

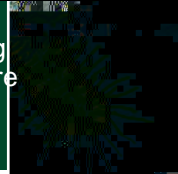
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LETTERS

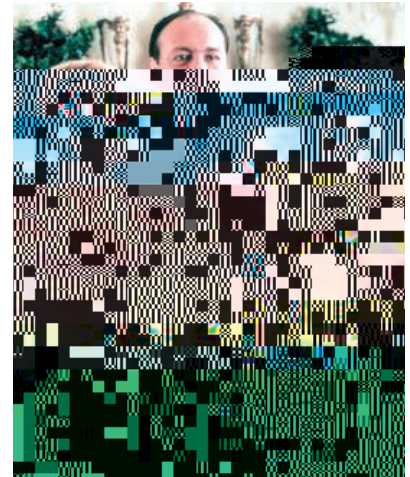
edited by Etta Kavanagh

Genetics and The Sopranos

THE SOPRANOS, A WIDELY VIEWED HBO TELEVISION SERIES POR-
traying contemporary Mafia life in New Jersey, recently aired its final
episode. Future critics of popular culture who look back to
The Sopranos years from now may especially appreciate its relatively
sophisticated treatment of genetic themes.

By my count, the 86 episodes aired since 1999 include 20 explicit
dialogs about genetics. These range from the comical (“Two beautiful
kids—you must be proud... yeah, yeah—how about that huh?...
Even with our genes.”) to dinnertime conversation about the number
of nucleotides in a chromosome, to the forensic (“cut him up in the
work area?... no more of that: DNA.”) and the dramatic (“My God—
there’s nothing holding us together but DNA!”).

The most in-depth discussions about heredity occur between the
lead character Tony Soprano and his psychiatrist concerning genetic
basis of panic attacks in Tony’s family when he discovers



The nuclear Soprano family... celebrating
an interesting genetic heritage?

cloning. As The Sopranos

titles its place in the history of American popular culture, its use of
genetic dialogs may, in the long run, be recognized as one of its most
revealing insights into the productive

BERNARD P. POSSIDENTE JR.

Biology Department, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866, USA.

Reference

1. B. Bates, *Public Understand. Sci.* 4, 47 (2005).

A Less Pessimistic View of U.S. Science Funding

REGARDING J. M. GENTILE’S LETTER “*Genetics, Innovation in research
the U.S. a world leader in science*” (13 July, p. 194), readers would do well to examine my
entire address to the AAAS Science Policy Forum (available at www.ostp.gov).

In my talk, I expressed alarm that the
nation’s research capacity in some fields is
outpacing trends in federal research support
that have persisted over four decades. It is
simply not the case that “the United States has
begun to stumble as a world leader in science
and technology” or that researchers have been
“left high and dry by flat federal funding.” We
continue to outspend and outperform all other
major economies in research, and R&D fund-
ing has grown by 56% (from \$91 billion to
\$143 billion) since 2001. I certainly agree

with Gentile that the capacity exists to do
more, and that is the point. In contrast to the
federal discretionary budget, whose limits are
increasingly constrained by mandated pro-
grams, private-sector investments in research
and development tend to grow with the
economy. They currently exceed federal R&D
by a factor of more than two. Research uni-
versities and other institutions are already

forming innovative partnerships with state
and private-sector entities to augment federal
research funding, and this will certainly
continue. This is a healthy trend that should
be encouraged.

JOHN H. MARBURGER II
Director, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Executive
Office of the President, 725 17th Street, NW, Washington,
DC 20502, USA.


References

1. AAAS Report XXXII, “Research & Development FY2008
(American Association for the Advancement of Science,

- Washington, DC, 2007), Table I-11, p. 59.
2. National Science Board, “Science and Engineering
Indicators 2006: Highlights—National R&D Trends,” vol.
1 (NSB 06-01, National Science Foundation, Arlington,
VA, 2006), pp. 4–5.

Evolution and Group Selection

WORRY THAT SOME PSYCHOLOGISTS, UN-
familiar with evolutionary biology, will be mis-
led by J. Haidt’s account of “The new synthe-
sis in moral psychology” (Reviews, 18 May
p. 998). Haidt claims that whereas “[h]uman
group selection was essentially declared off-
limits in 1966,” it is now accepted that
“groups that develop norms, practices, and
institutions that elicit more group-beneficial
behavior can grow, attract new members, and
replace less cooperative groups” (p. 1004).
Although it is certainly true that such things



“can” happen, Haidt fails to mention that the overwhelming conviction among evolutionary theorists remains that they are most unlikely, since the selection differential between groups would have to exceed the cost differential experienced by self-sacrificial individuals within groups.

By a rhetorical sleight of hand, after describing D. S. Wilson’s group-selection hypothesis for the evolution of religion, Haidt then announces—as though it were fact—that “group selection greatly increased cooperation within the group” (p. 1001). This is pure speculation, not fact, and highly controversial, contrarian speculation at that.

In another case of substituting opinion for reality, Haidt proposes his “Principle 4,” arguing for the biological legitimacy of “patriotism, respect for tradition, and a sense of sacredness” (p. 1001). Perhaps, in the future, these supposed components of morality will be found to have genuine evolutionary underpinnings, but for now they seem closer to a political platform plank for the religious right; psychologists interested in achieving a new synthesis by applying evolutionary biology to human morality should bear in mind that just because these notions appeared in