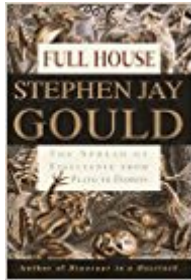




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Full House: The Spread Of Excellence From Plato To Darwin



Synopsis

Few would question the truism that humankind is the crowning achievement of evolution; that the defining thrust of life's history yields progress over time from the primitive and simple to the more advanced and complex; that the disappearance of .400 hitting in baseball is a fact to be bemoaned; or that identifying an existing trend can be helpful in making important life decisions. Few, that is, except Stephen Jay Gould who, in his new book *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, proves that all of these intuitive truths are, in fact, wrong. "All of these mistaken beliefs arise out of the same analytical flaw in our reasoning, our Platonic tendency to reduce a broad spectrum to a single, pinpointed essence," says Gould. "This way of thinking allows us to confirm our most ingrained biases that humans are the supreme being on this planet; that all things are inherently driven to become more complex; and that almost any subject can be expressed and understood in terms of an average." In *Full House*, Gould shows why a more accurate way of understanding our world (and the history of life) is to look at a given subject within its own context, to see it as a part of a spectrum of variation rather than as an isolated "thing" and then to reconceptualize trends as expansion or contraction of this "full house" of variation, and not as the progress or degeneration of an average value, or single thing. When approached in such a way, the disappearance of .400 hitting becomes a cause for celebration, signaling not a decline in greatness but instead an improvement in the overall level of play in baseball; trends become subject to suspicion, and too often, only a tool of those seeking to advance a particular agenda; and the "Age of Man" (a claim rooted in hubris, not in fact) more accurately becomes the "Age of Bacteria." "The traditional mode of thinking has led us to draw many conclusions that don't make satisfying sense," says Gould. "It tells us that .400 hitting has disappeared because batters have gotten worse, but how can that be true when record performances have improved in almost any athletic activity?" In a personal eureka!, Gould realized that we were looking at the picture backward, and that a simple conceptual inversion would resolve a number of the paradoxes of the conventional view. While *Full House* deftly reveals the shortcomings of the popular reasoning we apply to everyday life situations, Gould also explores his beloved realm of natural history as well. Whether debunking the myth of the successful evolution of the horse (he grants that the story still deserves distinction, but as the icon of evolutionary failure); presenting evidence that the vaunted "progress of life" is really random motion away from simple beginnings, not directed impetus toward complexity; or relegating the kingdoms of Animalia and Plantae to their proper positions on the genealogical chart for all of life (as mere twigs on one of the three bushes), *Full House* asks nothing less than that we reconceptualize our view of life in a fundamental way.

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Customer Reviews

The human mind has a trusty device for simplifying a complex world: reduce to averages and identify trends. Although valuable, the risk is that we ignore variations and end up with a skewed view of reality. In evolutionary terms, the result is a view in which humans are the inevitable pinnacle of evolutionary progress, instead of, as Stephen Jay Gould patiently argues, "a cosmic accident that would never arise again if the tree of life could be replanted." The implications of Gould's argument may threaten certain of our philosophical and religious foundations but will in the end provide us with a clearer view of, and a greater appreciation for, the complexities of our world.

In his first single-subject book of original writing since *Wonderful Life* (LJ 9/1/89), Harvard paleontologist Gould examines trends in natural variation throughout organic evolution, thereby discrediting the abstract ideas of eternal forms, fixed essences, and intrinsic progress. His insightful study even applies to sports systems, accounting for the apparent extinction of .400 hitting in baseball. In light of fossil evidence and overwhelming biodiversity, he concludes that there is no linear pattern or ultimate design to evolution. Instead, life is a spreading web or a branching bush; variation, rather than progression, is nature's expression of excellence. Consequently, our species is not the inevitable end-goal of evolution. It remains for Gould to consider in his next book the ethical and theological implications of his nonprogressive and naturalistic world view. (Are bacteria really as important as human beings?) Gould's book is rather a dense read for the average patron, but his ideas are important. Recommended for all academic and public library science collections.-?H. James Birx, Canisius Coll., Buffalo, N.Y. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information,

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Gould bets his *Full House* against our biased view of natural evolution. Watch out because he is a damn good player. He builds his arguments in such a convincing way making deep thinking not just palatable but exciting and, more importantly, reusable. The whole thing starts revisiting basic statistics concepts using baseball numbers. To ended up with an elegant argument that natural selection doesn't mean increase in complexity. Well, it may feel like a punch in the face since we have been living the age of bacteria for ~3.5 billion years. Yeap, forget dinos and humans; we are just at the right tail of a skewed distribution.

Stephen Jay Gould was an author of popular science addressing topics in evolution. His specific credentials included his status as a professor of zoology and geology and a specialty in invertebrate paleoclimatology. Despite those increasingly complex academic credentials he wrote very comfortable and deep essays and books. His topics in *Full House* are several particular aspects of evolution. Fortunately he was writing in a time before this evolution had become as militarized as it appears to be today and despite reviewer comments otherwise he had religious values and as such tended to respect others with religious values. His books always include humor and self-deprecation. Drawing examples from several of his favorite topics including baseball, Gould addresses the popular misconception that evolution necessarily moves in any direction or necessarily favors either the process that resulted in the human being or any singularly upward trend. By making the argument that bacteria can rightfully claim to be the dominant life form across the history of Earth as a living planet Gould deliberately disorients those readers who had been taught that humans are dominant. On a more abstract level he demonstrates a scientific model known as the drunkard's walk. This is a classic thought problem wherein it is shown that if you have an absolute minimum value like zero that all variation must exist at some higher number. The analogy is to a drunken person stumbling out of a bar where if there is a wall to the left of his intended path and therefore his stumbling root must favor the other direction. The third leg of his argument allows him to use sports mostly baseball to demonstrate not only can there be a right wall where in the variations effectively exist between two values one absolute and the other less easily defined but relatively easy to demonstrate. He has his own argument for why the .4000 hitter has disappeared from professional baseball. There is no absolute reason why this number has become unobtainable but the evidence would suggest that some combination of factors effectively created a right-hand wall. By combining arguments that are usually easy for a scientifically oriented reader to

follow Stephen Gould's Full House walks the careful reader through a sequence of arguments that effectively address a number of problems in understanding the statistics of the evolutionary process. This is a rereading by me of this particular book. As much as science is moved forward in the 20 years since publication of I believe this content is sufficiently general to still be consistent with more recent finds. More than this I've always found it a pleasure to follow Gould as he helps me to answer questions about evolution and to enjoy myself with his friendly and personal writing style.

If you are a Gould fan, this book is a must read. He shatters the common perception that the processes of natural selection and evolution have an intrinsic bias leading to a unidirectional trajectory from simple to complex life forms. Although I am a graduate level scientist who was well-schooled in the theory of evolution, I have to admit that I too was under the belief that life always progressed from simple to complex forms. However, using simple examples understandable by laypersons (e.g., the disappearance of the .400 hitter in baseball), Gould demonstrates how statistical distributions distorted by right and left "walls" or limitations can lead to major misperceptions about trends and the directionality of change. Gould was a brilliant scientist and a gifted, engaging writer whose work can be enjoyed by all. In my humble opinion, this is one of his best works.

There are already several excellent reviews below describing the contents of this book. My purpose for writing is to report that I continue to use it very successfully with high school honor students, and can strongly recommend it as a supplement for honors classes. Particularly useful are the statistical modeling examples...experiments the students love doing ('hands-on'), such as the drunkard's walk (random deviation from a left wall). Using a coin-flip, the students can repeat the experiment several times and record some excellent data, especially when the entire class is compiled. Then, of course, simulate the data with Excel. There are several lucid examples which are excellent for class discussion...although the baseball stats get a bit long for the typical HS student. In 2000, I took a small group of students to the AAAS meeting in Washington DC to meet with SJ after we'd studied his book thoroughly in class. He met with us several times, and it seemed as though we already knew him. He was gracious and engaging, and the students were inspired. The prose in this book is intimate, honest, and illuminating. I miss this beautiful man.

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