

Tinbergen’s four questions, organized: a response to Bateson and Laland

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‘What people think of as the moment of discovery is really the discovery of the question’, according to a comment attributed to Jonas Salk. For biology, that moment came in 1963 when Niko Tinbergen published an essay describing Four Questions that need to be answered to explain fully a biological trait. Aristotle offered similar categories, Huxley described three of them in modern terms, and Ernst Mayr paved the way with his distinction between proximate and ultimate (evolutionary) explanations [1,2], but Tinbergen’s Four Questions have proved most valuable for biology. The 50th anniversary of their publication provides, as Bateson and Laland note, an occasion for celebration and reflection [3]. Their article focuses on possible ways the questions could be amended in light of modern advances and debates. The implications of gene–culture evolution, levels of selection, exaptation, and

epigenetics for Tinbergen’s questions are certainly worth discussion, as the Bateson and Laland article illustrates. However, emphasizing such controversies and subtleties can obscure Tinbergen’s accomplishment, which remains vastly underappreciated.

Tinbergen’s core insight is that the questions are not alternatives, they are complementary: answers to all four are necessary for a complete biological explanation. If only I had understood that in medical school many frustrating debates could have been resolved in a moment. Even now, however, some biologists, and most physicians, have never heard of Tinbergen’s Four Questions, and vast confusion results from proximate answers offered for evolutionary questions and vice versa.

Organizing Tinbergen’s questions makes them easier to understand. They are about two different types of ques-

Table 1. Tinbergen’s four questions, organized.

FOUR AREAS OF BIOLOGY: FOUR QUESTIONS		Two objects of explanation	
		<u>Developmental/historical</u> A sequence that results in the trait	<u>Single form</u> The trait at one slice in time
Two kinds of explanations	<u>Proximate</u> Explains how organisms work by describing their mechanisms and their ontogeny	<u>Ontogeny</u> Q: How does the trait develop in individuals? A: Description of the trait’s forms at sequential life stages, and the mechanisms that control development.	<u>Mechanism</u> Q: What is the structure of the trait; how does it work? A: Description of the trait’s anatomy, physiology, regulation, and how the trait works to accomplish a function.
	<u>Evolutionary</u> Explains how a species came to its current form by describing a sequence of forms, and how they were influenced by selection and other evolutionary factors.	<u>Phylogeny</u> Q: What is the phylogenetic history of the trait? A: Description of the history of the trait as reconstructed from its phenotype and genotype precursors	<u>Adaptive significance</u> Q: How have variations in the trait interacted with environments to influence fitness in ways that help to explain the trait’s form? A: Description of how variations in the trait have influenced fitness

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tions, and two different objects of explanation. Two of the questions are about proximate mechanisms, and two are about evolution. Two of the objects of explanation are about the current trait, and two are about the sequences that result in the trait. This suggests a two-by-two table that illustrates how the questions are related (Table 1). When I started using a slide of this table in lectures at the turn of the millennium my discussions with the audience changed: instead of wanting answers to questions about Darwinian medicine they wanted only a copy of the slide.

The table has evolved in response to user suggestions. Tinbergen used 'evolution' to describe phylogeny, and 'survival value' to describe adaptive functions, but evolution now routinely refers to phylogeny and natural selection, and other evolutionary forces, and it is therefore the appropriate term for the overarching category. As noted by Bateson and Laland, 'survival value' is outmoded now that we recognize the centrality of reproductive success. 'Function' is a poor alternative because it encourages the incorrect assumption that each trait has one specific function, whereas some have none and others have several that may involve tradeoffs. The proposed term, 'current utility', seems likely to promote confusion. Current utility can, of course, be different from past utility, but as a recent article in this journal pointed out: 'it is impossible to differentiate exaptation from adaptation unless we interpret the term teleologically' [4]. Also, most students asked about the current utility of noses mention their usefulness in supporting eyeglasses. Tinbergen wanted evolutionary explanations of the form of a trait in terms of how its variations in previous generations interacted with past environments to help account for its current form. Yes, it can be hard to decide what selection forces help to explain the nature of a

trait, but that is no reason to give up on trying to answer what is often the most engaging question. As Tinbergen put it: 'I have always been amazed, and I must admit annoyed as well, when I met, among fellow-zoologists, with the implied or stated opinion that the study of survival value must necessarily be guesswork' ([5] p. 418).

Tinbergen's questions were framed for behavior, but they are equally useful for other traits. Skin tanning, the mechanisms that synthesize bilirubin from biliverdin, parietal cells in the stomach that secrete acid – these and a thousand other traits also need all four explanations. We need to know how they work, how they develop, their phylogeny, and how past variations have influenced fitness in ways that help to explain their current forms. Hopefully Tinbergen's Four Questions will, by their 100th anniversary, have been extended to the full range of biology.

Acknowledgments

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References

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On current utility and adaptive significance: a response to Nesse

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Randy Nesse agrees with us that Tinbergen's four questions were, and continue to be, an extremely valuable contribution to science, but disagrees over which term best replaces Tinbergen's now-dated term 'survival value'. Nesse favours 'adaptive significance' whereas we prefer 'current utility'. The problems with 'adaptive significance' are discussed in our main article [1]: it is ambiguous as to whether the term refers to original or current functionality (which frequently will not be the same) and misleadingly implies that all functionality must result from a biological evolutionary process (which is now known to be false). 'Current utility' suffers from neither of these drawbacks,

but we worry that Nesse's terminology, like his figure, will perpetuate these problems.

Nesse, by contrast, is concerned that 'current utility seems likely to promote confusion', claiming that it will encourage 'noses function to support eyeglasses' reasoning. He asserts that it is only through teleological thinking that adaptations and exaptations can be distinguished. For us, this misses the point. Although we do not object to teleological interpretation, it clearly would be foolhardy to suggest that its utilization safeguards against the misdiagnosis of adaptation. Gould and Lewontin's [2] critique of the 'Panglossian paradigm' used Voltaire's satire to illustrate problems with a vulgar adaptationist stance in which 'noses function to support eyeglasses' reasoning is rife. They write (p. 581): 'We fault

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