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The Commentarial Engine

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I am happy to get the opportunity to bring the work of Steve Farmer, John B. Henderson and Peter Robinson to the attention of the readers of *Comparative Civilizations Review*. The attempt to use developments in scientific thought is a common one in the pages of this journal, but I have yet to see any study make such rigorous and fruitful use as this article.

Our featured paper, “Commentary Traditions and the Evolution of Premodern Religious and Philosophical Systems: A Cross-Cultural Approach,” argues that there is a discernible pattern to the succession of changes in religious and philosophical thinking across cultures and that this pattern has a specific cause, namely the reiterated application of exegetical principles, which produces the similarities we see across cultures. This is an important contribution by itself to our understanding of intellectual evolution.

But this article is part of a group of articles by these authors and others, such as Michael Witzel, to more closely link the study of culture and cultural change with the sciences, neurobiology, linguistics, genetics and evolutionary psychology. These articles, put together, represent a new approach to the study of culture and civilization and the prospect of real progress in our thinking about the nature of culture.

There is more nature in culture, and more culture in nature than we have previously imagined.

To make the importance of this academic phenomenon clear I will look at the article presented in this issue in the context of two others, “The Neurobiological origins of primitive religion: Implications for comparative mythology,” by Steve Farmer, and “Neurobiology, Layered Texts and Correlative Cosmologies: A Cross-Cultural Framework for Premodern History,” by Steve Farmer, John B. Henderson and Michael Witzel. These three articles together give us a view of a future with an understanding of the development of religious and philosophical thinking across cultures.

As the author’s introduction notes, when the article was originally written, the academic world was not yet ready for such a set of bold claims, particularly ones that suggest that the humanities can learn anything from the hard sciences. However, while there is still significant hostility to these sorts of arguments, there are many who are ready to look at the new claims.

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For one thing, until the developments of the last twenty to thirty years, there was little from the sciences that could inform how we think about changes in intellectual thought. Since that time a number of studies have come out and forged something of a consensus on the social basis of the evolution of higher brain functions.  

Farmer, Henderson and Robinson are not interdisciplinary interlopers, trying to impose a structure on intellectual history from the natural sciences with no training in or knowledge of the subject matter they are attempting to explain. Farmer and Henderson are both scholars from the Humanities who have noticed their findings cohere with some recent scientific developments. This led to the publication of another very important article by Farmer and Henderson, this time with Michael Witzel, an Indologist at Harvard University, who has written a thought-provoking book applying the same scientifically oriented approach the study of world mythology.

In that article, “Neurobiology, Layered Texts and Correlative Cosmologies: A Cross-Cultural Framework for Premodern History,” Farmer, Henderson and Witzel presented a neurological model of the brain that linked the stratified structure of neocortical columns with the formation of systems of thought that resolve conflict through the dispersal of the contradictions to different levels so that contradictions can then be accommodated in an overall consistent system. The results of that paper explain the neurological basis for the development of the exegetical techniques that play the key role in this paper.

The other paper we look at concerns the origins of myth and religion. In “The neurobiological origins of primitive religion: Implication for comparative mythology,” Farmer writes, “The idea that the anthropomorphism underlying primitive religion and myth is in fact a side-effect of brain development is supported by a great deal of testable evidence…” This puts Farmer in line with the scholarly consensus concerning the social brain as the basis for much of our higher intelligence as well as our tendency toward anthropomorphism. But Farmer diverges from the social model in suggesting that a neurobiological explanation is also required, specifically topographic brain maps which utilize a mirroring structure to transfer information from one level to another. If the face in the cloud is to become a god, then the brain must transfer information at one level to another, and this is accomplished via the construction and integration of topographic brain maps in which “default state anthropomorphic models are routinely over-extended into the non-human world.” (32)

If we combine these with other articles written by Farmer and the rest of the group of scholars involved in these investigations, we see the development of a new bold vision for the humanities. We see a scientifically informed approach to textuality that gives a convincing explanation of the similar forms of intellectual change that we see across cultures.

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When we consider the three articles together, then, what we see is a set of arguments that explain the development of intellectual thought at five different levels, the level of brain organization, the level of correlative thought, the level of myth, the level of religion and the level of philosophy. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. It gives us a good start on understanding human thought from its earliest beginnings in basic correlations to the first myths, to the development of these myths into religions and finally, from religion into philosophy. This is work of breathtaking scope and importance. Those who view the sciences and humanities as forever distinct magisteria should rethink their positions in the light of these articles that show that there can be lots of fruitful overlap.

Now to the article of this issue.

Farmer et al. make two sets of arguments in our featured article. One set is to show that parallels in premodern intellectual developments across cultures are due to similarities in the form of exegesis across cultures, which take the form of repeated applications of a small number of intellectual moves. These patterns are what create the parallels in intellectual evolution across cultures.

The other set of arguments aims to show that there is a mathematical and neurological basis for the patterns and evolution. It is thus a bold reductionism that claims to explain the form of the intellectual content of at least some ideas and even the progression of ideas in intellectual history as ultimately caused by the structure of the brain, which, in turn, reflects a structure that can be described as fractal-like. This means that intellectual history can be analyzed in the same way as all other complex systems, via the development of self-similar structures. I will focus on the first set of arguments in this introduction to the featured article.

Farmer et al. argue that “Because the reconciliative methods of religious and philosophical commentators were similar worldwide,”—a result of our common neurobiological heritage, “when rates of textual information flow were roughly comparable, structural growth in those traditions tended to evolve in similar ways as well.” The particular contents may be quite different, but the governing structures are the same across traditions. Since the governing structures are the same, we see the development of cross-cultural parallels in intellectual development.

Scholars of comparative religion, philosophy and mythology will immediately recognize the patterns Farmer et al. are discussing. The existence of cultural parallels has long been known, but up to now there has been no adequate explanation for the parallels. Scholars have also been aware of similarities in exegetical traditions. Barbara Holdrege’s *Veda and Torah*[^4], pointed to similar exegetical practices by the Rabbis and interpreters of the Vedas. But the argument of the authors is that these patterns of exegesis have tended to lead to convergent systems of argument across traditions. They are not convergent by being

exactly the same in content, but by displaying the form of fractal self-similarities that are likely to result from the reiterated use of certain exegetical strategies.

We see this most clearly in the reconciliation of contradictions by removing one side of a contradiction to a different level and thus removing the contradiction. This convergence is fueled by two contrary processes, a repetitive commentarial or scholastic process of exegesis that brings information into a tradition in certain forms, and entropic processes which drain information out of traditions. These two processes in conjunction with periodic classicist revivals produce the convergences in cosmologies and correlative systems the authors are attempting to explain.

This is the commentarial engine, the engine that fuels the fire of intellectual change and development. The commentarial engine is what leads all premodern traditions of religious and philosophical thought to develop structural forms such as nested hierarchies, complex systems of correspondence, and the idea that parts of the system mirror the system as a whole, which reflects a fractal structure.

The Parallels: Farmer et al. point to five parallels explained by the theory. The first parallel is the emergence of textual canons between 700-500 BCE. In Greece we have Homer and Hesiod, in China the Analects and the Five Classics, in India the Vedas, and so on. The external push that gave rise to this convergence was the development of lightweight writing materials.

The second parallel is the simultaneous development in abstract thought. Classical philosophy and theology break out in Greece, China, India and Israel. The idea is that philosophy and theology arise out of the exegesis of the canons that were established. The authors follow Havelock in seeing Greek philosophy as the result of exegetical practices applied to Homer and Hesiod. The same is true elsewhere, as in India where Indian abstract philosophy is said to arise out of Vedic interpretation and critique.

The third parallel is the syncretic system-building of the Imperial age, 300 BCE to 550 CE. At this time across the world we see classical sources turned into encyclopedic syntheses and higher-level systems. State Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism and Neo-Platonism emerge as synthetic tendencies produce systems of correspondence and hierarchies of beings.

The fourth parallel is the development of high-correlative systems in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, such as we see in the work of Pico della Mirandola and in Neo-Confucianism.

The final parallel is the collapse of high-correlative systems with the advent of modernity. The argument of the authors is that correlativity had reached a breaking point of complexity that could not be maintained and thus collapsed like a sand hill that has reached its maximum height. This is marked by a destratification of correlatives, humorously displayed in Voltaire’s skewering of the scholastics like Pangloss of Candide.

The authors claim that this theory is testable. The authors offer a computer simulation as evidence that reiterated exegetical practices will produce the general shape of intellectual history, or at least the general shape of the history of cosmological thought. I will not attempt to assess this aspect of the project, but it does constitute a powerful argument in its favor if successful.

In the end, the authors are ultimately presenting another interpretation of intellectual history. It is a vision of intellectual history informed by developments in the sciences, and in this way can be linked to a body of work by numerous scholars rethinking the human story.

In this conception of intellectual history, we begin with common neurobiological heritage, a brain that is wired to detect predators, but as a by-product, creates spiritual entities. The “social brain,” as scholars now refer to the body of research concerning the influence of social life on neurological development, is responsible for not only making humans smarter, it led to an anthropomorphism that persists to this day and permeates our thinking.

These anthropomorphic spiritual entities are narrativised into myth, which is eventually rationalized into religions. The brain has certain structural features that configure the development of intelligence at least partially in terms of correlatives—a point made by our authors, and this correlative impulse leads to the development of the exegetical engine, which takes over the shaping of the outline of intellectual history—another point made by our authors.

This is a powerful conception of intellectual history. It is sensitive to the new research on the brain and evolutionary psychology, and it is the sort of history that lends itself to scientific confirmation and disconfirmation.

There are two sorts of alternative approaches for the explanation of cultural parallels.

One is the Jungian approach that understands parallels as the result of a common stock of ideas arising from a collective unconscious. The other is a more mundane approach that looks for cultural influences, either common origins or cultural contacts through trade or other sorts of cultural interaction. The Jungian approach, as popular as it is among civilizationists, nevertheless founders on its implausible metaphysic of a collective unconscious. The approach to explaining the parallels from cultural contacts does not fare well either. Cultural contacts can’t explain similarities between cultures without cultural contacts. Any similarity between North and South American intellectual frameworks and
those of the rest of the world present a particular quandary for those who explain the similarities through common origin or cultural contact.

This theory, however, makes sense of these parallels in terms of universal processes. The authors’ approach is also inimical to those who follow Dilthey in arguing for the irreducible uniqueness of all historical phenomena. The authors show that at least in some ways, historical phenomena are not unique but subject to systematic explanation. Comparativists understand there are convergent intellectual developments across the world’s cultures; the task is how to explain them.

There are limits to the explanatory power of the exegetical techniques, of course. While the authors are able to show—and even predict, the parameters of change in human religious and philosophical thought, the specifics of any given intellectual innovation are separate matters.

- The authors could not predict the development of the concept of the Dao, but they could predict that something like that concept, displaying the synthetic tendency of reiterated exegesis, would develop. Maybe it would be more like the Logos of Greece than the Dao of China. But it would be something along the lines of the Dao, Logos or Brahman that would develop.
- The authors could not predict the syntheses of Neo-Confucianism, but they can predict that some high-correlative systems would develop in response to the Confucian canon.

And, of course, the theory is limited in the way Dilthey would suggest; it cannot explain individuality—the character of a person or the creativity involved in artistic endeavor.

The theory also stops short of assessing the real contributions of a given intellectual development to the progress of human understanding. The theory cannot tell us which systems will be efficacious or produce truth. It can only indicate their form. The authors’ arguments thus stop far short of replacing all other sorts of explanations of premodern thought that academics might be interested in.

These limits, of course, are a good thing.

It is the theory that promises too much that founders. The theory that promises too much also creates more enemies than need be.

The academic resistance to this approach should therefore be tempered by an understanding of both the promise and the limits of the argument. So we reintroduce this article to the academic audience. It is time for civilizational studies to take note of this provocative thesis as well as the general approach, and to explore the implications of the theory.
One implication is that the progress of human thought is not the result of pure rational cogitation on issues of concern; rather, there are factors which govern the kinds of paths thinking will take, and that a full account of premodern thought must consider.

The way is now open for further explorations of the conditions and history of thought that draw on these foundations. This study shows that there is much to be gained by grounding our theories of civilization in our scientific understanding of the brain, mathematics, evolutionary psychology and the authors’ unique contribution, exegetical theory.