

[Iver B. Neumann](#)

Response to the roundtable

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Response

Iver B. Neumann

I should like to thank my four interlocutors for their thoughtful responses. I will touch only briefly on the comments made by Chris Brown and Jon Mercer, since we have few outstanding issues, and concentrate on what, not unexpectedly, emerges as the major bone of contention, namely the status of physiology or biology relative to a social science like ours.

I agree with Chris Brown that there is perhaps too much self-reflection relative to other kinds of analysis within the discipline, but note in my defence that the genre of the inaugural is particularly inviting of this kind of stock-taking. We only seem to have one disagreement, namely the extent to which the roads not travelled in international relations should be studied. I may be more positive on this front, both for their inherent interest (what they can tell us about variation in relations between human polities) and also for the genealogical reason that systems tend to retain the memory of negative choices. These may, therefore, prove to be important later on. While I remain skeptical about Searle's distinction between brute and institutional facts – what is so brute about the law of gravity in societies that do not acknowledge it?¹ – I am in agreement with the general thrust of Jon Mercer's argument. Neurosciences are important for us because they can tell us more about what is common to psychological systems, and so makes it easier to pin down psychological and social variation.² Mercer also notes, contra Johnson, that psychology and biology are indeed causally linked, but that the psychological realm is ontically separate. I concur.

Dom Johnson and I differ markedly over how to pinpoint the area of validity of scientific claims. For me, the social is a separate realm. Johnson sees little or no difference between psychology and biology, as an evolutionary psychologist would. He also elides these realms and the social. In this, Johnson is true to the programme of evolutionary psychology's forerunner, sociobiology. For example, apropos my critique of Thayer, Johnson states that

'To critique a biologist's work as "functionalist" is amusing. If a trait is not functional, then it would never have been favored by natural selection (except in special conditions).'

¹ I am still taken with Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

² At the same time, we need more work that points up the Euro-centrism of extant psychological knowledge, see Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine & Ara Norenzayan 'The Weirdest People in the World?' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, nos 2-3 (2010), 61–135.

Quite so. The observation is irrelevant, however, for I did not criticize a biologist. I criticised Thayer, presumably a social scientist who writes about stuff social, for effortlessly privileging biology. Such effortless privileging is unwarranted. Concepts like mutation and natural selection cannot simply be lifted from the biological system and applied to the social one. Natural selection does not 'cause' social phenomena amongst humans like predation, cooperation etc. Biology cannot ground social inquiry in this direct way, and it remains an open question whether any theory of social evolution may be causal. The issue here is not whether natural evolution is deterministic. It is not. The determinism under discussion here is located elsewhere, namely in trying to ground social inquiry directly in biology. Johnson and I agree that psychological and physiological factors have knock-on effects on the social, but each effect has to be tracked across the boundary between the physiological and the social, for context changes phenomena. In order to understand some phenomenon within a system, that phenomenon has to be discussed within that system. To take a historically charged example, a phenomenon like diffusion cannot simply be lifted out of the natural sciences and applied to the social system. How a phenomenon, say diffusion or mutation, works within a quite different system is relevant, but not sufficient to say something about how it works in the social system. It is first and foremost this translation from biology to the social that is in need of work, and not the translation from individual to group selection, which is already well under way.³

Johnson also argues that 'science is about understanding things as they are'. It is striking that an evolutionist should pick such a deterministic line, for evolutionism's focus is change, not stability. Social worlds are evolving, and observing them plays a role in their evolution. They cannot, therefore, simply be recorded by a view from nowhere. Again, the social falls without the area of validity of biological research.

Johnson's unwillingness to engage with the social as a specific sphere includes an unwillingness to engage with work that specifically attempts to think about evolutionism in the social sciences. Durkheim himself was an evolutionary thinker, and evolutionary Durkheimians are still in clear evidence within the social sciences. To give but one example, Wendt's teleological evolutionism is explicitly Durkheimian.⁴ The best elaborated evolutionary approach in the social

³ For a general discussion, see Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, Samuel Boyd, Robert Boyd and Fehr Ernst, eds., *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests: The Foundations of Cooperation in Economic Life*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

⁴ See, especially, Alexander Wendt, 'The State As Person In International Theory', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2004), 289-316.

sciences is undeniably the Luhmannian one.⁵ These are theories that are explicit about their social area of validity.

By the same token, Johnson is much too quick in settling on 'human nature' as the fighting ground. Again, the relevance of this notion for IR is not clear. It is, therefore, premature to argue that evolutionary theory obviously grounds offensive realism, as does Johnson. Other evolutionary approaches conclude otherwise. Tang recently presented a book's length evolutionary argument to the effect that the world has evolved from being an offensive realist to a defensive realist place.⁶ Niklas Luhmann grounds a post-positivist approach to IR. The debate is on, and in the interest of a good one all parties, particularly the participants themselves, should be reticent about proclaiming walk-over wins.

Where Johnson elides the biological and the social, Lauren Wilcox insists on erasing the biological from social inquiry. Her position on the social as such is one with which I am very sympathetic indeed. Actually, it is broadly speaking the position I held in the 1990s, and I am still in agreement with everything that Wilcox has to say about how the social shapes the body, including the need to study what kind of bodies current society needs. What I no longer find tenable is the lack of attention paid to the physical body. Wilcox's take on the duality social body/physical body is not differentiation, but denial of the very distinction. She approvingly quotes Butler's view that 'there is no such thing as [...] "the body", or "the material"'. Nowhere in Wilcox's reply, and nowhere in her forthcoming book, does she engage with even one scientific work that bears on the physiological.

Foucault famously quipped that there was no such thing as life before the 18th century, by which he presumably meant that physiological knowledge co-constitutes the physiological. The emergence of biology changed life. I agree. Our understanding of the material world is indeed dependent on knowledge – how could it be different? Furthermore, the relationship between the signifier – the body as a social fact -- and the signified – the body as a material fact -- is indeed indeterminate. In order to be a relationship at all, however, and this is where Wilcox and I disagree, the signified, in this case the physical body, needs some kind of status. This entire symposium is an attempt to argue why this is so scientifically. Wilcox also, and I think laudably, raises political concerns. It is a fact that scientific knowledge has indeed co-constituted groups as marginal and freakish on a number of occasions. Biologists and other scientists, social

⁵ For a mature statement, see Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society, vol. I* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, [1997] 2012), especially 'Chapter 3: Evolution', 251-358. Much to the chagrin of biologists, Luhmann assures the specifically social quality of his theorizing by conceiving of the system as communicative and placing humans outside of it, as its environment.

⁶ Shiping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

scientists included, have a lot to answer for. However, let us not forget the other side of the coin. As I see it, insisting on the importance of the physical body and the physiological unity of humankind grounds anti-racist, anti-classist and anti-sexist politics, for it is a reminder that the organic substrate of human beings is indeed that of one species. Contrary to certain political views that remain forceful, none of us is baboons, cockroaches or vermin, and none of us has horns. Insisting on human physiological universalism is, one may at least hope, a bulwark against the spread of such views. To give up on physiology is, therefore, also to give up on a key political resource.⁷

There is also, I think, a logical reason why it is untenable to erase the importance of biology. Social inquiry must be implicitly comparative. Exactly because the social is not universal, it cannot ground such inquiry. Social inquiry therefore has physiological universalism as its precondition. Humans are apples, other mammals are various kinds of citrus fruits, and apples may be compared. Furthermore, for social inquiry to be critical, it must discuss its own preconditions. The social study of relations between polities has as its precondition that these groups are of a kind, and that means of a physiological kind. If the physiological unity of humankind is a precondition for social inquiry, then it follows that not inquiring into the nature of that unity is an uncritical move.

Seeing that the entire social science undertaking rests on the idea that humans have a certain sameness, it rests upon us to follow and relate to evolving knowledge about that sameness, as it is produced by other disciplines. I thank my interlocutors once again for doing their part in nudging this critical issue onto the agenda.

END

⁷ Note that I am talking exclusively about physiological universality here. In social terms, there is very little universality.