
The evolution of technology is Darwinian

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Abstract

Darwinian evolution happens when natural selection shapes an evolving population, even if that population is not biological. Here, natural selection is understood along the lines of the traditional account made famous by Lewontin (1970) and recently developed by Godfrey-Smith (2009). This talk investigates whether there is empirical evidence that Darwinian evolution shapes the population of patented technologies. Analysis of the past thirty years of patent records reveals the signature of Darwinian evolution, although a form with highly tangled and "incestuous" genealogies that are quite unlike those found in biology. These empirical results illustrate the promise of a Darwinian analysis of the evolution of technology, and they answer many familiar criticisms of Darwinian analyses of culture.

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