

Limits of analogy: Are Religions Metaphoric Species, Individuals or Organs?

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I am deeply sympathetic to the ambitions of the authors (and hugely supportive of the idea of collaborative field sites). The domain in which they are working is fraught with contention and with linguistic traps, many of which they have evaded but, I fear, not all.

Let me attempt to unpick one set of confusion which I think needs further consideration since it has implications for the explanatory style being used. It may well be that the authors have thought through the following points but the article leaves this unclear.

The core parallel they take as their starting point is between biological and cultural evolution. In biology an ecological system contains many different species each struggling to survive. Cultural evolution takes place as different human groups coexist, possibly compete, but certainly change across time. The summary statement about biological evolution contains a metaphor since species do not struggle, the individual members that comprise them do. Evolution takes place across generations and with hindsight we can identify that phenomena such as extinction and speciation have occurred. Constituent features of the organisms change over time and this is how things like organs can be said to have evolved.

When we turn to establishing parallels between biological and cultural evolution we need to be hyper-alert to the terms of the parallel and to any traps that may be contained. So I think it is fairly clear that Wilson et al see a parallel between biological species and 'cultural groups'. I am using scare quotes because there is a crucial difference (in my opinion) between a cultural group in the sense of a national or ethnic group (a single society) and a cultural group as a constituent grouping of one or more of these: think of football supporters or the members of a religious confession. We could talk of these latter sub-groups as cultural groups within Cultural Groups. Another metaphor which goes back to Durkheim is to think of them as analogous to the organs of a body, hence the idea of organic solidarity and so forth.

My concern is that Wilson et al move between the different meanings of 'cultural group' without fully considering the implications. Just as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us that there is no such thing as religion only different forms of religiosity (1982: xi), we have to be ever conscious that there is no exclusively religious social grouping. As some form of bottom line consider that the members have to eat and shelter from the elements so there will always be economic aspects of their social grouping.

Some examples in the text:

To understand human cultural ecosystems, look to the fitness- enhancing properties of the functionally organized groupings that comprise the ecosystem -

the religious congregations and secular organizations that interact with each other at particular locations p 13 line 38

This contains a move from cultures as wholes/entities (parallel to species) to groups within cultures (eg religious congregations etc). However, groups within cultures are not the same sort of thing as the beavers in their biological parallel.

As a consequence I am unsure what level they are talking about when they say 'identifying the salient groups in cultural ecosystems need not be more difficult than identifying the salient functional units in biological ecosystems' p19 line 44. I think they mean sub-groups such as the different churches in Binghampton but these are NOT like beavers in an ecological system, they are like organs in a body or the beavers' teeth. Later this becomes clearer when they argue for 'the detailed study of functionally organized units in relation to each other and their environment. Microevolution is the engine that generates pattern at larger scales. It needs to be studied directly for cultural evolution no less than for genetic evolution.' P36 line 56 This may or may not be a helpful metaphor. My point is that they set up their parallel between biological species and large scale social groups (eg nations, tribes etc) but then when they deploy it they move to discussing what in the terms of the biological metaphor should be organs not species.

Having been critical I will end on two positive notes. First, is to endorse the need for long term fieldsites to enable connected collaborative research on religious behaviour and many other connected phenomena in ways that will allow evolutionary questions, and many others, to be addressed. Second is to point to an intriguing parallel where evolutionary questions are beginning to be asked in far more sophisticated ways than has been done in the past: I am thinking of some developments in sociolinguistics and conversation analysis where in collections such as *The morality of knowledge in conversation*. (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig (eds.) 2011) sociolinguists are dealing not only with epistemics but with the social loadedness of how, for example, assertion is managed. This provides a way of examining the microevolutionary engine that Wilson et al are concerned with. I look forward to seeing the results.

Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining religion: from Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stivers, T., Mondada, L. and Steensig, J. (eds.) 2011. *The morality of knowledge in conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.