

Heuristic Personification: Biology's Fourth Epistemic Practice

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Abstract

Drawing on Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976), and three papers by W.D. Hamilton written in the 'Modern Synthesis' tradition of biology (1964, 1972, 1971), I argue that *heuristic personification* - by which I mean the metaphorical attribution of rational agency to a biological entity as a means to explain a biological phenomenon, with the simultaneous denial of the reality of such agency - emerges as a core epistemic practice in biology. I show that this heuristic was indispensable for the discovery and formulation of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Moreover, I show that it is equally indispensable for sociobiologists working in the 'Modern Synthesis' tradition, who have used it for the discovery and formulation of mathematical models explaining altruism using the 'Selfish Gene' concept. Key to its classification as an epistemic practice is its predictive power. Furthermore, I propose that this heuristic is sufficiently distinct from the three types of epistemic practices introduced by John V. Pickstone (2004) that it deserves its own, separate category.

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Introduction

I will first briefly sketch John V. Pickstone's account of epistemic practices, or 'ways of knowing' (2004), showing how they apply to biology. While they may be necessary to classify the privileged ways of knowing inherent to biology, I will show that they are not sufficient: I will show that *heuristic personification* was an indispensable tool for generating knowledge for two biologists working in radically different times: First, by Charles Darwin (1859), and next by W.D. Hamilton (1964, 1972, 1971). By showing that the initial formulation of the theory of evolution by natural selection is inextricably tied to the *personification of natural selection*, and that the introduction of game-theoretic solutions to gene-centric explanations of altruism in sociobiology depended heavily on the *personification of the gene*, I will show that *heuristic personification* is a tool used by biologists to generate new knowledge. By claiming that these theories are inextricably tied to the heuristic of personification I mean that despite the best efforts of the authors, these theories resist a coherent formulation without it. Finally, I show that this heuristic cannot be subsumed under the three classical ways of knowing introduced by Pickstone. The reasonable conclusion follows that *heuristic personification* should be regarded as a distinct epistemic practice.

Three Ways of Knowing in Biology

Pickstone proposes three ways of knowing in the natural sciences: *natural history* (describing and classifying), *experimentation* (controlling phenomena and systematically creating novelties), and *analysis* (explaining complex phenomena by reducing them to simpler constituents). We give three illustrative examples.

For Pickstone, *natural history* is a privileged means of knowing the natural world that relies on "describing and collecting, identifying and classifying, utilising and displaying" (Pickstone, 2004, p. 60). It relies both on the meticulous accumulation and dissemination of facts and the journeys and expeditions that lead to their collection, such as Darwin's famous *Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin, 1839).

A key thread in Darwin's *Origin* is that the line between a "strongly-marked variety" and a "doubtful species" is blurred (1859, p. 39). The same is said for the line between "sub-species" and "species" (1859, p. 39-42). Darwin uses this as evidence for the mutability of species, writing that "The differences blend into each other in an insensible series; and a series impresses the mind with the idea of an actual passage" (1859, p. 42). On the other hand, Darwin claims that this gradation is unlikely on the "ordinary view of each species having been independently created" (1859, p. 121), thus priming the reader for the reception of evolution by

natural selection in later chapters. Darwin is brought to his view using his knowledge of existing plant and animal catalogues: “How many of those birds and insects in North America and Europe, which differ very slightly from each other, have been ranked by one eminent naturalist as undoubted species, and by another as varieties” (1859, p. 47). In addition to reported findings by his fellow naturalists, Darwin relies on his own experience on the expedition of the *Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin, 1839) to argue the same point: “Many years ago, when comparing and seeing others compare, the birds from the separate islands of the Galapagos Archipelago [...], I was much struck how entirely vague and arbitrary is the distinction between species and varieties” (1859, p. 40). In relying on reported observations from his voyage, this argument thus fits firmly under Pickstone’s ‘natural history’ epistemic category.

We can illustrate the *experimental* way of knowing with another example from Darwin. He starts by explaining the ‘standard view’ among his peers:

The view generally entertained by naturalists is that species, when intercrossed, have been specially endowed with the quality of sterility, in order to prevent the confusion of all organic forms.

— Darwin 1859, *Origin* (Darwin, 1859, p. 47)

To debunk this view, Darwin brings to bear decades of experimental evidence on plant hybridism by Kölreuter and Gärtner, concluding that the “two most careful experimentalists who have ever lived, have come to diametrically opposite conclusions [...]”, suggesting that intercross-sterility is not a *specially endowed quality*, but an *accidental one* based on the physical incompatibility of reproductive organs.

Lastly, to illustrate *analysis* we turn to the so-called ‘Modern Synthesis’ of biology. Whereas *Origin* was instrumental in convincing biologists of the reality of *evolution*, it took almost five decades for them to warm up to *natural selection* as the main driver, a period which Julian Huxley has called ‘the eclipse of Darwinism’ (Huxley, 1942). The discovery of the gene and the sequencing of DNA prompted a re-evaluation of the theory. A new research programme calling itself the ‘Modern Synthesis’ emerged between the 1930s and 1950s (Gayon & Huneman, 2019). Under this research programme, natural selection was taken to be the sole driver of evolution, and both the *gene* and the *organism* were taken to be subject to natural selection (Gayon & Huneman, 2019). Dawkins’ *Selfish Gene* put into vivid words for a popular audience the implicit beliefs held by biologists working in this tradition (Dawkins, 1976).

As we have seen, Pickstone defines *analysis* as “reducing complex phenomena to simple principles” (Pickstone, 2004, p. 56). We can illustrate this with the following example from the ‘Modern Synthesis’: how do we explain that animals tend to form clusters or herds? In 1972 W.D Hamilton published his “Selfish Herd” model (Hamilton, 1971), a mathematical model that predicts the clustering behavior by simulating prey organisms minimizing their own probability

of being attacked. When prey use their neighbors as living shields, groups and herds form, with very few assumptions about the organisms in question (Hamilton, 1972). Hamilton is said to use *analysis*, in the Pickstonian sense, because he has explained a complex behavior as a natural consequence from a simple rule (an organism's desire for self-preservation).

While Pickstone's three categories are remarkably well-suited to cover a large portion of epistemic practices in biology, we will next show that a careful reading of *Origin* and *Selfish* reveals *personification* to be a distinct, fourth epistemic practice.

The Fourth Way: Heuristic Personification

Darwin personifies *Nature* and *natural selection*. Dawkins personifies *genes* and *organisms*. Both are careful to stress that we should not take their personification *literally*:

So again it is difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature; but I mean by Nature, only the aggregate action and product of many natural laws, and by laws the sequence of events as ascertained by us.

— Darwin, *Origin of Species 3rd Ed.* (Beer, 2009)

Dawkins is more forceful:

Personification of genes really ought not to be a problem, because no sane person thinks DNA molecules have conscious personalities, and no sensible reader would impute such a delusion to an author.

— Selfish Gene (Dawkins, 1976, Prologue)

The fact that these personifications are taken to be metaphors by their authors has probably contributed to them being neglected in existing accounts of epistemic practices in biology. Nevertheless, Gillian Beer has argued that the following passage reveals Darwin's personified Nature to more than merely metaphorical (Beer, 2009):

as man can certainly produce great results by adding up in any given direction mere individual differences, so could Nature, but far more easily, from having incomparably longer time at her disposal

— Origin of Species (Darwin, 1859, p. 64)

Nature appears to be endowed by the agency to “produce great results”. By comparing Nature to a human breeder (“as man can certainly produce great results... so could Nature”), Darwin uses the familiar to make the novel intelligible to a Victorian audience. Personification is therefore not merely a literary metaphor, but a didactic tool. But it is more than a merely *didactic* tool,

too: Victorian audiences had moral objections to accepting evolution by natural selection, which was a threat to the “assumption that all manifestations of nature are aspects of a relationship between God and Man” (Beer, 2009). A common sentiment was that evolution threatened human dignity by reducing “morality to a mechanical process” (Chronicle, 1846). Personifying Nature, therefore, was a *rhetorical tool* which helped soften the moral blow by maintaining the ‘awesomeness’ of creation - replacing a real, active God with a personified, metaphorical Nature.

So personification was a literary device, a didactic tool, and a rhetorical device. This is not yet enough to justify calling it an ‘epistemic practice’. However, Pickstone has convincingly argued that reasoning from analogy with an active human selector was a key insight that led Darwin to formulate his theory. Citing Desmond and Moore’s biography of Darwin (Desmond & Moore, 1991), Pickstone highlights the influence that commercially-driven human selection had on Darwin (Pickstone, 2004, p. 30):

In Britain from 1750, cattle and sheep were changed radically as breeders sought marketable characteristics and faster growth. [...] the theory of evolution by natural selection [...] can be shown to have built on this shift in breeding technology.

— (Pickstone, 2004, p. 30)

If analogies with human selection are how Darwin stumbled upon his theory in the first place, then Beer’s suggestion that Darwin’s theory “needs” a more strongly personified nature is spot on. Darwin’s personification of Nature allowed him generate valuable knowledge about her, and thus should be viewed as an epistemic practice.

It may be suggested that *personification*, if it is an epistemic practice, should be seen as a sub-set of analysis, since it is employed as a tool to explain complex phenomena. But this view is problematic: all cases of *analysis*, as understood by Pickstone, require the breaking down of a complex phenomenon into simple, constitutive parts *which are taken to be real* (Pickstone, 2004). But Darwin clearly did not literally hold a personified view of Nature. It is the use of *useful fictions* to come to grips with reality that makes personification a practice quite distinct from Pickstonian *analysis*.

We will next see how personification-as-epistemic practice reappeared in the 1960s ‘Modern Synthesis’, with the *gene* and *organism* replacing *Nature* as the thing being personified. By the 1960s biologists needed tools to navigate the complex, mathematics-heavy turn of the modern synthesis. Personification was one of these tools. Thus, Dawkins states that “natural selection for selfish genes tends to favour cooperation among genes”, ascribing to genes (the basic unit of heredity) the (anthropomorphic) quality of *cooperation*. For Dawkins, personification of this kind is not “just a quaint didactic device”:

“[in] Darwinian calculations of altruism and selfishness [...] it is very easy to get the wrong answer. Personifying genes, [...] often turns out to be the shortest route to rescuing a Darwinian theorist drowning in muddle”.

— (Dawkins, 1976, *Introd. p. xii*)

To give a concrete example, the biologist W.D Hamilton attributed “to the genes, temporarily, intelligence and a certain freedom of choice”, in a paper on the sterility of worker ants (Hamilton, 1972). Thus, the *personification of genes* becomes a way of quickly and reliably arrive at the result of a long mathematical calculation without having to explicitly go through with it.

Dawkins does not just personify genes; organisms are also given fictitious motivations and intelligence *purely for the sake of argument*. In describing the death-throes of the runt of a litter, Dawkins presents the following argument:

As soon as a runt becomes so small and weak that his expectation of life is reduced to the point where benefit to him due to parental investment is less than half the benefit that the same investment could potentially confer on the other babies, the runt should die gracefully and willingly. He can benefit his genes most by doing so.

— Dawkins 1976, *The Selfish Gene*, (Dawkins, 1976, p. 168)

Dawkins does not describe the *actual* mental state of the runt when he says “the runt should die gracefully and willingly”. And yet, the effects of gene selection are such that we can *pretend* that the runt is a rational actor attempting to optimize the chances of passing on his genes. Dawkins explains that this *personification of the organism* is mental short-cut for the following argument, which relies on the *personification of the gene*:

A gene that gives [the runt] the instruction, “Body, if you are very much smaller than your litter-mates, give up the struggle and die” could be successful in the gene pool, because it has a 50 per cent chance of being in the body of each brother and sister saved.

— (Dawkins, 1976, p. 168)

So, sociobiologists working in the ‘Modern Synthesis’ tradition personify organisms by giving them the fictitious intelligence and motivation to rationally calculate the maximum chances of passing on their genes. They personify genes in attributing to them what Dawkins terms ‘selfishness’ - i.e the motivation and intelligence to maximize their own chances of survival. Both instances of personification, like the one employed by Darwin, enable them to make discoveries and explain biological phenomena - they are thus distinct ways of knowing.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Pickstone’s epistemic practices, we have seen that personification is far more than a didactic metaphor. Personifying Nature allowed Darwin to view the similarities

between artificial breeding and natural selection, and led to the formation of his radical theory. For Dawkins and the sociobiologists of the Modern Synthesis, the personification of genes and organisms serves as a rigorous analytical shortcut—a way to navigate complex mathematical probabilities by treating biological entities as rational actors. These uses of *personification* cannot be reduced to Pickstone’s category of *analysis*, as they have the distinctive quality of using *useful fictions* to making discoveries about the world.

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