

Press Release

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cogito Prize 2004 to Alex Kacelnik and Ernst Fehr

This year's cogito-prize, endowed with 50'000 Swissfrancs, was jointly awarded to Professor Alex Kacelnik of the University of Oxford and Professor Ernst Fehr of the University of Zurich at an award celebration at the University of Zurich on October 20, 2004. The cogito foundation, which strives to stimulate the dialogue between researchers in the humanities and natural sciences, thus honours their contribution in furthering the collaboration between the scientific cultures. The president of the cogito foundation pointed out that the cogito prize was created to encourage and distinguish persons who break the bonds of their own discipline in their research. The cogito laureates should become role models for future generations of scientist and show them how deeper insights can be gained by looking at scientific questions from various perspectives.

Hans Weder, Rector of the University of Zurich and member of the cogito foundation's foundation council, read the laudatory act for Ernst Fehr, professor for macroeconomics and experimental economic research at the University of Zurich. He was honoured for his collaboration with biologists and neuroscientists. By combining economic theories with knowledge from game theory and social psychology he has gained new insights about the behaviour in strategic interactions. He was able to demonstrate that altruistic punishing and rewarding are important in the setting of social norms and for the functioning of organisations and markets.

Rüdiger Wehner, professor for zoology at the University of Zurich and member of the cogito foundation's foundation council, delivered the laudation for Alex Kacelnik, professor for zoology at Oxford University. He has pioneered the combination of evolutionary biology, experimental psychology and economics for the exploration of cognition among humans and animals. His work on rationality includes studies of cognition in New Caledonian crows, a species that has extraordinary capabilities for advanced planning and design of tools.

The two laureates then gave talks entitiled "The Nature of Human Altruism" and "Rationality in Biology, Economy and Psychology". Both talks were testimonies on how fruitful the cooperation among various disciplines can be.

Talks see „events“ on www.cogitofoundation.ch

Biographical information on the cogito Prize winners:

Alex Kacelnik, born in 1946, is Professor of Behavioural Ecology and Head of the Behavioural Ecology Research Group at the University of Oxford. He has been among the founders of the optimality approach to the study of behaviour while remaining a firm advocate of the study of behavioural mechanisms, conducting experiments and developing theoretical models that deal with the extent and limitations of rational behaviour in birds and humans. As the originator of Scalar Utility Theory, he has proposed an account of decision-making under risk that applies across the animal kingdom, including humans. He has recently coordinated a multidisciplinary two-year project on “The Sciences of Risk” at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Berlin, where biologists, economists, anthropologists and psychologists contributed from their diverse perspectives to a broad understanding of risk sensitivity. During his Berlin time, many exchanges with Fehr helped to sharpen the mutual influence between biological evolutionary theory and experimental economics.

Kacelnik’s work on rationality includes widely known studies of cognition in New Caledonian crows, a species that has extraordinary capability for advanced planning and design of tools. He is also a fellow of Pembroke College at Oxford and a co-founder and director of Oxford Risk Research and Analysis (ORRA), a spinout company of the University of Oxford for the transfer of the scientific study of decision making to industrial contexts.

Ernst Fehr, born in 1956, is Professor of Microeconomics and head of the Institute for Empirical Research in Economics at the University of Zurich. His research is closely connected to the Laboratory of experimental Economics, which was founded at the University of Zurich in 1994. Using empirical methods, Fehr studied the origins of human altruism and its influence on economic and social behaviour, such as social preferences and norms. He has shown that altruistic reward or punishment can lead to the establishment of social norms and has a strong influence on the properties of organisations and markets. More recent research has focused on the role of boundedly rational behaviour in strategic interactions, as well as on the neurobiological foundations of social behaviour. Discussions on problems of evolutionary biology with anthropologist Robert Boyd of the University of California Los Angeles and zoologist Alex Kacelnik have had a great influence on Fehr’s recent work from an interdisciplinary point of view. This has led to several publications in NATURE, which have found international acclaim. Apart from his duties at the University of Zurich, Fehr is also an affiliate faculty member at the Department of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as well as an external faculty member at the Santa Fe Institute.