

Evolution, dysfunction and disease: a reappraisal

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Abstract

Some ‘naturalist’ accounts of disease employ a biostatistical account of dysfunction whilst others use a ‘selected effect’ account. Several recent authors have argued that the biostatistical account (BST) offers the best hope for a naturalist account of disease. We show that the selected effect account survives the criticisms levelled by these authors relatively unscathed, and has significant advantages over the BST. Moreover, unlike the BST it has a strong theoretical rationale and can provide substantive reasons to decide difficult cases. This is illustrated by showing how life-history theory clarifies the status of so-called diseases of old age. The selected effect account of function deserves a more prominent place in the philosophy of medicine than it currently occupies.

1. Introduction

A core issue in the philosophy of medicine is whether non-evaluative facts play the key role in determining whether a state is pathological (Boorse [1977]; Wakefield [1992]; Kingma [2007]; Murphy [2009]). Call this the question of ‘naturalism’ regarding disease (Kingma [2014]). Many authors on both sides of this question agree that some version of the so-called ‘Biostatistical theory’ (BST) is the best naturalist account of disease (Schwartz [2007]; Kingma [2007]; Hausman [2012]; Boorse [1977], [2014]). We contend that this is a mistake. The BST is subject to some extremely damning criticisms, and so linking the fortunes of the naturalist project to the BST unnecessarily weakens that project.

Instead, we contend that a ‘selected effect’ view of biological function and dysfunction will be a component of the best naturalist view of disease (Wakefield [1992], [2007]). After describing the two accounts in section 2, we argue for this conclusion along three lines. In section 3, we defend the selected effect view against criticisms old and new. The selected effect view is very far from being ‘dead in the water’ as many authors appear to believe. In section 4 we show how the selected effect view avoids fundamental problems that have dogged the BST since it was first proposed. Finally, in sections 5 and 6 we show that the selected effect approach can do more than recover intuitive judgments about dysfunction. It can advance our understanding, providing a principled basis for demarcation decisions and generating new insights into the very idea of pathology.

Underlying our arguments is the idea that explication (Carnap [1950]), as opposed to mere analysis, is the proper goal of philosophy in this context.¹ It has proved extremely difficult to give an analysis that captures all cases of disease, only cases of disease, and still manages to say something substantive and informative about disease. In our view, the first two of these desiderata should not stand in the way of meeting the third. The aim of philosophical analysis should not be restricted to describing how disease is understood by ordinary folk, or by doctors, or by philosophers of medicine. It can and should have the more substantial aim of advancing our understanding of what it is for an organism to be in a normal or a pathological state. Ruth Millikan ([1989]) has advocated this view of philosophical analysis in her work on the concept of biological function more generally.

Towards the end of the paper we show how evolutionary biology provides substantive reasons to consider some phenotypes as pathological and others as normal (see also Nesse [2001], [2007]). An evolutionary view of function can adjudicate difficult cases in a principled and independently motivated way. It therefore has the potential to advance our understanding of the subject, rather than merely recovering pre-existing intuitions. So this paper includes both methodological and substantive elements: we advocate a particular approach to

¹ Lemoine ([2013]) and Schwartz ([2014]) hold similarly pessimistic views of the effectiveness of conceptual analysis in settling debates regarding the nature of disease.

1 philosophical work, and we defend a particular application of this approach to dysfunction in the context of
2 medicine.

3
4 Before we begin, it will be helpful to clarify the scope of the paper. First, we do not offer an overall account of
5 the concept of disease. Our focus is on the non-evaluative facts that will form at least *part* of an overall account
6 of disease. The dominant view in the literature is that these are facts about biological function and dysfunction.
7 So our goal is to defend a particular account of function and dysfunction – the selected effect account – in the
8 context of medicine.
9

10
11 Second, nothing we say in this paper should be taken to suggest there is a single correct account of biological
12 function. Both authors are pluralists: we think there are a number of legitimate notions of function at play in the
13 biological sciences, each with advantages in different contexts (Griffiths [1993], [2009]; Godfrey-Smith
14 [1993]). Perhaps more than one account will be needed even in medicine alone. The question is not ‘What is the
15 correct account of biological function?’ but rather ‘Which account(s) of biological function do a good job of
16 demarcating pathological states?’
17

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19 Third, we aim to convince *naturalists* to seriously consider the selected effect account of function. We do not
20 argue that those who reject naturalism must adopt a selected effects account! However, our arguments are
21 relevant to anti-naturalists because, as we show below, many of them take a refutation of the biostatistical view
22 of function to be *ipso facto* a refutation of naturalism.
23

24
25 Finally, we note that psychiatric disorders pose special challenges for any analysis of the normal and the
26 pathological, so while we do not distinguish the psychiatric from the somatic domain in this paper, we remain
27 open to the possibility that they may require separate treatments.
28

29 With the throat clearing out of the way, we begin by outlining the two relevant accounts of biological function.
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32 2. Biostatistical and Selected Effect Accounts of Function

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34
35 The standard view of biological function and dysfunction in the setting of health and disease is that employed
36 in Christopher Boorse’s BST ([1977]). In spite of being almost four decades old, this view is still widely
37 discussed and hotly contested in the philosophical literature.²
38

39 Boorse gives the following account of disease:

- 40
41 1. The reference class is a natural class of organisms of uniform functional design; specifically, an age
42 group of a sex of a species.
- 43 2. A normal function of a part or process within members of the reference class is a statistically typical
44 contribution by it to their individual survival and reproduction.
- 45 3. A disease is a type of internal state which is either an impairment of normal functional ability, i.e. a
46 reduction of one or more functional abilities below typical efficiency, or a limitation on functional
47 ability caused by environmental agents.
- 48 4. Health is the absence of disease.
49 (Boorse [1977] pp. 555, 567)
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52
53 Our focus is on Boorse’s definition of function, given in clause 2. Function is the contribution made to future
54 survival and reproduction, and ‘normal’ functioning is simply statistical normality within a particular reference
55 class. If a trait contributes to fitness in a manner typical of members of the reference class (or better), it is
56 considered to be functioning correctly.
57

58
59 ² A selection of important recent philosophical discussions include Cooper ([2002]), Kingma ([2007], [2010]),
60 Hausman ([2011]), and Garson and Piccinini ([2014])

1
2 An alternative approach to biological function is the selected effect account (Papineau [1987]; Millikan [1984],
3 [1989]; Neander [1991]; Griffiths [1993]; Godfrey-Smith [1994]). Details vary, but the core commitment of the
4 selected effect account is simple: ‘biological proper functions are effects for which traits were selected by
5 natural selection’ (Neander [1991], p. 168).
6

7
8 Any capacity of a system that is of interest to a scientist can legitimately be subjected to functional analysis
9 (Cummins [1975]). For example, Jared Diamond has analysed plants and animals in terms of their capacity to
10 contribute to colonial expansion (Diamond [1997]). The selected effect theory of biological function rests on
11 the insight that one biological capacity, and the functions it generates, stands out from all the others. It is no
12 mere quirk of psychology or sociology that leads the selected effect view – and biology generally – to focus on
13 the capacity to survive and reproduce (see also Garson [2013]). According to the theory of natural selection,
14 many parts and processes that we observe in living organisms exist because they contributed to survival and
15 reproduction in ancestral organisms. Selected effect functions explain why organisms have the parts and
16 processes that have those functions. They are often referred to as the ‘Proper functions’ of those parts and
17 processes (Millikan [1984]; Neander [1991]).
18

19
20 However, the selected effect account does not suggest that we look to the distant evolutionary past to discover
21 the function of a trait. The current orthodoxy in philosophy of biology is that selected effect function derives
22 from the ‘modern history’ of a trait: the evolutionary forces that have maintained the traits in a lineage under
23 recent selection (Griffiths [1993]; Godfrey-Smith [1994]).
24

25
26 Karen Neander was a notable and early defender of the selected effect view in the context of medicine
27 (Neander [1998]), but the most prominent advocate is Jerome Wakefield ([1992], [2000], [2007]). His ‘harmful
28 dysfunction’ account of medical disorder incorporates both evaluative and non-evaluative elements. It requires
29 both that biological dysfunction occurs and that this dysfunction is considered harmful. In this paper we are not
30 concerned with Wakefield’s overall account of medical disorders, only with its non-evaluative portion. For
31 Wakefield, biological dysfunction occurs when a structure fails to produce the effect for which it has been
32 selected, so he subscribes to the selected effect theory. In the philosophy of medicine Wakefield’s account of
33 dysfunction is frequently sidelined in favour of the BST account. In the next two sections we argue that this is a
34 mistake.
35

36 37 38 **3. Objections to the Selected Effect Account**

39
40 The view that the most viable naturalist account of dysfunction is the biostatistical account rests on arguments
41 against selected effect accounts in general, or against Wakefield’s version in particular. In this section we show
42 that these arguments are much less effective than their proponents suppose. Several counterexamples are
43 thought to show that the selected effect account generates counter-intuitive function ascriptions. Some of these
44 counterexamples rely on an inadequate understanding of how natural selection works, and evaporate once one
45 considers a serious, contemporary attempt to give an evolutionary explanation of the relevant phenotype.
46 Others target older versions of the selected effect view that its current adherents would not accept. Others raise
47 good *prima facie* objections, but fail to recognise the replies available to their opponent.
48

49 50 *Boorse*

51
52 Boorse himself takes a superficial view of evolutionary theory when he states in his original paper that
53 adaptedness cannot be an analysis of health, since ‘Parents hardly become healthier with each successive child,
54 nor would anyone maintain that the healthiest traits are the ones that promote large families’ (Boorse [1977], p.
55 548). However, ever since David Lack developed the concept of optimal clutch size (Lack [1947]), it has been
56 understood that larger families do not necessarily mean higher fitness. They may lead to less robust offspring
57 and lower rates of survival to reproductive maturity. Reproduction must also be traded against survival, as we
58 discuss at length in Section 6. The selected effect view is not committed to the idea that a big family is
59
60

1 equivalent to health. Perhaps this argument is intended to be light-hearted, but comments such as this
2 undoubtedly contributed to the premature rejection of evolutionary views of dysfunction.
3

4 In his early writings Boorse was attacking an early and inadequate version of the selected effects theory
5 (Wright [1973]; Boorse [1976]), but selected effect accounts have moved on considerably since then, as have
6 Boorse's criticisms (Boorse [2002]). Some of these newer criticisms target the viability of selected effects as a
7 general account of all function attributions, and so are not of concern here, as explained above. Some, however,
8 target selected effect accounts in the medical context. For example, Boorse claims that the selected effect
9 account is unable to distinguish functional normality of different life-stages from one another ([2002], pp. 91–
10 2). The mental abilities of an 8-year-old are less developed than those of a 14-year-old, but since the selected
11 effect approach treats these individuals as members of the same evolutionary lineage, Boorse claims it cannot
12 distinguish the two. But life history theory, a central aspect of modern evolutionary theory, is dedicated to
13 making exactly such distinctions, and doing so with mathematical precision. There is no problem here. We
14 discuss life history theory at length in section 6.
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16

17 Boorse also suggests that there is a problem with transitions in selective regimes. He uses the example of
18 woodland in which the trees have been blackened by industrial pollution. There are some light-coloured moths,
19 adapted for camouflage against the natural colour of the trees, and some darker moths, a recent adaptation for
20 camouflage against the blackened bark. Boorse argues that the selected effect theory has no principled way to
21 specify how much time must elapse before the function of light pigmentation ceases to be camouflage ([2002],
22 p. 100)³. The same phenomenon can occur spatially – in invasive cane toads (*Rhinella marina*) in Australia,
23 large toads with lowered immune function and rapid, directional hopping are selectively favoured at the
24 invasion frontier but disfavoured in settled populations behind the frontier (Phillips *et al.* [2010]). How far back
25 do we need to go behind the frontier before suppressed immune function becomes dysfunctional⁴? The
26 underlying issue is that selected effects functions can change gradually over evolutionary time and ecological
27 space. But this is how biology works. It would only be problematic if it were a conceptual truth that diseases
28 must have sharp boundaries, which does not seem to us to be at all evident. On the contrary, many sharp
29 boundaries in medicine, such as BMI cut-offs for obesity, or the fasting blood-glucose cut-offs for pre-diabetes
30 and diabetes, are imposed on what are in reality continuous differences for practical, often administrative,
31 reasons. Moreover, the fact that boundaries are not sharp does not mean they are unprincipled. Evolutionary
32 biology is used to handling the vague boundaries that are inevitable in a Darwinian world in disciplined and
33 rigorous ways. We return to this issue in section 6.
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37 *Kingma*

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Elselijn Kingma is a prominent critic of the biostatistical view of dysfunction (for example, Kingma [2007];
[2010]; [2015]). In her view, the BST is 'the best and only presently existing naturalistic account' of
dysfunction and of disease ([2010], p. 262). Presumably she excludes Wakefield's harmful dysfunction account
in this statement because it is not purely naturalistic. However, in a recent book chapter on psychiatric disease
([2013]) Kingma explicitly compares Boorse and Wakefield's accounts and argues that the BST is superior to
the selected effect account of dysfunction.

Kingma targets the more recent versions of the selected effects account (Millikan [1989]; Neander [1991]). Her
first concern is that the evolutionary history of a trait is difficult to confirm and hence these accounts render
function and dysfunction unknowable: '[...] we will never be in a position to access all those facts; we are
lucky to have access to any.' (Kingma [2013], p. 374) Her specific target in this chapter is psychiatry, but at
least as far as somatic disease is concerned, this seems overly pessimistic, especially since the orthodox version
of the selected effects account is now the 'modern history' version of Godfrey-Smith ([1994]). This account
clearly distinguishes between evolutionary explanations of the origin of traits and evolutionary explanations of

³ Boorse also discusses the problem of fixing a normal range of function for a trait, something dealt with at
greater length in (Schwartz [2007]), discussed below.

⁴ For an approach to this issue using expected mutation rates, see (Griffiths 1993)

1 the maintenance of traits. For a great number of medically relevant traits it is transparent how fitness would be
 2 reduced if they failed to perform their proper functions, and equally transparent that those fitness benefits have
 3 played a role in maintaining the trait in the recent past. It is clear that Northern Europeans lost much of their
 4 skin pigmentation to meet the challenge of synthesising vitamin D in that dark and benighted region (Jablonski
 5 and Chaplin [2000]). This selection pressure is still operative (Glass *et al.* [2009]).
 6

7
 8 Another of Kingma's objections to the selected effects account is that there are 'selected disorders'. These are
 9 traits that have been selected but which constitute disorders in modern circumstances. Kingma's examples are
 10 rape, being excessively violent, and attention-seeking behaviour. However, in each of these examples, either the
 11 traits are not considered diseases, or they are paradigmatically controversial cases – cases where we would like
 12 our account of pathology to adjudicate, as there are no clear shared intuitions to guide us. For example, rape is
 13 not considered an illness: in the absence of some independently diagnosed mental disorder rapists go to jail, not
 14 to hospital. Alternatively, it is controversial whether undesirable personality traits such as attention-seeking are
 15 pathologies, as opposed to normal but inconvenient human variation. So it is not a devastating criticism of
 16 Wakefield that he leaves it to future empirical research to determine whether these so-called personality
 17 disorders are really disorders.
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19
 20 Tim Lewens has presented a similar objection in counterfactual form (2015, 188). If rape *were* an evolved
 21 facultative response to low social status in males, *then* it would follow that males who have low social status
 22 but do not rape *would* be dysfunctional. This is intended to be a counterintuitive result. But Lewens is
 23 conflating two questions. First, does it seem counterintuitive now, as things stand, to say that low status men
 24 who do not rape are dysfunctional? Yes, this is clearly counterintuitive. Second, if we had firm scientific
 25 grounds for believing that it is a monomorphic feature of the male brain (as opposed to a polymorphism, found
 26 in some men but not others) to have mechanisms designed to produce rape behaviour in response to low status,
 27 would it be counterintuitive to say that brains lacking these mechanisms (or with damaged mechanisms) were
 28 dysfunctional? No, it would not be counterintuitive to say dysfunction is present in that counterfactual scenario.
 29 It is a stipulation of the thought experiment that males are designed to exhibit rape behaviour in certain
 30 situations, and that some males cannot act as they are designed to act. Nevertheless, a propensity to rape – even
 31 if stipulated to be part of the design of human males – would be an immensely unfortunate aspect of human
 32 nature, and it would still be deplorable to act on it. The rhetorical power of this argument is that it makes the
 33 defender of SE function look 'soft on rape'. But this type of argument can be used to make any definition of
 34 dysfunction appear 'soft on rape'. For example, normativists are committed to the view that *if* everyone
 35 approved of rape, *then* not raping *would* be dysfunctional. Lewens defends this counterfactual mode of
 36 argument by saying that we should not make "pathology hostage to evolutionary enquiry" (2015, 188). In
 37 section 6 we will argue the exact opposite.
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41 Kingma's next criticism concerns traits that haven't been selected for, but are merely side effects of natural
 42 selection.⁵ Reading is probably too recent in our lineage to have a selective history. If it is merely a by-product
 43 of some other cognitive abilities, then it has no Proper function. This means that, according to the selected
 44 effect account, impaired ability to learn to read cannot be a dysfunction. Yet, Kingma claims, we see impaired
 45 ability to read as a disorder. Wakefield has previously argued that we consider such impairments to be disorders
 46 because (or at least when) we presume the impairment is explained by some underlying dysfunction in a
 47 cognitive trait that does have a Proper function (Wakefield 2000).⁶ Kingma rejects this, arguing that something
 48 can go wrong with a side-effect without anything going wrong with the traits of which it is a side-effect.
 49
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51 However, it is very difficult to find plausible examples of this phenomenon, and reading is not one of them.
 52 Most people who cannot read have not had the opportunity to learn, so these cases are irrelevant. The relevant
 53 cases are people who have every opportunity to learn to read but are unable to do so or who require special
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 57 ⁵ This distinction between 'selection of' and 'selection for' phenotypes is introduced in Sober ([1984]), and
 58 elaborated and defended in Goode and Griffiths ([1995]) and Wilkins and Griffiths ([2013])

59 ⁶ The example was actually introduced by Wakefield ([2000]), intended to be a case in his favour. Murphy and
 60 Woolfolk criticised his proposal along similar lines to Kingma (Murphy and Woolfolk [2000b]).

1 education to do so. Kingma's proposal is that some of those people have no underlying deficit in any trait that
2 has been selected, such as visuospatial recognition or facility with symbolic representation more generally. But
3 in that case it is a mystery why they can't learn to read in the normal way. Reading is not unique in this respect.
4 The ability to acquire evolutionarily novel, culturally transmitted traits has been so critical in human evolution
5 that it is very unlikely that substantial impairments to this ability are part of the normal variation in human
6 populations. Minor impairments may well be part of normal human variation, but by the same token they do not
7 elicit the intuition about dysfunction.
8

9
10 Kingma finishes with a more general criticism: the selected effects account unduly restricts the set of traits that
11 might exhibit pathology. Kingma claims that 'most, if not all of our physical and the vast majority of our
12 mental traits, fall within the domain of health and disorder' (Kingma [2013], p. 379). She claims that this is a
13 core commitment of the concept of a disorder, and that a restriction to selected traits fails to capture this core
14 commitment.
15

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17 But how large is the domain that the selected effects account excludes? Millikan has shown with admirable
18 rigour that if our basic representational capacities have been selected, then all mental representations have
19 Proper functions derived from the functions of the system that produces them (Millikan [1984]). The same is
20 true for other physiological systems. No-one in the past had ever run as fast as Usain Bolt, but the activities of
21 his muscles as he runs the 100m still have Proper functions. The kinds of case Kingma has in mind certainly
22 exist – the selected effects account cannot judge whether a mutation in a stretch of genuinely 'junk' DNA is
23 dysfunctional – but for the most part these cases do not generate strong intuitions about function and
24 dysfunction.
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26
27 Kingma's arguments are certainly not without merit, but they do not leave the selected effects account of
28 dysfunction dead in the water and unworthy of further attention. At best they establish that the account is
29 unintuitive in rare and/or peripheral cases, and we will argue below that this level of disagreement with
30 intuition is acceptable.
31

32 *Hausman*

33
34 Daniel Hausman's work has also focussed on the BST, although his goal is to update and defend it. Hausman
35 explicitly rejects selected effects accounts of functions, claiming that the BST is 'the best-developed naturalistic
36 view of health' (Hausman [2012], p. 520). Hausman's primary argument for this appears in a footnote:
37

38
39 Suppose, e.g. (as might in fact be the case), that some of the many essential functions that the liver
40 carries out were not selected for, but were side effects of other things that were selected for. There
41 would then be no functional explanation for why the liver carries out these activities: the fact that the
42 liver makes these contributions would not be a causal consequence of livers having done these things in
43 the past [...] Yet these contributions of the liver would still be among its functions, and etiological [= *selected effect*]
44 theories would mistakenly deny this.
45 ([2012], p. 522)
46

47
48 There are two ways we might understand this claim. One is biologically implausible and the other is not
49 relevant to the current version of the selected effects account.
50

51
52 Hausman suggests that the liver might have some effects that are 'essential' – perhaps the organism will die or
53 do very poorly without these effects – and yet there has been no selection for these effects, as they were side-
54 effects of other useful functions of the liver. But this misunderstands what it means to be an evolutionary side-
55 effect. If a trait enhances fitness in several different ways, the strength of selection acting on that trait will be
56 greater than if the trait only enhanced fitness in a subset of those ways. This will show up in the evolutionary
57 dynamics, and so all these effects will be selected effects and have Proper functions.
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1 Hausman's example is more plausible if we interpret it as pointing out that some of the essential effects the
2 liver now performs were not the functions that led to the original evolution of livers. However, interpreted this
3 way, the argument targets a straw man. Current versions of selected effect accounts of function appeal to the
4 selective forces that maintain traits in a population, not to the selective forces involved in the origin of traits.
5

6 Hausman also comments that selected effects theories cannot characterise 'partial dysfunction' (parts that work
7 but do not work very well). This is a complex matter, and selected effects theories in philosophy certainly have
8 not given it enough attention, but there is no reason to suppose that it cannot be done. Evolutionary theory does
9 not imply that every organism in a population except the fittest organism in that population is dysfunctional
10 with respect to some trait. We cannot run as fast as Usain Bolt, but that does not mean our leg muscles are
11 dysfunctional. Amongst many other reasons, this is because the selective problem facing an organism is not
12 how to be 'best' but how to make the best allocation of available resources to many different traits given the
13 available information about its circumstances. We return to the problem of 'partial dysfunction' in Section 4.
14

15 *Murphy and Woolfolk*

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19 Dominic Murphy and Robert Woolfolk directly criticise Wakefield's views, rather than compare them with the
20 BST. Like Wakefield, their primary concern is psychiatric disorders, but the points they make apply more
21 widely. Murphy and Woolfolk recognise that in the current version of the selected effects account functions
22 arise from the selective maintenance of traits, rather than their selective origin (Murphy and Woolfolk,
23 [2000a]). Nevertheless, they believe that problems arise when we consider either *spandrels* or *vestigial traits* –
24 either structures that are side-effects of selected traits, or structures that are no longer selected but are still
25 extant. An example of the former is the human chin, which apparently develops only as a side-effect of the
26 growth of other parts of the jaw. An example of the latter is the human appendix, a reduced form of the caecum
27 that houses cellulose-digesting bacteria in herbivores. Since neither kind of structure has effects for which it
28 was recently selected, neither has selected effect functions. Nevertheless, we can have disorders of these
29 structures. Therefore, Murphy and Woolfolk argue, disorder does not require this type of dysfunction.
30
31

32 Wakefield ([2000]) gives a similar reply to both cases. In disorders which arise from these structures, there is
33 dysfunction present, just not where Murphy and Woolfolk look for it. In the case of the spandrels, given that
34 these structures arise as side effects of other selected traits, there will have been some dysfunction in those
35 other traits. For example, the hereditary prognathic chin of the Habsburg imperial family made it difficult for
36 them to chew. One Emperor supposedly starved as a result. The ability to masticate food has, obviously, been
37 selected and the other parts of the jaw of which the chin is a side effect are designed to facilitate this. In cases
38 of disordered vestigial traits Wakefield argues that the organ itself isn't dysfunctional, since it doesn't have a
39 job to do, but some of the tissues that make up the organ are dysfunctional. Even if the appendix has no selected
40 function, for example, the tissues of the appendix are severely inflamed (and so dysfunctional) in cases of
41 appendicitis.
42
43

44 We are sympathetic to these replies. However, there does seem something rather *ad hoc* about them. If
45 Wakefield can cite tissue inflammation as a type of dysfunction, then the requirement that dysfunction must be
46 present is dangerously close to trivial, since this can easily apply to all structures, selected or not. Additionally,
47 such responses may be in danger of mislocating the pathology. Appendicitis seems to be a disorder of the
48 appendix, regardless of the status of its components.
49
50

51 At this point we might wonder how such clashes of intuition can be resolved. Murphy and Woolfolk claim
52 appendicitis is a disorder of the appendix while Wakefield claims it is a disorder of the appendix's tissues.
53 Murphy and Woolfolk claim that a strangely formed chin is a disorder, while Wakefield claims it is just a sign
54 that something closely related is disordered. It seems unlikely that intuitions about cases will solve this
55 disagreement, and indeed perhaps we have reached a limit for the role intuitions can play in the debate. This
56 brings us back to a point we made in our introduction. An account of pathology should capture paradigmatic
57 cases, but it should do more than that. For example, it 'ought to provide a way of integrating research [...], to
58 underlie a heuristically fruitful taxonomy of mental disorders, and generally do a good job at furthering our
59
60

1 understanding of phenomena labelled pathological.’ (Murphy and Woolfolk [2000a], p. 242). If using an
2 account that delivers on this desideratum costs us disputed intuitions, or even clear intuitions regarding
3 peripheral or rare cases, perhaps that is a price worth paying.
4

5 We do not pretend that this short discussion has conclusively vindicated the selected effects account of
6 dysfunction.⁷ We do take ourselves to have shown that the selected effect account of dysfunction has not been
7 given a fair go in the philosophy of medicine. Perhaps the selected effect account of dysfunction doesn’t apply
8 to each and every intuitive case of pathology, but it has not been decisively refuted, nor are its failings so
9 evident that it can be disposed of in a footnote. In the next section we outline a reason for taking the selected
10 effects account very seriously: it avoids deep and intractable problems for the biostatistical account.
11
12

13 14 **4. Problems for the Biostatistical Account** 15

16 The BST has endured sustained criticism since 1977, and a great many purported counterexamples to the view
17 have been produced. Two of the most persistent issues highlighted by these examples are the ‘epidemic
18 problem’ and the ‘reference class problem’. First, it seems plausible that there are instances where a disease is
19 so widespread that it is statistically normal for members of the reference class to be affected (Neander [1991];
20 Schwartz [2007]; Kraemer [2013]). For example, body lice were almost ubiquitous in humans in the not so
21 distant past and are still ubiquitous in many other species. Looking to the future, if obesity continues to increase
22 worldwide, then metabolic problems such as type II diabetes may become statistically typical in at least certain
23 populations. It seems odd to say that the effects of parasitic infection or diabetes are not disease states merely
24 because they predominate statistically.
25
26

27 Second, BST lacks a principled basis for determining the reference class within which to assess statistical
28 normality. Boorse’s reference classes are partitioned by age and sex. This seems intuitively correct, but we are
29 not told why it is correct (see Kingma 2007]). Boorse states that: ‘[...] the reference class was restricted by sex
30 and age because of differences in normal physiology between males and females, young and old.’ (Boorse
31 [1997], p. 8). But this reliance on ‘normal differences’ is unhelpfully circular. We need an independently
32 motivated reason to partition the population in one way as opposed to another.
33
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35 These two problems coincide in so-called diseases of old age. If we partition the population according to age as
36 Boorse suggests, then deleterious physical states that become widespread at certain ages will not be classed as
37 dysfunctional; they will be ‘epidemics’ within a particular reference class. For example, if it is typical to have
38 marked osteoarthritis at age 80, the BST will declare osteoarthritis to be normal functioning – a physiological
39 variant, rather than an instance of pathology. But biomedicine certainly classifies osteoarthritis as pathology,
40 and it seems right to do so. Boorse is aware of this issue, and has attempted at various times to either resolve it
41 or bite the bullet. For example, Boorse claimed that if a particular physical state is typical within some age
42 group, that state is not dysfunctional within that age group:
43
44

45 ‘[...] medicine is wrong [...] what is pathological is only age-excessive atherosclerosis, premature
46 prostate cancer, and so on’
47 (Boorse [2002], p. 103)
48

49 We believe that a philosophical account of dysfunction can be revisionary: it ought to have the resources to
50 resist some intuitive judgements regarding pathology where necessary. However, such resistance needs to be
51 justified in terms of the broader goals for which we are explicating the concept. Osteoarthritis is not some
52
53

54
55 ⁷ One important omission here is Kenneth Schaffner’s discussion of the role of the selected effect functions in
56 physiological research (Schaffner [1993]). Schaffner claims that it plays no essential role at all. We don’t have
57 space to discuss this properly, but our belief is that the role evolutionary thinking plays in discovering
58 physiological mechanisms is separate from the role it plays in determining which mechanisms are normal and
59 which are pathological (Griffiths 2009). Here we are only concerned with the latter issue.
60

1 peripheral case of pathology – it characteristically manifests as (potentially very severe) immobility and pain,
2 caused by bone surfaces rubbing against each other instead of being cushioned by cartilage. Moreover,
3 osteoarthritis is only one of many ‘diseases of old age’. Boorse has recently considered an alternative view,
4 according to which normal functioning is indexed to the young adult phenotype (Boorse [2014]). It is unclear
5 why one would adopt this addition, beyond the fact that it saves some intuitions. Moreover, it would encounter
6 the reverse problem, making a great many aspects of normal childhood and normal ageing pathological. We
7 show in section 6 that a principled solution to systematic age-related change is available using the selected
8 effects account.
9

10
11 The selected effect account of function successfully negotiates these classic objections to the statistical account.
12 First, epidemics of disease present no difficulty for the selected effect view. Every instance of a trait in the
13 current population may fail to produce the effect for which it was selected in the past, and in such an instance
14 the selected effect account diagnoses an epidemic of dysfunction. Second, the selected effect account avoids the
15 reference-class problem. The classes relevant to attributions of function and dysfunction are objectively and
16 independently determined: they are the lineages that feature in evolutionary explanations of the prevalence of
17 traits in a population.⁸
18

19
20 In the previous section we saw that the selected effects account can effectively rebut many of the arguments
21 offered against it. Here we have seen that it effectively addresses the two main problems of the biostatistical
22 framework. These two themes come together in a surprising way in the work of Peter Schwartz, another critic
23 of the selected effects account.
24

25 *Schwartz*

26
27 Schwartz’s ‘Defining Dysfunction: Natural selection, design, and drawing a line’ ([2007]) raises the issue of
28 ‘partial dysfunction’ that was mentioned earlier. He argues that the performance of many traits fall on a
29 gradient with no clear point at which to declare the trait functional or dysfunctional. For example, heart ejection
30 fraction, the efficiency with which the heart pumps blood, can vary continuously. How low must the ejection
31 fraction be before someone is classified as having a dysfunctional heart? Schwartz argues that the selected
32 effect approach is unable to negotiate this issue. It is indeterminate if any particular ejection fraction has been
33 selected, because whether a trait is favoured by natural selection depends on the environment and the
34 competing alternatives. For example, a particular ejection fraction might be selected for in a population of
35 conspecifics with poor heart activity, but selected against in a population with excellent hearts.
36
37

38
39 This is, indeed, a neglected issue in the philosophical literature on selected effect function. However, there are
40 plenty of intellectual resources in evolutionary biology to meet this challenge, so, like many of the authors
41 discussed above, Schwartz presents only a *prima facie* objection. Selection in spatially and temporally
42 heterogeneous environments (where ‘environment’ can include conspecifics) is a major topic in evolutionary
43 theory. It can lead to the evolution of polymorphisms, in which many types coexist in a population as result of
44 selection, or phenotypic plasticity, in which the optimal phenotype manifests itself differently across different
45 environments. Phenotypic plasticity may be either intra-generational or inter-generational, with parents
46 producing different offspring on the basis of their ‘experience’ of the environment. Another form of phenotypic
47 plasticity occurs in the physiological mechanisms of homeostasis and allostasis, in which the Proper function of
48 a trait is defined by the present or predicted value of one or more environmental variables respectively. In all
49 these ways, many different values of a trait may coexist in a single population, each of them performing a
50 different Proper function. Ruth Millikan’s ([1984]) apparatus of ‘derived and adapted’ Proper functions is
51
52

53
54 ⁸ There are some tough conceptual issues about the individuation of evolutionary processes (see for example
55 Brandon [1990]) which critics of the selected effects account could use to argue that it is indeterminate or
56 unknowable which lineage features in the explanation of the recent maintenance of a trait. This, however,
57 would be to deny that biology can produce well-confirmed evolutionary explanations of the recent trajectory of
58 traits in populations, something even many creationists are willing to allow, so we suggest that the burden of
59 proof here is on the critic.
60

probably the only parallel in the philosophical literature to the sophisticated ways in which biology approaches these issues. Another relevant aspect of evolutionary theory is that organisms are designed to allocate different amounts of resources to their various traits according to their circumstances. The ‘right’ amount of resources for an organism to devote to one of the many activities which it must engage in to survive and reproduce, and hence the ‘right’ level of performance, differs according to age and many other circumstances (see section 6). So although this is certainly a complex issue, it is not a reason to discard an evolutionary approach.

Having rejected the selected effects account, Schwartz turns to the biostatistical account. Schwartz has two criticisms: statistical normality does not guarantee correct functioning, and statistical rarity is no guarantee of poor functioning. For example, if heart failure became more prevalent, this would not make heart failure a case of correct functioning. Conversely, the ejection fraction in the lowest 1% of healthy young men might still provide a perfectly adequate blood supply, so it should not be classified as dysfunctional, rare though it is. So according to Schwartz ([2007] p. 375-6), whether a trait is dysfunctional is independent of the statistical prevalence of the trait. However, rather than discard the biostatistical view, Schwartz claims it can be repaired. A weak heart is dysfunctional, he argues, when (and because) it causes other problems. The fact that a young man’s heart is functioning in the bottom 1% for his age group is irrelevant as long as there are no negative consequences of this.

Given that statistical considerations drop out of his account, it is surprising that Schwartz calls this a ‘fix’ for the biostatistical theory, rather than a replacement.⁹ How Schwartz defines negative consequences is even more surprising: these are the consequences that ‘diminish the ability of a part or process in the organism [...] to carry out an activity that is generally standard in the species and has been for a long period of time’, and this will usually be ‘an activity or capacity that has been subject to the process of natural selection in the species.’ (Schwartz [2007], p. 379) Schwartz’s final view therefore seems much closer to the selected effects account than to the biostatistical account. This confirms our impression that the selected effects account deserves to be taken more seriously in the philosophy of medicine than it is at present. It has been rejected so definitively that it cannot even be recognised when it is reinvented.

5. Analysis versus Explication

In this section we argue that the selected effects view has a strong theoretical rationale that is lacking in at least recent versions of the biostatistical account. It can serve as an explication of dysfunction, not merely as an analysis. As such it can guide our intuitions, rather than merely confirm them where they are clear and leave them unclear where people disagree. The history of the biostatistical account is one of ongoing modification to fit counterexamples (Boorse [1997]; Hausman [2011]). Updated versions have then encountered further counter-examples, necessitating further modification (Kingma [2010]). The current state-of-the-art is a version due to Justin Garson and Gualtiero Piccinini ([2014]).¹⁰ Their account can be summarised as follows, using the standard notation for conditional probability:

Let RC be a reference class, X a trait that is distributed over that reference class, and Y a function of that trait. Let S be a situation-type (a set of instances of situations), such as asphyxiation due to an obstructed throat, or a disjunction of such situation-types, such as asphyxiation due to an obstructed throat or ingestion of a toxic substance.

1) ‘Function’

A function of X in RC is $Y =_{\text{def}}$

⁹ See also (Hausman [2014] p. 635).

¹⁰ Garson and Piccinini are pluralists about the concept of function. They defend the biostatistical view here because it is treated in other recent work in philosophy of medicine as the best hope for a naturalist account of dysfunction (Garson & Piccinini [2014]).

- 1 (i) $P(X$ contributes to survival or inclusive fitness in RC) is non-negligible.
 2 (ii) $P(X$ contributes to survival or inclusive fitness in RC by doing $Y|X$ contributes to survival or inclusive
 3 fitness in RC) is non-negligible.
 4

5 **2) Situations where Y is ‘appropriate’**

6 Relative to RC, the set of situations, S, under which X’s exercise of Y is appropriate can be defined by the
 7 following two (independently necessary and jointly sufficient) conditions:

- 8 (i) Inclusivity: $P(X$ is in S|X’s doing Y contributes to survival or inclusive fitness) ~ 1 .
 9 (ii) Specificity: there is no S’ which is a proper subset of S such that (i) is true of S’.

10 **3) ‘Appropriate rate of function’**

11 Trait X performs function Y at a rate of functioning that is appropriate in a situation $s \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} s$

- 12 (i) If an organism in RC possessing X is in s and s [is not a member of] S, then X performs function Y at a rate
 13 of zero (or close to zero). [**and**]
 14 (ii) If an organism in RC possessing X is in s and s [is a member of] S, then X’s rate of functioning provides an
 15 adequate contribution to survival or inclusive fitness in s, relative to other rates that are physiologically possible
 16 for X in s.
 17

18 **4) ‘Dysfunction’**

19 Let X be a token of a trait-type whose tokens are distributed over reference class RC, Y a function of X, and S
 20 the set of situations that are appropriate for X performing Y.

21 Then: X is dysfunctional with respect to Y $\stackrel{\text{def}}{=} X$ cannot perform Y in at least one situation, s, with s [is a
 22 member of] S, at the rate that is appropriate in s.

23 (Garson and Piccinini [2014], p. 6-13)

24 Summarising still further, Garson and Piccinini’s analysis states that in any setting which is not extremely rare
 25 where X performing Y might contribute to the organism’s survival or inclusive fitness, if X fails to perform Y
 26 adequately with respect to what it is physiologically possible for X to do, then X is dysfunctional. Note the
 27 switch here from a consideration of the statistical population norm to what is ‘possible’ for that trait. However,
 28 ‘possibility’ is presumably still indexed to what members of a relevant reference class are capable of, rather
 29 than the individual in question. It might not be physiologically possible for an individual’s severely damaged
 30 cardiac muscle to contract effectively, but this cannot be a reason to deny that their heart is dysfunctional.
 31 Rather, it must be that their damaged cardiac muscle is dysfunctional because it is possible within some wider
 32 human population for cardiac muscle to contract more effectively.

33 Garson and Piccinini’s account deals with many counterexamples to the biostatistical account. Perhaps it will
 34 turn out to be not just the latest, but the ultimate version, immune to the best efforts of philosophers to imagine
 35 scenarios in which it delivers a counterintuitive verdict. In fact, it would be surprising if there were obvious
 36 counterexamples because this analysis has been developed to deal with all the problem cases suggested over the
 37 past thirty-seven years. And herein, we believe, lies a problem. Perhaps this account can recover our intuitions
 38 about whether X is dysfunctional by asking whether X performs Y ‘adequately’ with respect to what is
 39 ‘physiologically possible’ in some set of scenarios. But the more important issue is why these cases count as
 40 dysfunctional, and why it matters that something is dysfunctional. If the only rationale for an analysis is that it
 41 fits all of our intuitions about cases, why not simply rely on intuition?

42 Moreover, the analysis still requires intuition to deliver a determinate verdict about any particular case. The
 43 issue of choosing the reference class in an independently motivated way is not addressed, and the notion of
 44 ‘physiological possibility’ in clause 3(ii) is not fully defined. In the absence of principled criteria these are free
 45 variables that can be used to fit the definition to a predetermined, intuitive result.

1 A philosophical account of dysfunction should give more guidance when intuitions are unclear, and deliver
2 greater theoretical contribution to our understanding of dysfunction and pathology. Rather than refining an
3 analysis through a series of counterexamples we ought to find a theoretically grounded explication of the
4 concept (Carnap [1950]), and see what this tells us about both the clear and the difficult cases. An explication
5 needs to accord with our intuitions regarding paradigm examples, but it does not have to achieve this across the
6 board. It certainly does not have to accord with our intuitions regarding esoteric thought experiments. Rather, it
7 is more important that in those cases where the explication disagrees with intuition (and also in those where it
8 agrees), the account ought to be able to explain why it disagrees (or agrees). In this way, we will increase our
9 understanding of the straightforward cases, be able to assess whether we should or shouldn't change our minds
10 in the ones that clash, and generate some further avenues for investigation.

11
12
13 The selected effects account of dysfunction is a good candidate for an explication of dysfunction because the
14 underlying evolutionary rationale for the definition is transparent. It simply applies the orthodox evolutionary
15 concept of adaptation. This means we can address the balance between theoretical coherence and
16 correspondence with intuition in a constructive and well-motivated manner. Also, we will not be open to
17 criticisms of circularity or covert subjectivity regarding the constituent concepts in the account, as these
18 concepts are derived from a mature science, namely evolutionary biology, to which we can look for additional
19 clarification when it is needed.

20
21
22 In the next section we illustrate these advantages by showing how life history theory can illuminate the
23 'diseases of old age' that caused such trouble for the biostatistical account.

24 25 26 27 **6. Explicating Dysfunction: Life History Theory and Senescence**

28
29 Life history theory (Roff [1992], [2002]; Stearns [1992]) is a good place to start when examining the adaptive
30 functions of traits that are important for health and illness. This branch of evolutionary theory is based on the
31 insight that an organism is a process lasting from birth to death. Natural selection does not design a single, adult
32 phenotype. It designs a changing series of phenotypes – a life-history.¹¹ In life-history theory, the basic
33 evolutionary problem facing the organism is to find the optimal way to parcel the resources available to it into
34 offspring. This problem is modelled as the simultaneous optimisation of two parameters, the probability of
35 surviving to each age class and the number of offspring produced in each age class, integrated across all age
36 classes (there are both continuous and discrete versions of these models). The primary constraint on this
37 optimisation problem is the quantity of resources available to the organism. But it is also constrained by
38 multiple trade-offs between the two key parameters: there is an overall trade-off between survival and
39 reproduction; reproduction in the current age class must be traded off against reproduction later; current
40 reproduction must be also traded off against growth, and against condition (the maintenance of structures that
41 have already developed); current growth or condition may trade off with survival to later age classes. The
42 mechanisms that induce these trade-offs may be either genetic – the same alleles influence both traits – or
43 physiological, for example, nutrition allocated to making somatic cells is not available to make germ cells.

44
45
46 Solving this complex optimization problem under different sets of constraints and in different ecological
47 settings leads to the many different life-history strategies observed in nature. Organisms do not start
48 reproducing the moment they are born because they do not have enough resources to reproduce successfully -
49 they will have a higher lifetime reproductive output if they invest in growth before commencing reproduction.
50 This raises the question of when to stop growing and start reproducing. Many organisms are semelparous – they
51 complete all their growth before engaging in a single round of reproductive activity to which they commit all
52 their resources. A famous example is the Australian marsupial genus *Antechinus*, in which males die at the end
53 of the breeding season, and in one species of which all females die after weaning their offspring. Other
54
55

56
57
58 ¹¹ Recall Boorse's objection that the normal mental abilities of an 8-year old are not normal for a 14-year old.
59 According to life-history theory, mental ability at 8 and 14 are separate traits of humans, as separate as legs and
60 arms, and each has its own selection pressures and constraints.

1 organisms, including humans, are iteroparous – they have several rounds of reproduction, which implies
2 staying alive and maintaining condition between each round. One basic evolutionary dynamic affecting the
3 choice between semelparity and iteroparity is that high juvenile survival and low adult survival favours
4 semelparity, whilst the opposite favours iteroparity. There are many other life history choices to be made. For
5 example, humans exhibit determinate growth - they do not continue to increase in size after reaching
6 reproductive maturity, as many fish and reptiles do.
7

8
9 Life history strategies are implemented by the organism's morphology, physiology and behaviour. This
10 implementation lends itself to functional analysis. For example, we can identify the Proper function of shutting
11 down the immune system in male antechinus during the breeding season: it is to free up energy for sperm
12 production, fighting and copulating. Shutting down the immune system is an adaptation for that purpose:
13 modern antechinus have this trait because of the selective advantage it conferred on their ancestors.
14

15
16 When paired with life history theory, the selected effect account of biological function illuminates a number of
17 otherwise problematic issues regarding dysfunction. One of the most dramatic demonstrations of this is
18 senescence. As mentioned earlier, certain phenotypes, such as osteoarthritis, are statistically normal in later age
19 classes. The selected effects theory confirms the intuition that these states are dysfunctional. However, the
20 advantage of this approach is not just that it coincides better with our intuitions. Rather, the evolutionary theory
21 of senescence provides solid reasons why we should distinguish between phenotypes that manifest in later age
22 classes, recognising many of them as dysfunctional but, more speculatively, recognising some as
23 adaptations to the specific ecological demands of those age classes. Drawing these distinctions is not only
24 necessary to explain why we observe these phenotypes, they also have an important heuristic role for
25 biomedical research and potential implications for treatment.
26

27
28 As an example of the evolutionary theory of senescence, consider three age-classes in a contemporary East
29 Asian population (Table 1). Those aged two years can almost all digest lactose and none of them have
30 osteoarthritis. Most of those aged 20 no longer produce lactase and so cannot digest lactose, but few of them
31 have developed osteoarthritis. Almost all of those aged 80 have developed osteoarthritis. So are lactose
32 maldigestion and osteoarthritis dysfunctional or not? The person on the street in Western countries regards both
33 lactose maldigestion and osteoarthritis as diseases, while Boorse's original version of BST regarded neither as
34 diseases. How are we to decide?
35

36
37 The two ways in which phenotypes change over time in Table 1 represent two very different biological
38 phenomena. Understanding these two phenomena provides a rationale for classifying the phenotypes as
39 functional or dysfunctional.
40

41 [Insert Table 1]
42

43
44 Lactose digestion in mammals is an adaptation to the ecological demands of infancy. Mammals switch off
45 production of lactase when they wean because to do otherwise would waste resources. Lactase production is an
46 adaptation for a specific stage of development and ceases operation as part of normal mammalian development.
47 However, when food sources containing lactose became important for adults in some ancestral human
48 populations, then, in the most famous example of gene-culture coevolution, continued expression of lactase in
49 later age classes was favoured by natural selection. Those human populations, which include northern
50 Europeans, are an exception to the ancestral pattern of mammalian development. Most human populations,
51 however, have not been under selective pressure to digest lactose, and so retain the ancestral pattern and switch
52 off the lactase gene at weaning. Problems occur when people from these populations are in an environment that
53 strongly favours lactose digestion, potentially resulting in the problematic symptoms of lactose intolerance.
54

55
56 This leads to some interesting results. First, the selected effects account appears to suggest that whether lactose
57 maldigestion is dysfunctional depends on one's ancestry. If an individual with lactose maldigestion has a
58
59
60

1 simple pattern of geographic ancestry, they can be objectively assigned to a specific evolutionary lineage in
2 which this is either part of normal functioning, as in East Asians, or dysfunctional, as in northern Europeans.¹²
3

4 Second, if the individual has complex geographic ancestry, as is increasingly likely today, then whether their
5 lactose maldigestion is a dysfunctional phenotype becomes objectively vague. By ‘objectively vague’ we mean
6 that there are factual grounds for assigning an individual to a zone between two categories.¹³ Doctors may need
7 to declare a sharp cut-off for official diagnosis, but this is often a pragmatic clinical decision, rather than an
8 application of a determinate concept of pathology. Here, perhaps, lies the best answer to Schwartz’s concern
9 with ‘drawing a line’ ([2007]): sometimes it is indeed vague whether dysfunction is occurring or not, but that
10 simply means we are representing the biological facts accurately.
11

12
13 In the case of lactose maldigestion there is no clinical need to determine whether individuals with complex
14 geographic ancestry have dysfunctional alleles or selected alleles. That distinction could at least sometimes be
15 made by identifying the geographic origins of the haplotypes containing the alleles in each individual, but it
16 would serve no clinical purpose. In the context of clinical care, it may still be medically appropriate to advise
17 someone with lactose intolerance to avoid dairy products even when their lactose intolerance does not arise due
18 to a dysfunction. Similarly, advising light-skinned individuals to wear sunscreen when they visit Australia does
19 not imply any dysfunction is occurring.
20

21
22 The development of osteoarthritis is a phenomenon of a very different kind, but is also illuminated by life
23 history theory. Like many iteroparous species, humans undergo *senescence*, or deterioration in condition in
24 later age classes. Senescence is explained in life history theory in a number of ways. The most famous is
25 ‘antagonistic pleiotropy’ (Williams [1957]), in which some allele increases fitness in earlier age classes, but
26 reduces fitness in later age classes. Because younger organisms have a greater reproductive potential than older
27 organisms, such alleles may be favoured by selection, leading to the evolution of species-typical disease
28 outcomes in older age-classes. Senescence may also be explained simply by a high rate of extrinsic
29 mortality. An organism that is less likely to survive to a later age class because of, for example, a high rate of
30 predation, should allocate more resources to reproduction and less to maintaining condition.
31

32
33 Senescence differs from development (ontogeny) because there is no selection for senescent phenotypes. In
34 development, earlier phenotypes are succeeded by later ones because the later phenotype increases fitness in the
35 age class in which the phenotype is manifested. Embryonic haemoglobins are just what is needed in the early
36 months of gestation, but adult haemoglobins are, unsurprisingly, better when you are an adult. In stark contrast,
37 people do not develop osteoarthritis because stiff and painful joints are better suited to the ecological demands
38 of later life. Evolutionary explanations of senescence recognise that the senescent phenotype always imposes a
39 cost – the organism would be fitter if it retained the phenotype seen in earlier age classes. The senescent
40 phenotype is explained by genetic or physiological linkage, either of which can tie this phenotype to another,
41 fitness-enhancing phenotype. Here we have a well-motivated, definitive answer why osteoarthritis is a
42 pathological state no matter how prevalent it becomes: joints are selected to move freely within a certain range,
43 and never selected to stiffen and become painful.
44
45

46
47
48
49 ¹² It was pointed out by an anonymous reviewer that this means two patients with lactose intolerance might be
50 in differing states of health and disease purely due to different ancestry. Our first reaction to this point was that
51 it is the correct result. However, we have since realised the issue is more subtle than this, not least because
52 maldigestion of lactose does not necessarily lead to lactose intolerance, which might be viewed as a state of
53 pathology regardless of the root cause. For most humans it is not abnormal to stop producing lactase, but it is
54 abnormal to have resulting gastrointestinal dysfunction, even if this is the effect of an evolutionarily novel
55 environment (see also Gluckman *et al.* [2009], p. 5). Our thanks to the reviewer for pushing us on this question.
56

57
58 ¹³ In a Darwinian world, many biological categories grade into one another. For example, during a speciation
59 event or in a hybrid zone there are individuals who cannot be clearly assigned to any one species. But other
60 individuals are definitively in one species and not the other.

1 In normal English usage the term ‘senescence’ refers to the entire suite of phenotypic changes characteristic
2 of later age classes. But not all such phenotypes need be senescent in the sense defined by evolutionary
3 explanations of ageing. One advantage of a biologically informed, selected effect approach to dysfunction is
4 that it reveals an important distinction between genuinely senescent phenotypes and age-specific adaptations to
5 the ecological demands of later age classes. For example, menopause has traditionally been regarded as simply
6 one more example of reduced function in old age. Most mammals, however, remain fertile for a much larger
7 proportion of their lifespan – in many cases until shortly before death. So human menopause, which can occur
8 less than two-thirds into the life-span, cries out for explanation. If the ‘grandmother hypothesis’ (Hawkes
9 [2003]) is correct, then menopause is an adaptation for multi-generational childcare – an age-specific
10 adaptation, like infant lactase production or embryonic haemoglobin (see Le Couteur & Simpson [2011] for
11 other examples of adaptations to old age).
12
13

14 It is worth noting that this kind of insight may have real consequences for medicine. If menopause is an
15 adaptation, for example, then we might expect to find a single mechanism driving the complex changes in gene
16 expression that underlie menopause. Moreover, when investigating the causes of individual differences in the
17 onset of menopause, we might look for environmental cues that carry information that would be relevant in
18 light of our hypothesis about its evolutionary function.
19
20

21 The lesson we draw from these examples is that even deeply seated intuitions about dysfunction are defeasible
22 in light of new discoveries, and particularly new discoveries about the evolutionary reasons for the existence of
23 those phenotypes.
24
25

26 Conclusion

27
28
29 The selected effect approach to dysfunction in the philosophy of medicine is not ‘dead in the water’, as many
30 authors appear to believe. On the contrary, once we adopt the orthodox version of the selected effects account,
31 the so-called ‘modern history’ version, and take evolutionary theory seriously, the main criticisms of the view
32 can be deflected.
33

34 There are three desiderata for a philosophical account of dysfunction in the context of biomedicine. It should
35 capture all the cases of dysfunction, only cases of dysfunction, and it should say something substantive and
36 informative about dysfunction. Much of the existing literature has emphasised the first two desiderata. Because
37 of this, the current version of the popular biostatistical view, honed on many counterexamples, takes almost a
38 page to summarise in relatively technical language and still includes free parameters that can be adjusted to fit
39 what seems intuitive.
40
41

42 Conversely, we have emphasised the third desideratum. Our approach is an explication of the concept of
43 dysfunction, not merely an analysis of the concept as we find it today. Because it has a strong theoretical
44 rationale, our evolutionary approach to dysfunction can challenge established ways of thinking, and offers
45 substantive reasons for reversing intuitive judgments about dysfunction in some cases. Our discussion of
46 senescence illustrates this, showing that an evolutionary explication of the concept of dysfunction can improve
47 our understanding of dysfunction in the context of the diseases of old age.
48
49

50 Our approach also grounds the ideas of function and dysfunction in a mature scientific discipline. It emerges
51 naturally from the core concept of adaptation in evolutionary theory. When determining the function of a
52 specific trait we can appeal, not to our intuitions, but to an established scientific practice which can offer
53 substantive evidence for one function ascription rather than another.
54

55 The selected effect approach to biological function is not without its problems. But we believe that it deserves a
56 more prominent place in the philosophy of medicine than it currently occupies. To discover if a naturalist
57 account of dysfunction and pathology is possible, we must be sure we have settled on the best naturalist
58 account. Until the selected effect view is given proper attention, this will not occur.
59
60

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For Review Only

Age Class	Lactose maldigestion	Osteoarthritis
2	<1%	<1%
20	90%	10%
80	90%	80%

Table 1. Prevalence of lactose maldigestion and osteoarthritis in three age classes in a hypothetical but realistic contemporary East Asian population. (Actual numbers are not definite, due to varying diagnostic criteria and distinctions between affected joints.)