One of the paradoxes of our culture is that we surround ourselves with things and assets that make life easier, yet life never gets easier. What we gain by adopting vacuum cleaners, word processors, route planners, and strawberry slicers is outweighed by the fact that somehow we inadvertently keep finding ways to make life more demanding. It is quite remarkable that when we discuss and appraise our culture we tend to zero in on achievements and smuggle the fact that we keep making life harder on ourselves. Groundbreaking ideas, brilliant discoveries, and handy inventions are so sexy that it is almost impossible not to view cultural evolution as an accumulation of what we can showcase as products of human ingenuity. We inevitably envision cultural evolution as the production of new "things"—as evolutionary scientists would say, a matter of "variation".

This lecture argues that it is much more illuminating to apprehend our cultural evolution as a succession of ever new ways to make life more exacting, as a matter of "selectiveness." Over the course of our evolution we have stumbled upon a supremely effective strategy to create ever new "regimes of selectiveness"—a strategy that can best be designated as the ability and the willingness to create accomplished facts. Our proficiency in creating accomplished facts has evolved into the biggest wonder of human cultural evolution; on a par with the brilliant colors found in certain tropical fish, the social brilliance of the ant, or the web-weaving genius of the spider.

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