

# Darwinian Explanations of Cultural Phenomena

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Evolutionist and Darwinian explanations of cultural phenomena have come under heavy attack ever since they came into being in the nineteenth century. This is not surprising in the case of, for example, Spencer or Ernst Haeckel, whose grand claims to universal explanations were quite programmatic, and had no underlying methodology. (Surprisingly, they misunderstood even the most essential aspect of Darwin's Principle of Natural Selection, *viz.* that evolution is explained by blind, that is a-teleological, forces and not by 'progress'.) However, evolutionist explanations have changed substantially since those early days and it is no longer possible to reject them *tout court*. It is time to look at these attempts in much more detail.

The following is the threefold aim of my paper.

- I I will distinguish between three types of evolutionist explanations of culture.
- II I will analyse the understanding of "causality" found within those explanations.
- III I will argue that any critique of (or debate on) evolutionist explanations of culture will have to take the distinctions of (I) into account.

(I) There are three types of evolutionist explanations:

- a) Culture can be seen as a reaction of human beings to a natural environment, itself shaped by evolution. This approach is the most restricted in its aspiration. (Montesquieu, Herder, and recently J. Diamond, give examples for this approach)
- b) Human beings can be seen as (evolutionarily) shaped animals that must behave in a certain way. Here cultural history seems to be a continuation of natural history. (Subtypes are Schopenhauer's and Freud's libido theory, Lorenz' ethology, Darwinist anthropology, and evolutionist sociology)
- c) Cultural developments and changes can also be understood as being themselves governed by the Principle of Natural Selection. In this case we have a non-biological, evolutionist explanation. (Examples might be Maynard-Smith's evolutionary stable strategies, and the meme-concept by Dawkins, Dennett, and Blackmore)

(II) The understanding of causality can range from that of weak to strong determinism. Where evolutionary elements are seen only as setting up conditions for cultural phenomena, claims for causation are very weak; much stronger are claims that man is determined to behave in such and such a way. There is also a difference between linear explanations and network theories, which latter assume a mutual influence (and evolution) of culture and nature.

(III) Some of the most common critiques of evolutionary explanations of culture are targeted only at deterministic versions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> type. They fail to be fatal to the weak version of the 2<sup>nd</sup> type as much as for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> type of explanations. A successful criticism of the 3<sup>rd</sup> type, for example, would have to be entirely different: the 3<sup>rd</sup> type is refuted when we can show that cultural phenomena cannot be divided into atom-like memes.

The aim of this paper is not to solve the dispute over the scope of evolutionist explanation of cultural phenomena. Rather, I want to contribute to a better understanding of what the debate is all about.