

DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE
University of Houston

NSF Science Ethics Series

TITLE: Evolutionary Theory as Methodological
Anesthesia: Methodological and Philosophical Lessons
from Evolutionary Psychology

Professor Richard N. Boyd



FRIDAY, OCT 19, 2012

3:00 P.M. - 5:00 P.M.

232 PGH

Host: Dr. Ioannis Pavlidis

According to mainstream ‘evolutionary psychology’ evolutionary theory makes an important methodological contribution to human social psychology. Consideration of plausible evolutionary scenarios regarding early human social behavior are said to provide a ***methodologically independent*** source of insights, identifying some psychological theories as those ‘predicted’ or otherwise especially supported by evolutionary theory. The methodological practices characteristic of ‘evolutionary psychology’ are such that the theories so identified are typically reductionist or nativist theories which minimize the role of social structures and of learning in explaining human social behaviors.

In fact, the relevant sort of methodological independence guarantees that such scenarios do not favor reductionist or nativist theories over theories that emphasize the role of learning and of social structures (or vice versa). So, in practice, appeals to evolutionary theory function as a sort of methodological anesthesia, directing psychologists’ attention away from scientifically important alternatives to reductionist or nativist theories.

About Professor Richard N. Boyd

Richard Boyd is Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. He did his undergraduate work (mathematics) and graduate work (philosophy) at MIT. He has held teaching appointments at The University of Michigan, The University of California Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, The University of Canterbury (NZ), The University of Melbourne, and Claremont-McKenna College. He works on issues in philosophy of science, the philosophy of biology, the philosophy of mind, and metaethics.