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Permalink
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Authors
Leaf, Murray
Read, Dwight

Publication Date
2014-07-20

Intelligibility and Unintelligibility: Response to Professor Mithen's Review of *Human Thought and Social Organization: Anthropology on a New Plane* by Murray Leaf and Dwight Read

Murray Leaf
School of Economic, Political & Policy Sciences
University of Texas at Dallas
Richardson, TX 75080

Dwight Read
Department of Anthropology
UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90035

Steven Mithen describes our book, *Human Thought and Social Organization,* as unintelligible. "[H]aving struggled for many hours with their text I was entirely unable to fathom much of what they were writing about. I severely doubt if many others will be able to decipher the meaning of their complex terminologies, excessively long sentences, and quite simply what they were trying to do" (2014: 142). This troubles us. Since a previous review by Bojka Milicic (2013) showed an excellent grasp of the full range of implications of the argument and another by Radu Umbres (2014) showed a good understanding of it, we are confident that Mithen's description is wrong as a matter of fact. So what led him astray?

Mithen notes that he has little experience with kinship. This certainly would contribute to the problem, since our central focus is kinship and much of the discussion is framed by contrasting what we do with previous kinship studies. But we also describe other kinds of organizations, and in each case we tried very hard to show how every step in our analysis was grounded in observations and to say what the observations were. These observations are not arcane. Everyone experiences kinship as we describe it, and everyone ought to have experiences with something like the other kinds of ideas and organizations we describe. So the problem is more basic. Mithen is not connecting what we say to his own experiences. Why not? It seems to us that he answers this question at the start of his review and keeps coming back to it throughout.

He begins with saying that Leaf and Read "are hardly reticent about their own evaluation of *Human Thought and Social Organization*. Within the preface they declare that simply providing a new paradigm for understanding kinship is quite insufficient for their achievement--they provide us with nothing less than a 'new science.'" The problem with this is that we were not *evaluating*. We were *describing*. In taking the statement only as self-praise and not as description, Mithen denied himself the perspective he needed to recognize the full range of issues that are in play.

A new science necessarily involves a new conception of what a science is. That is what the distinction between a new paradigm and new science entails, in Kuhn's terms. We cannot repeat here all that we say about the difference between the current ideas of anthropology as a science we are criticizing and the new idea we are presenting, but three points are absolutely crucial and Mithen seems to have missed all of them. The first is that our method must be both empirical

and formal. Empirical means that it has a definite subject matter that we can observe to see if our statements and inferences are true or false. Formal means that we make those inferences in very simple and precise terms that enable us to work out their logic. This is what we mean describing what we do as empirical formal analysis. Other empirical formal sciences in this sense are physics, biology, chemistry, and linguistics. The second is that we cannot leave ourselves out of our subject matter; everything we say about "it" or "them" has to include "us." And third, this subject matter includes ideas. Other sciences recognize *that* we think, but in order to have a science that relates human thought to human social organization we have to describe and explain *what* we think. Descriptions of ideas and their uses are absolutely central. These last two points are not true of the other formal empirical sciences, and this is why we have to describe ours not only as *a* science but also as a *new* one.

The most crucial point is that ideas can be observed. We say a great deal about how to do so--by systematic elicitation. The key to understanding the elicitation process is to recognize that ideas do not occur alone. Ideas are defined by association with other ideas, in systems. So one part of our analysis describes how to *elicit* them as systems. The other is how to *analyze* them as systems.

Much of our argument contrasts our position with the assumptions of logical positivism that dominated componential analysis, ethnoscience, and related previous approaches in anthropology. Logical positivists argued that ideas could not be observed because they are subjective. Science has to deal with what is objective. We reject the implicit assumption that objectivity is an inherent property of things rather than a constructed property of kinds of knowledge. In its place, we build on a line of thinking going back to Kant. Kant argued that all knowledge is "initially subjective." That is, it pertains to a perceiving subject. Subjective knowledge becomes objective when it is organized under certain kinds of shared categories. These are categories that are "synthetic a priori." Kant's examples included geometry in judgments of the material world and the categorical imperative in judgments of morality. Our argument is that is that they also include the cultural idea systems that are used to construct social organizations.

We trust that anyone can see that geometry is a system of ideas. Each concept defines the other in a rigorous logical system. Yet geometry is not a web of empty tautologies; we can use it to speak about physical spaces and shapes with great precision. This is how it makes space objective for us. The same is true of kinship terminologies; they make kinship objective for their users. Economic idea systems make economic relations objective for their users, and the same is true of the other social idea systems we describe. But while all of these are logical systems, the logics are not the same. We describe the differences. Geometry has no concept like "self" as against other, or "I," "you," and "they." There is no concept of reciprocity in a social sense. Social idea systems always provide some version of such conceptions: father-son, husband-wife, commander-subordinate, buyer-seller, friend-friend, friend-enemy, and so on. They also provide specific computational concepts for connecting one such relational pair to another, such as "son of" and "father of" in kinship, or "enemy of" in factions. These computations are every bit as precise as "+" and "×" in mathematics, or "gives up an electron" in chemistry. The resulting generative power of these systems of social ideas is precisely what makes it possible for culture-bearers to create massively complex and consistent systems of mutually accepted definitions of social relationships. This is what we show, mainly for kinship but for enough non-kinship sys-

tems to justify our more general claims. No other science has done this, and no other science works this way. So, again, this is a new science.

We regret that Professor Mithen could not be more informative. In its place, we especially recommend the review by Professor Milicic in *Anthropos*. It is both brilliant and brief.

References

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