all of these phenomena. Around 1900 AD, Planck, Einstein, Bohr and others realized that the most daunting problems of the (then) modern physics such as the ultraviolet catastrophe, the specific heat of solids, the hydrogen spectrum, the photoelectric effect, ... can be solved elegantly by supposing that the energy (or action) is quantified and varies only in integer units. In biology, the theory of Darwinian evolution was trapped in the quagmire of its inconsistency with the then obvious blending theory of inheritance, until the work of Mendel, and its rediscovery by de Vries and Correns around 1900 AD (curious coincidence) restored its scientific soundness by introducing the concept of genes as the quantum of inheritance information.

These are but a few examples where complex patterns could be simply explained by supposing an underlying discrete level. The discreteness hypothesis, and specially its consequences, was in each of these cases unintuitive. Living organisms on the other hand don't need the discreteness *hypothesis*, as this is the most obvious fact about them : death and birth events change their number by integers only. The study of the consequences of this discreteness however is still not widespread in the biological community[1] and in many areas, scientists resort to ad hoc theories before estimating the effect of the discreteness. In this article, we review three such cases : (i) spatial clustering of organisms, which is observed for nearly all living organisms ; (ii) the observed biodiversity and many of its general laws such as the species-area relationship ; (iii) the emergence of cooperative behavior during Darwinian evolution.

An important remark is in order. In none of these cases it is claimed here that a simple discrete theory will explain all the phenomena. I only observe that discreteness

implies some surprising pattern which always exist. When complex patterns are observed in nature, the contribution of discreteness should be subtracted and only the remaining part, if any, needs a special theory.

II. SPATIAL CLUSTERING.

Since the 1970's and the gathering of large amount of data on spatial distribution of various species, ranging from plants to insects to mammals, it has become obvious that nearly all species tend to have a clustered distribution and to aggregate into some areas[2]. The study of these spatial distributions has now become an independent field and is called metapopulation biology or ecology (for a review, see [3, 4]). If the diffusion of organisms (animals move and plants disperse their seed) were random, one would expect that the distribution of species would soon (in few generations) become homogeneous. This is analogous for example to the dilution of a drop of ink in water. Common sense therefore requires that if we observe aggregation of individuals in one place we should look for deterministic causes. There is no shortage of deterministic causes : (i) species are adapted to some environment, nature is heterogeneous therefore each species tends to concentrate in places in which it is best adapted ; (ii) many species are social and their social interaction could be a cause of aggregation. These are the two obvious and most studied explanations of clustering of organisms.

Plain common sense however is wrong in this case: the sole fact of discreteness of life is enough to cause clustering and no amount of random movement can counteract this agglomeration. This is what we show below. Before going further however, we should define precisely what we mean by clustered distribution and how we can measure it. The most practical way of measuring patchiness is to divide space into squares (quadrats), count the number n_i of individuals in each square, compute the mean μ and the variance V of these numbers, and calculate the variance to mean ratio (VMR) V/μ . (Figure 1) . For homogeneous distributions the VMR is equal to unity ; for clustered distributions $VMR > 1$. The VMR is a robust measure of patchiness. Another robust mea-

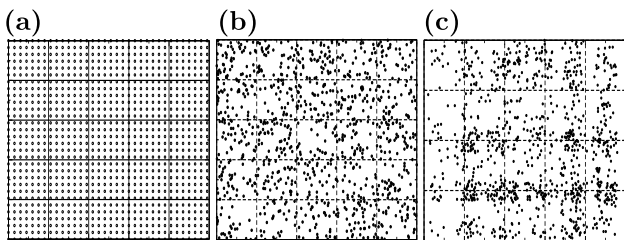


Figure 1: Various kinds of spatial distribution : (a) regular, $V/\mu < 1$; (b) homogeneous $V/\mu = 1$; (c) patchy $V/\mu > 1$.

sure of patchiness is the spatial autocorrelation function, *i.e.* the normalized histogram of the distances between all pairs of individuals in the ecosystem. A homogeneous distribution will have a flat autocorrelation function ; in contrast, the autocorrelation function of a patchy distribution displays a peak at the origin and the length scale over which this function decreases gives the typical size of the clusters. The autocorrelation function is an extremely powerful mathematical tool and contains the most complete information about the spatial distribution, but is measurable only in controlled laboratory experiments.

Let us come back to the problem of clustering. Consider the simplest organism moving randomly with diffusion coefficient D , reproducing at rate α and dying at rate μ . A naive model of the distribution of these “Brownian bugs” would use a diffusion equation for their concentration of the form of

$$\partial_t c = D\nabla^2 c + (\alpha - \mu)c \quad (1)$$

Consider for example the particular case where birth and death rates are equal. Then we will have a plain diffusion equation and any spatial heterogeneity will be smoothed out after some time. Young et al [5] used such a simple model of Brownian bugs to study the phenomenon of plankton blooms, but instead of resorting to equation (1), they numerically simulated these bugs and found the exact contrary of the predicted phenomena : the distribution, which was homogeneous at the initial time, would get more and more patchy as time passes. Something is grossly wrong with the use of the continuous approach (1) : such equations are written for averaged quantities and suppose that fluctuations (deviations from the mean) are small compared to the mean. However, the noise of reproduction and death due to the discreteness of life violates this assumptions: as we will see below, fluctuations become much larger than the averages, hence the error in using continuous differential equations in modeling ecological systems.

To understand reproduction/death induced fluctuations, we need to include the second important aspect of life : for an individual, the moment of its death or reproduction is a random variable. For a collection of n individuals, we can speak only about the probability of

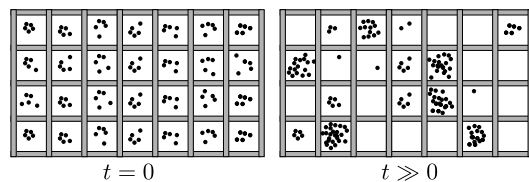


Figure 2: Reproduction/death noise : placing n_0 individuals in each cell at time $t = 0$ and letting them die and reproduce at the same rate. As time passes, some cells will contain a large number of individuals, while others become empty.

a death/birth occurring during a given time interval. If the probabilities induce small fluctuation, the stochastic process can be approximated by a differential equation (mean field approach) ; if not, one has to resort the Master equation approach (and/or its numerical resolution) in order to estimate various statistical quantities such as the mean, the variance and the correlations. Let us forget about the spatial aspect of the problem at hand for the moment. Consider the space divided into non-communicating cells and let us place exactly n_0 individuals in each cell at time $t_0 = 0$ (Figure 2). These individuals are capable only of reproducing/dying. Let $n(t)$ be the number of individuals in a cell at time t . In the simplest possible model when birth at rate α and death at rate μ are constant and independent of density, age structure, ..., the probability density for one birth/death to occur during the time interval dt is

$$W^+(n) = \alpha n ; W^-(n) = \mu n \quad (2)$$

and from the above transition rates, the probability $P(n, t)$ of observing n individuals at time t is deduced through the (book keeping) Master equation

$$\begin{aligned} \partial_t P(n, t) = & W^+(n-1)P(n-1, t) - W^+(n)P(n, t) \\ & + W^-(n+1)P(n+1, t) - W^-(n)P(n, t) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

We can very easily numerically simulate the above stochastic process and observe that as time increases, many cells will become empty and a few will harbor a very large number of individuals. The average number of individuals per cell will remain constant, but the variance and hence the VMR will diverge linearly. This is a system which, after a few generation, will display a huge amount of clustering. In fact, in this simple stochastic process, the time evolution of the mean $\langle n \rangle$ and the variance $V = \langle n^2 \rangle - \langle n \rangle^2$ of the number of individuals in cells can be deduced exactly without solving the Master equation :

$$d\langle n \rangle / dt = 0 ; dV/dt = 2n_0$$

leading to the above assertions[6].

What is special about this reproductive noise is the fact that it cannot be canceled out by diffusion. Removing

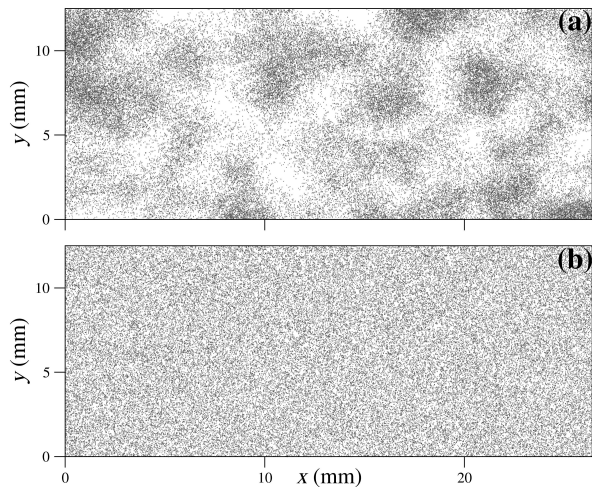


Figure 3: Neutral clustering of microorganisms : (a) ~ 70000 *Dictyostelium Discoïdum* (size $\sim 10 \mu\text{m}$) after approximately 7 generations. Each dot represents a single individual and its position was measured from an actual experiment [7]; the $\text{VMR} \approx 40$ for squares of size 0.7 mm ; (b) the same number of individuals spread homogeneously.

the barriers between the cells and letting the individuals diffuse from high density to low density sites only slows down the clustering phenomenon, but does not inhibit it [6] and the VMR (and spatial correlation functions) still diverges for one- and two-dimensional ecosystems:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{VMR} &\sim \sqrt{t} \text{ for } d = 1 \\ &\sim \log t \text{ for } d = 2 \end{aligned}$$

The two dimensional case corresponds exactly to what Young et al. [5] were observing in their numerical simulations.

So all living organisms will naturally form spatial clusters, at least in the simplest, neutral models. Can this clustering be observed experimentally? The answer is yes. Spread some microorganism capable of movement, reproduction and death on a Petri dish, measure the position of *each* one at each time step and compare it to the predicted auto-correlation function or VMR (figure 3). In such a controlled experiment, all the parameters (α, μ, D) are measured and there is no room for free fitting parameters. The only difficult step is to measure the position of all microorganisms, which can be achieved by an automatized microscope and image analysis. The experiment which was indeed performed [7, 8], showed the perfect agreement of the spatial autocorrelation function with the theoretical computations.

Real ecosystems are density dependent and the density of individuals cannot grow very large. We can incorporate this density dependence into the model in its most stringent case : the ecosystem is composed of many species, the total density is fixed, and when one individual dies, it is replaced by the progeny of a neighboring

one, whatever its species. It can be shown that the major features exhibited above don't change and individuals still form increasingly large clusters, uniform in their composition of species [9]. This clustering can also be (painfully) measured in real ecosystems (for example in rain forests[10]) and shown to be compatible with the theoretical computations, although in real ecosystems, many parameters cannot be measured.

Spatial clustering of organisms is one of the most fundamental problems in ecological studies. The message of this section is the following : observing a patchy distribution should not be considered per se as surprising and one should not rush to find deterministic causes for it. The very nature and discreteness of life naturally leads to clustering. Of course all clustering are not caused by discrete effects. Before looking for other causes however, one must subtract the effect of neutral causes and use deterministic causes only for the remaining (if any) patchiness.

III. NEUTRAL BIODIVERSITY.

Observation of the stunning biodiversity in various ecosystems is what led Darwin and Wallace to formulate the theory of evolution. The finches of Galapagos are the standard example cited in any textbook of the field[11]. Even at a single trophic level, *i.e.* considering species which use the same resources, the biodiversity is always large. In spite of many competing theories the question of the causes of biodiversity is still unanswered today, . The adaptationist program so violently criticized by Gould and Lewontin [12] is still predominant: each species is adapted to its local environment and the biodiversity is just a reflection of the heterogeneity of Nature and spatial isolation between close cousins. The possibility of having speciation at the same trophic level at the same geographical location has been (arbitrarily) ruled out by Ernst Mayr in his famous book[13], with far-reaching consequences on evolutionary thinking.

Ecologists however began to gather large data on biodiversity and observed general patterns everywhere. One of the most striking observed "law" is the species-area relationship which states that the number of species S in an area exhibits a power law dependence on the size A of the area considered: $S = kA^\alpha$ [14]. An alternative and more precise measure of biodiversity for a fixed area is the abundance curve: collecting species in a given area and measuring the abundance of each species leads to the abundance curve $S(n)$, which is the histogram of the number of species having abundance n . Abundance curves taken from very different habitats began to show very similar patterns (for a review, see [15]). The third observation came from measurements of biodiversity in islands close to a continent. It was observed that the number of species in islands decreased as a function of

its distance from the continent and increased with the size of the island. These generic observations could seem at odds with the adaptationist program.

To explain the third observation, MacArthur and Wilson[16, 17] took a bold approach. They supposed that (i) all species at the same trophic level are *equivalent* ; (ii) species migrate from continent to islands, with the rate of migration a decreasing function of the distance ; (iii) due to genetic drift, species become extinct in islands, with the extinction rate a decreasing function of the size of the island. The number of species present on the island is then a dynamic equilibrium between migration and extinction.

MacArthur and Wilson's article, considered as a cornerstone of biogeography, was a radical departure from Mayr and the adaptationist program, and proved extremely successful. The next radical step then was taken by Hubbell[15] who applied the same idea to the whole continent : all species at a given trophic level are equivalent, new species appear by mutation and become extinct by genetic drift. The biodiversity curve is then a function of a single number that takes into account the mutation rate and the size of the community. Hubbell's book founded what is called the neutral theory of biodiversity and provoked an incredibly wide and heated debate in the ecological community, which is still ongoing.

I review below some of the mathematical consequences of the neutral theory to which we contributed. In retrospect, it seems strange that the idea of neutral speciation, considered very early by population geneticists such as Malecot[18] and Kimura[19], took so much time to permeate the ecological/evolutionary thinking; I believe that this is partly due to the influence of Mayr's book. The main idea however is very simple : for a community of size N composed of equivalent individuals with the same fitness, the extinction time of a species due to genetic drift is $\tau_e \sim \log N$; the appearance of new species is inversely proportional to the (neutral) mutation rate $\tau_a \sim 1/\mu$. Therefore, if $\tau_a \ll \tau_e$, many equivalent species will coexist at the same geographical location and their abundance will be a dynamic interplay between these two events.

Consider a community consisting of N individuals and S species, with species i having n_i individuals (Figure 4a). All individuals, regardless of their species, are equivalent in their reproductive/death rate. When an individual dies, it is immediately replaced by the progeny of another one. Because of mutations, the progeny can differ from its parent with probability ν , thus forming a new species appearing with abundance 1. After its appearance, the species abundance is a stochastic function of time ; if an individual is the sole representative of a species and dies, then this species disappears. As in the previous section, the probability $P(n, t|1, t_0)$ for species i to have n individuals at time t , knowing the species appeared at time t_0 , obeys a Master equation of the form

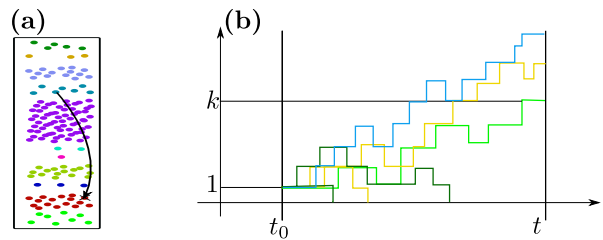


Figure 4: (a) The Moran model of a neutral community composed of various species, where an individual is replaced upon its death by the progeny of another regardless of its species. (b) Each new species appears with abundance 1 by mutation at some time t_0 ; the number of individuals $n_i(t)$ of species i at time t is a stochastic curve .

(3) where the transition rates are[20] :

$$W^+(n) = \mu(N - n)n(1 - \nu)/N \quad (4)$$

$$W^-(n) = \mu n(N - n + \nu(n - 1))/N \quad (5)$$

The increase rate $W^+(n)$ is the probability density of death of an individual that does not belong to the considered species $\mu(N - n)$ multiplied by the probability of birth of an individual that belongs to the considered species n/N , times the probability of no mutation $(1 - \nu)$. The decrease rate is similar, but takes also into account the probability of an individual dying and being replaced by the progeny of a member of its own species with a mutation.

Let us set the origin of time at $t_0 = 0$. The master equation gives the fate of one particular species. $\langle \phi(n) \rangle$, the average number of species having abundance n at time t is the sum of all those who have been generated at an earlier time τ and have reached abundance n at time t :

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \phi(n) \rangle &= \int_0^t f(\tau) P(n, t|1, \tau) d\tau \\ &= \nu \int_0^t P(n, \tau|1, 0) d\tau \end{aligned}$$

where $f(\tau)$ is the probability per unit of time of generating a mutant and is equal to ν (time is measured in units of generations $1/\mu$). Defining the mutation pressure as $\theta = N\nu$, the quantity ϕ can be readily obtained at the limit of large time when the equilibrium is reached. For large communities, using frequencies $\omega = n/N$ and relative abundances $g(\omega) = N \langle \phi(n) \rangle$, the abundance curve $g(\omega)$ takes a simple form[21]

$$\omega g(\omega) = \theta(1 - \omega)^{\theta-1} \quad (6)$$

The above computations ignore spatial distances: an individual can be replaced only by the progeny of its neighbor rather than by everyone in the community. A self consistent model of geographical dispersal is incredibly

difficult. We can however go one step further and apply the above model to the case of island biogeography, where a small island of size M is close to a continent of size N ($M \ll N$). The population of the island is affected by migration from the continent, but given the large size of the continent, the reverse is not true. We can also neglect mutation inside the island as the mutation pressure is small. So the transition rates in the island are similar to eqs (4,5) except that a local individual can be replaced by a migrant from the continent with probability m , where the abundances are given by expression (6). Defining the migration pressure as $\mu = Mm$, in the limit of large sizes of both the island and the continent, we can compute the relative abundance $g_I(\omega)$ inside the island as[21]

$$g_I(\omega) = \mu\theta \int_0^1 (1-\omega)^{\mu u-1} \omega^{\mu(1-u)-1} u^\theta du$$

This expression may seem cumbersome, but it can be easily plotted and depends on only two parameters : θ which itself can be seen as a function of biodiversity on the continent and μ which is a simple decreasing function of the distance between the continent and the island. This expression was also obtained by Volkov et al.[22] and in a slightly modified form by Etienne[23] .

Improving the above model by taking fully into account the spatial dimension seems mathematically intractable. We have been able to slightly improve the continent-island model by treating both communities on an equal footing[24] but going further seems beyond the reach of the mathematical tools we used. Nevertheless, the neutral theory of biodiversity is the first falsifiable theory of biodiversity. It has been put to intense test and has been proved successful at interpreting quantitatively available data in island biogeography[25]. As in the previous section, the merit of this model is to provide a first approximation for biodiversity which will always be present, even though many data will necessitate the addition of more ingredients, such as for example, density dependence replacement rates[26, 27] to explain deviation from this theory.

IV. EMERGENCE OF ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR IN DARWINIAN EVOLUTION.

Altruistic behavior is widespread among living organisms. ‘‘Altruism’’ is an emotionally charged term that many scientists avoid in favor of more neutral terms such as cooperative behavior. We stick to this word here and define altruistic behavior as the production of some ‘‘common good’’ that benefits all individuals of the same species in the community, at a cost to the producer. Light production in *Vibrio fischeri*[28, 29], siderophore production in *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*[30], invertase enzyme

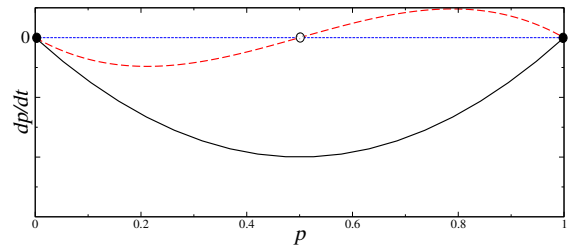


Figure 5: the phase space presentation of the Fisher equation (7). Solid curve: constant fitness $r - 1 < 0$; of the two fixed point, only $p = 0$ is stable. Dashed curve: frequency dependent fitness where $r - 1 = f(p) < 0$ for $p < p^*$. Both fixed points $p = 0$ and $p = 1$ are stable.

production in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*[31], stalk formation by *Dictyostelium discoideum*[29, 32], are but a few examples, taken from the microbial world, where individuals in a community help others at their own cost by devoting part of their resources to this task. From the evolutionary point of view, altruists have a lower fitness than other individuals in the community who don’t help, but are recipients of the benefits produced by altruists. Throughout this paper, we call these latter individuals ‘selfish’. Fitness is defined by the (average) number of progeny a given genotype can get to the next generation.

How altruistic behavior can emerge by natural selection if individuals carrying this genotype have a lower fitness than the selfish one ? This is among the hottest debates of evolutionary biology, and has been ongoing from the inception of the discipline[33]. In the deterministic view of evolution, genotypes with higher fitness increase their frequency in the population ; therefore, if altruism is selected it means that its associated genotype has some hidden benefits that compensate its apparent lower fitness. The only task is to discover the hidden advantage.

The first class of model for the hidden advantage was proposed by Hamilton[34, 35] and is known as kin selection: the common good is not provided to everybody, but only to individuals carrying similar genotype. The original Hamilton model based on ‘‘frequency dependent fitness’’ was formulated for sexually reproducing organism and would take into account the degree of closeness between genotypes ; the argument is simpler for asexual organism. Consider the deterministic Fisher equation for the change in the frequency p of a genotype having fitness r :

$$dp/dt = (r - 1)p(1 - p) \quad (7)$$

advantageous mutants have fitness $r > 1$ and therefore increase their frequency, where deleterious mutants have fitness $r < 1$ and decrease their frequency. This equation supposes that fitness does not depend on the frequency of the allele and is a constant . If however the fitness r is a function of the gene frequency $f(p)$ and the function

changes its sign for some intermediate frequency p^* , then the gene will increase its frequency if $p > p^*$ (figure 5). This is precisely the point made by Hamilton : if help is provided and received only among altruists, then at high frequency, the benefits that each altruists receive from other ‘kin’ can outweigh the cost of the common good production to one individual.

The second class of models, called group selection, suppose that individuals are divided into groups. Not only do individuals compete inside each group in order to increase their frequency, but groups compete among each other at a higher level of selection[36]. The idea of group selection goes back to the inception of evolutionary biology and was promoted by the founding fathers of modern evolutionary synthesis, then was discredited (excommunicated) by G.C. Williams[37] in 1972, then restored by Lewontin[38] and Price[39] and regained respectability again in the 1990’s.

This two class of models are nowadays the main explanations for the emergence of altruisms in Darwinian evolution[40], even though a “religious” war can erupt between them from time to time (see for example[41] and some among many replies to it[42, 43]).

As in the two previous section, I want to review an alternative theory we developed[?], based on the discreteness and random nature of life. As in the previous sections, I don’t claim that this theory explains all the observed behavior and replaces the other two. But as in the previous section, I show that a very simple explanation exists which does not rely on some hidden benefits, but relies only on the very nature of life.

The deterministic Fisher equation (7) is not satisfactory at small excess relative fitness : a fitter genotype appearing at one copy number can disappear just by chance and not get the possibility of increasing its frequency at all. Evolutionary dynamics is a stochastic process due to competition between deterministic selection pressure and stochastic events due to random sampling from one generation to the other. In order to capture the main characteristics of this competition, Fisher and Wright introduced a very simple model which was later slightly modified by Moran([44]) to make it mathematically more tractable[45]. The model consists of a community of fixed size N , composed of wild type individuals with fitness 1 and mutants with fitness r . When an individual dies, it is immediately replaced by an other, the replacement probability being proportional to the fitness of remaining individuals. The transition rates for the mutants to increase/decrease their number by one individual is

$$W^+(n) = r\mu(N - n)n/N \quad (8)$$

$$W^-(n) = \mu(N - n)n/N \quad (9)$$

and their mean field approximation leads to the deterministic Fisher equation (7). However, this is a probabilistic process : the number of mutants can fall to zero

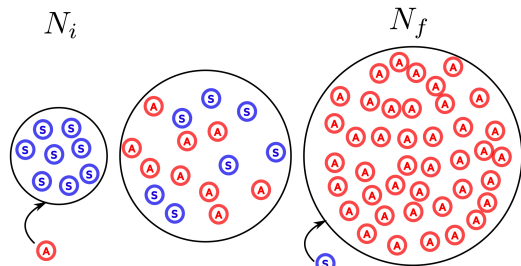


Figure 6: The neutral effect of common good production : the carrying capacity N of the habitat depends on the number of altruists present, ranging from a minimum N_i when only selfish individuals are present to a maximum N_f . In this case, the fixation probability of one A introduced into a community of S can be higher than the fixation probability of one S introduced into a community of A.

(extinction) or N (fixation) with finite probability and if it does so, the system remains in this state. One of the most fundamental concepts of evolutionary dynamics is precisely the *fixation probability*, *i.e.* the probability that a mutant spreads and takes over the whole community([46]). In the framework of the Moran model the fixation probability is [44, 45]

$$\pi_f = \frac{1 - r^{-N_0}}{1 - r^{-N}} \quad (10)$$

where N_0 is the original number of mutants. For small selection pressure $Ns \ll 1$ where $s = r - 1$, the fixation probability π_f of a mutant appearing at one copy can be approximated by

$$\pi_f \approx \frac{1}{N} + \frac{s}{2} \quad (11)$$

The fixation probability is composed of two terms : even in the absence of selection, the population will become homogenic, a process known as genetic drift; in the neutral case, all individuals at generation zero have an equal probability $1/N$ of becoming fixed. When a beneficial mutant is present, the fixation probability of its carrier is increased by the relative excess fitness. Note that genetic drift is at the heart of the neutral theory of biodiversity discussed in the previous section.

The Fisher-Wright-Moran model is the most fundamental model of population genetics, displaying the importance of genetic drift. We can complement it to take into account the effect of altruistic individuals, without adding any hidden benefits. The most notable effect of “common good” production is the increase in the carrying capacity of the habitat, which benefits everybody regardless of its genotype (altruistic or selfish). Let us suppose that the carrying capacity N is N_i when only selfish individuals are present and N_f when only altruistic individuals are present ($N_i < N_f$) and has an intermediate value

when the community is a mixture of both genotypes, with N an increasing function of the number of altruistic individuals n (figure 6). Let us suppose now that altruistic individuals have fitness $r < 1$ compared to selfish ones and let us set $s = 1 - r$ as the cost of altruism. In a deterministic model, altruists will always lose to selfish ones[?]. When taking into account the stochastic nature of this process, the answer can be different. As I stressed above, the quantity of interest in the stochastic process is the fixation probability. Let us compare the fixation probability π^A of one altruistic mutant introduced into a community of selfish individuals to the fixation probability π^S of one selfish mutant introduced into a community of altruistic individuals(figure 6). A back-of-the-envelope computation, according to eq.(11) gives :

$$\pi^A = \frac{1}{N_i} - \frac{s}{2} ; \quad \pi^S = \frac{1}{N_f} + \frac{s}{2}$$

We see that even though selfish individuals have higher fitness, we can have $\pi^A > \pi^S$ if

$$s < \frac{1}{N_i} - \frac{1}{N_f}$$

Alternatively, by setting $\Delta N = N_f - N_i$ and $\bar{N} = \sqrt{N_i N_f}$, the above criteria can be written in terms of selection pressure

$$\bar{N}s < \Delta N / \bar{N} \quad (12)$$

which means that if the selection pressure against the altruists is smaller than the relative change in the carrying capacity, then altruists *win*, even though they have a smaller fitness.

The above computation can be made exact by writing the transition rates for the carrying capacity of the system along the transition rates for the change in the number of altruists (eq.8,9)[?]. Although the mathematics get more complicated, the final result is that computed by the expression (12).

One could think that natural communities are composed of large number of individuals, so even for small costs s , the criteria (12) is violated. This argument however is not correct because populations are geographically structured: individuals can be replaced only by their neighbors, so the effective populations entering into expression (12) are indeed much smaller than the total size of the community. In fact, at small migration rate, the altruistic advantage is amplified as places with high carrying capacity composed of altruists send out more migrants than places with a lower carrying capacity composed of selfish. This amplification mechanism can be computed at small migration rates and it can be shown that large, geographically structured populations are indeed *immune* to invasion by selfish individuals ($\pi^S = 0$)[47].

Let us again stress that this simple advantage of altruists is a pure effect of the discreteness of life which cannot exist if living organisms were part of a continuum. I do not claim that kin or group selection do not exist or are irrelevant, but there is an inherent advantage in producing the common good that is always present and is due to the discreteness of life. It may not overcome the cost associated with this behavior in some living ecosystems and then other more elaborate schemes have to be considered, but before resorting to these “hidden advantage” theories, one should subtract the contribution of discreteness and the increase in the carrying capacity.

V. CONCLUSION.

There are many other biological systems where the discreteness of underlying processes have come to the forefront. The most notable example is noise driven chemical reactions taking place inside living cells giving rise to non-genetic individuality and which has been thoroughly investigated during the last decade[48]. The message I intended to carry through the three examples reviewed in this paper is that, as in many other areas of science, the discrete nature of life has important consequences which have been all too often neglected. The main reason of this neglect may be the counterintuitive nature of these consequences : a drop of ink in water tends to dilute and it is not evident that by adding neutral reproduction, the ink should reverse its course and *concentrate*. I hope however that this very fundamental and important aspect of life will become more a part of the general culture of scientists.

* Electronic address: bahram.houchmandzadeh@ujf-grenoble.fr

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