

Definitional Argument in Evolutionary Psychology and Cultural Anthropology

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Abstract

An old aphorism claims that "The person who defines the terms of the debate can win it." This paper argues that the debate between evolutionary psychologists and cultural anthropologists over the biological explanation of human behavior is framed by a larger definitional dispute over the question, "What is culture?" Both disciplines attempt to define "culture" to build their disciplines, but were engaged in different kinds of arguments by definition. Definitional arguments often take one of two forms. A real definition takes the form "What is X?" In this view, we should use the word "X" in a particular way because that is what X really is. The other form of definitional argument, pragmatic definition, takes the form, "How should we use the term X?" In this view, an arguer puts forward reasons for using the term "X" in a particular way. Evolutionary psychologists are engaged in argument by real definition. In their "manifesto" for evolutionary psychology, Tooby and Cosmides argue that the explanations of social or cultural behavior in the social sciences are "incoherent" because they attempt to explain such behavior "psychological phenomena without describing or even mentioning the evolved mechanisms their theories would require to be complete or coherent" (p.37). Because humans are biological creatures, cultural explanations must include biology because culture really is biological. Hence, biology is a necessary part of explanations of human culture. Cultural anthropologists engaged in argument by persuasive definition. A close examination of Kroeber's writings reveals, however, that he readily acknowledged that humans were biological and culture rested on a biological foundation. He argued that we should treat culture as autonomous in our explanatory schemes because that would bring benefits to the biological sciences as well as the human sciences. In his writings, Kroeber reveals himself as a staunch Darwinian who argues for the autonomy of cultural anthropology on pragmatic, not on ontological grounds. Hence, the historical caricature of his work by evolutionary psychology fails.

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