

## **Book Review**

For *Organization Studies*, accepted 30 July 2019

**Daniel S. Milo**

***Good Enough: The Tolerance of Mediocrity in Nature and Society*  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 320pp.**

**Reviewed by:** Donald Nordberg, Bournemouth University, UK (ORCID: 0000-0003-0857-7106)

Why, I wondered, did *Organization Studies* want someone to review a book, written by a philosopher, about evolutionary biology? Why did I leap at the chance?

The second was easy: Years ago, while learning about corporate governance, I found a mention of a “theory of lesser peaks”. I have lost the reference, sadly, but it is related to institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and path dependence (Bebchuk & Roe, 1999), and a remark by Amartya Sen (2006) about eschewing the pursuit of an “ideal” form of justice. It suggests that the fear and cost of descending from a lesser peak inhibits us from achieving even greater heights. For example, having achieved pretty good corporate governance, do you want to risk losing those gains for the sake, after another, even longer climb, to try a different system? Why not settle for something good enough?

The clue to answering the first question is the final word in the subtitle of this charmingly accessible book. Scholars have long sought analogies from other fields, including organisms, to explain the non-natural world of organizations that Gareth Morgan (1997) famously catalogued. While the meat of Daniel Milo’s book focuses on biology and our (and Darwin’s) flawed understanding of the theory of natural selection, it is bookended by chapters that hint at, rather than develop, a more all-embracing application, across social interactions, economic affairs and the nature of organizations.

Its discussion of biology demonstrates, through repeated examples, that the outcome of natural selection is not continuing improvement. Let’s consider just one: After an introductory chapter outlining his argument, Milo turns in Chapter 1 to the giraffe. Giraffes cannot be the product of ever-better adaptation to their environment. The common explanation, and the one used by Darwinians for many years, is that their long necks allowed the giraffe to feast on leaves inaccessible to shorter creatures. Such an adaptation would surely benefit them, especially during periods of limited rainfall.

Sadly, for the theorists, the data from field studies show something else. Giraffes don’t feed much at the greatest height, and during droughts, they feed from lower branches or the ground. Nor do their long, strong necks seem to facilitate reproduction. If natural selection is right, why didn’t these awkward creatures – which have difficulty drinking water, running,

kneeling to rest or sleep, or engaging in intercourse – succumb to the drawback of such maladaptation?

Natural selection does occur, Milo agrees, but it is not alone in driving speciation or variation within species. Favorable mutations improve the chances of survival, yes, but they often come alongside other changes in DNA that increase variety without necessarily helping the creature survive. Mutation is random. Some variants may even be worse, but not bad enough to inhibit their heritability and persistence through generations. Indeed, studies in natural history, detailed through most of the book's 10 chapters, suggest that nature favors persistence over change, unless, by luck, a change is helpful in the context of some shift in the environment.

Take humans. *Homo sapiens* survive, even dominate the earth, despite their many maladaptations. It's not just their lack of body hair, their susceptibility to disease, their slow gait or merely modest strength that make them unsuited in a contest for survival of the fittest. Think of the long gestation period of their offspring, and then the much longer period of development before their young can walk, let alone feed themselves and reproduce. And then there's their long life after their fertility has dimmed. Surely natural selection, as recorded in what Milo calls the "domestication fallacy" in Darwin, would have de-selected beasts that live long lives and continue to absorb resources, while engaging only in recreational rather than reproductive sex.

One of those random adaptations that arrived along with the lack of body hair, limited muscular strength and other lost benefits was a very powerful brain. There is a brain that can solve problems, remember much of what happened in the past, and, most importantly, imagine the future. This imagination, Milo argues, may be the key to understanding why *homo sapiens* left Africa to seek out other domains in ways the other humanoids did only modestly and much less successfully. It accounts for our need for ever greater variety and novelty, our thirst for innovation and experimentation – for things that don't help the fittest survive.

The book's final chapter then seeks to draw social and economic conclusions from the biological base it builds. For example, in its closing pages, we read:

Imperatives such as *innovate or die* and *be competitive* are strongly connected to natural selection as described by Darwinism and neo-Darwinism but feebly connected to natural selection as it actually operates (Milo, 2019, p. 249, emphasis in the original)

Darwinism and neo-Darwinism have much in common with neoliberalism, he asserts. "If evolutionary thought all too easily naturalizes capitalism's competitive zeal, it is because Darwin was only partly right" (Milo, 2019, p. 2).

If how natural selection "actually operates" through accident, randomness and luck, generating mediocrity or worse more often than excellence, then perhaps we are misguided to think that *homo economicus* is a product of nature or a goal to achieve. Perhaps organizations are mistaken to strive, always, to be competitive. Or indeed to innovate, an exercise at odds with the efficiency we often hear is central to being competitive.

Building on Milo's version of biological history, we can revise our image of organizations as organisms. It can explain why many small businesses persist, over generations, without constant improvement. They are "good enough", at least until something radical happens. It

may explain why charities attract volunteers, why social enterprises seek something other than greater profitability, as well as why we enjoy the useless activity of elaborate team sports, leagues and the international organizations that run them. We value them, perhaps, not principally for the business opportunities they represent.

It also suggests reasons why, in complex organizations, facing complex decision-making, we should expect – even accept – failures, because circumstances arise when *innovate or die* is associated with natural selection, and when to *be competitive* is vital. We just can't be sure when they are coming, or from which direction.

And how might we organize and then govern those organizations? Milo's view of biology points us away from seeking perfection and even perfectibility. It points instead towards sticking with what works until it doesn't and accepting what's "good enough", while tolerating and even embracing experiments that don't cause too much harm. Corporate governance might need only to be "reasonably good" (Nordberg, 2018). Imagination will then take care of the rest, until it doesn't. As for a philosophy of organization, the philosopher Milo seems to favor pragmatism over the utilitarian, and the utilitarian over the ideal. The rest is luck.

## References

- Bebchuk, L. A., & Roe, M. J. (1999). A theory of path dependence in corporate ownership and governance. *Stanford Law Review*, 52(1), 127-170.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340-363.
- Milo, D. S. (2019). *Good Enough: The Tolerance of Mediocrity in Nature and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morgan, G. (1997). *Images of Organization* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nordberg, D. (2018). Edging toward 'reasonably' good corporate governance. *Philosophy of Management*, 17(3), 353-371. doi: 10.1007/s40926-017-0083-9
- Sen, A. (2006). What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice? *Journal of Philosophy*, 103(5), 215-238. doi: 10.5840/jphil2006103517