

# Review of: "Evolution Isn't Teleological, Writing About it Is"

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Teleological language is found in scientific literature, but particularly in the evolution literature. This reveals an apparent internal contradiction since evolution rejects teleological explanations for the origin of species and, by extension, throughout science. Evolutionists have long since recognized this problem and have worked at its resolution. This paper by Jamie Freestone builds on and contributes to that tradition.

Section 2 of the paper surveys the problem and proposes helpful distinctions, including not only the external versus internal distinction but also an intentional versus non-intentional distinction. The result is four different broad categories which are helpful, though finer distinctions are possible. Section 3 presents a brief linguistic analysis and argues for the unavoidability of teleological language, including that such language makes for effective communication, may be required in some instances by the market pressures in the publishing business, and that such language supports a wealth of useful metaphors. Section 4 continues with this line of thinking, arguing that such language supports the common narrative forms used in popular science literature. Finally, section 5 concludes the paper, arguing that teleological language in evolutionary literature is essentially unavoidable.

I will make a few comments on specific passages and then conclude with a broader comment. In his discussion of philosopher Daniel Dennett, Freestone appears to categorize Dennett's argument as internal teleology. Freestone writes that "Dennett says Darwin's theory provides a way to rationally talk about teleology without resorting to the divine or supernatural." It may be helpful to expand this discussion and consider how this view reveals a final cause of evolutionary theory itself. The theory has a purpose, which, according to Freestone, Dennett explains.

Later in section 2, Freestone discusses the work of philosopher Alex Rosenberg. Rosenberg views the heat death of the universe as precluding any possibility of a teleological narrative. The author provides a much-needed corrective that a heat death could be a final cause. However, the author is quick to add that it obviously would not be divinely directed. No justification is given. This is one of several signs that the paper is not theologically neutral, but rather holds to the utilitarianism foundational to evolutionary theory. (e.g., <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040282>)

After presenting the matrix of four possible categories, Freestone states that given the range of views in the matrix, it is hard to conceive of a non-teleological explanation of evolution. Here it seems that Freestone needs to do more work to justify this conclusion. As it stands, it seems to be a hasty conclusion based on a categorization of the existing teleological language in the literature. It certainly is true that teleological language is pervasive in the evolution literature. However, I would contend that it is not inevitable. Certainly, one can find journal papers that take care to avoid such language. This

claim towards the end of section 2 may be anticipating section 3, which provides a brief linguistic analysis in arguing that it would be difficult to write a popular introduction to evolutionary science without resorting to at least some form of internal teleology. If this is the justification for the section 2 comment, then that should be made more clear, and perhaps a rearrangement is necessary. But as it stands, the section 2 claim appears to be based merely on the matrix categorization.

Finally, section 5 concludes with the argument that teleological language is essentially unavoidable in the evolution literature. As Freestone explains, “our minds and our languages simply did not evolve to deal with totally agentless systems.” The claim that our minds evolved, and how they evolved, not only reveals underlying commitments of the paper to evolution but also engages with the very teleological language that is of concern to this paper.

Stepping back, the apparent internal contradiction that teleological language is pervasive in the evolution literature while at the same time evolution rejects teleological explanations in science may be explained in various ways. A whiggish approach, and probably the most common response, is that such teleological language is nothing more than a convenient shorthand. Nothing more should be read into it, as it is simply a sign of evolutionists attempting to communicate the theory in ways that people can best understand. Freestone's paper falls squarely into that tradition. On the other hand, a theory-neutral approach is free to ask the question of whether such teleological language serves to mask theoretical shortcomings. This would be a reasonable line of inquiry given 1) the theological grounding of evolution's justifications, 2) the failure of evolution to achieve theoretical convergence, and 3) the findings of teleological design in biology, especially in recent decades, which contradicted evolutionary expectations. I am not suggesting an expanded scope for the paper, but as it stands, the paper makes no mention of this alternate approach. At the very least, a brief introduction of the broader landscape, and where this paper fits within that landscape, would seem helpful and appropriate.