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## Row over kin selection continues - March 23, 2011

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More than 130 scientists have between them penned five letters attacking a recent *Nature* paper on the evolution of social behaviour.

That [paper](#), published in August 2010, questioned a theory called kin selection, which posits that some individuals, such as worker bees, behave unselfishly because kin with whom they share genes reap the benefit of their labours.

Instead, Martin Nowak, Corina Tarnita and Edward O. Wilson, all at Harvard, argued that such behaviour could emerge as a consequence of natural selection, in which individuals maximize their own survival and reproduction. For more on this paper, read Nature's [news coverage](#) of it.

The theoretical essay outraged many scientists. Richard Dawkins [claimed](#) that Nowak's team misunderstood kin selection, while Jerry Coyne, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Chicago, Illinois, [pointed out](#) that kin selection follows naturally from a situation in which genes affecting behaviour are selected for and spread through a population.

The five letters published today in *Nature* restate that argument and point to overwhelming support for kin selection in experimental and observational studies of different animals. "Theoretically it's wrong, and on an empirical front it ignores all the existing literature," says Stuart West, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Oxford, UK, who is a co-author on [one of](#) the letters.

Nowak, Tarnita and Wilson [stand by](#) their work and say that studies merely showing relatedness in eusocial animals do not support kin selection. "It is time for the field of social evolution to move beyond the limitations of inclusive fitness theory," they write.

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Posted by Ewen Callaway on March 23, 2011

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