

Evolutionary perspectives

Morality and Mind in early Christianity

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Sept 16, 2008

1. Natural selection

Natural selection is one of the basic mechanisms of evolution, along with mutation, migration, and genetic drift.

Darwin's grand idea of evolution by natural selection is relatively simple but often misunderstood. To find out how it works, imagine a population of beetles:

1. There is variation in traits.

For example, some beetles are green and some are brown.



2. There is differential reproduction.

Since the environment can't support unlimited population growth, not all individuals get to reproduce to their full potential. In this example, green beetles tend to get eaten by birds and survive to reproduce less often than brown beetles do.



3. There is heredity.

The surviving brown beetles have brown baby beetles because this trait has a genetic basis.



4. End result:

The more advantageous trait, brown coloration, which allows the beetle to have more offspring, becomes more common in the population. If this process continues, eventually, all individuals in the population will be brown.



If you have variation, differential reproduction, and heredity, you will have evolution by natural selection as an outcome. It is as simple as that.

2. Evolutionary psychology

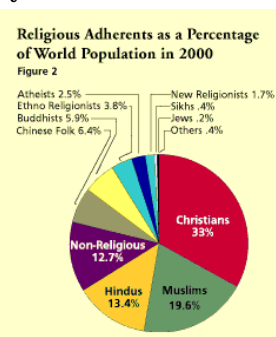
- The human mind is not a general-purpose computer
- The mind evolved in ancestral environments (non-human ancestors and hunter-gatherer societies) to solve particular tasks: feeding, evading danger, securing offspring
- Natural selection: individuals having minds that performed better in solving such problems had more offspring and passed on genes determining such mental structures
- Examples that are relevant for religion: agent-detection, ontological expectations, social cognition
- Once adaptive traits might be neutral or non-adaptive under changed circumstances (e.g. sweet tooth or preference for fat)

3. Evolution of ideas?

- Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976)
 - Culture evolves similarly to biological species
 - Heredity in cultural evolution is secured by *memes*
 - *Memes* are bits of culture that hop from mind to mind, such as ‘tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.’
 - More later on cultural evolution...
- Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture* (1996)
 - Bits of culture are seldom exactly copied
 - They tend to develop toward *attractor positions*
 - An important factor of attraction is the mind
 - Ideas that fit the mind better will spread, regardless of their adaptive value (“mental cheeseburgers”)

Questions about religion

1. What evolved mechanisms is religion using?
 - Do all religions use the same mental structures?
 - Compare Buddhist meditation, Jewish diet, Muslim suicidal attacks, ancestor cults...
 - Is there anything special to early Christianity in this sense?
2. Is religion an evolutionary adaptation?
3. Do religions evolve in history?
 - Is the success of some religions (pie chart) due to “natural selection”?
 - What are the factors that determine the success of particular religions?
 - What made early Christianity a success?



Questions about morality

1. Is morality a necessary part of religion? (What about salvation by secret initiations or meditation?)
2. Are all gods morally interested? How is Santa Claus different? (“He knows when you’ve been bad or good”)
3. Is religion using moral intuitions (piggybacking on them)?
4. Is morality using religion (religion makes people behave – education of responsible citizens in 19th century liberal theology)?
5. What kind of role did morality play in biblical religions?
6. Matthew 23:34–39: “You shall love your God with all your heart ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
7. What about inner Christian differences in morality?