W.G. Runciman’s latest contribution to neo-Darwinism’s growing body of literature promises something akin to a “theory of everything”. Its lofty aim is to displace the agendas of luminaries like Spencer, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim by analyzing the “underlying process by which the human cultures and societies documented in the historical, ethnographic, and archaeological record [came] to be of the different kinds that they are” (vii).

The method itself is never clearly outlined, and so must be reconstructed from disparate statements strewn throughout the book: construct a “just-so story” (30-32, 139) that 1) isolates packages of information (memes), which have gained a selective advantage over competitors (29); 2) detects the causal link between memes or practices observed in behavior, and environmental selective pressures that have enhanced their reproductive fitness (29, 57), by reverse engineering the extant data—unearthed material objects, texts, etc.; and 3) identifies the three factors working together to favor the co-evolution of certain memes and practices, biological (“evoked”), cultural (memes “acquired” through learning and imitation), and social (memes “imposed” by structures) (34-37, 149).

The viability of the model rests upon at least two basic assumptions, one key premise, and a series of qualifiers. The first assumption is that evolution never goes backwards, implying that subsequent generations who carry units of selection will not increasingly resemble their ancestors biologically, culturally, or socially—militaries no longer fight in phalanx formation, for example (182). A second assumption pertains to the possibility of isolating, identifying, and then classifying the relevant memes buried in the morass that is historical data (more on this below). The model is premised on the notion that human history is the continuance of biological evolution by other means, which is then qualified in a series of ways. First, neo-Darwinism is not
“social Darwinism” with its concomitant racist sympathies, reductionist sociobiology (4), and deference to the manifest destiny and unregulated free market capitalism of late 19th century America (18-19). Second and related, neo-Darwinism does not open a back door to Marxism’s historical materialism (19-20) mainly because it is non-teleological, and sees the range of observable variations affecting phenotypic behavior as more complex than mere emphasis on socio-economics will allow. Third, it recognizes appropriate distinctions and similarities between meme and gene transmission (7). Fourth, it admits that chance plays a role in the transmission of memes (129, 193, etc.). Finally, the model distinguishes between narrating stories about people, which is the purview of history, and examining social practices, which is the focus of comparative sociology (172).

The main strength of Runciman’s approach from this reviewer’s perspective is that it strives to remain purely explanatory without permitting appeal to supernatural phenomena or teleological ideologies to classify data; however, it faces three problems: 1) Will the data permit isolation of the relevant memes that are the de facto engines of social and cultural evolution? The problem of sources is faced, for example, by social-historians of antiquity, and the neo-Darwinian model is not immune. 2) How big a role does chance play? By definition it remains outside the realm of analysis, but if so-called “lateral transmission” (movement of information outside the mechanism of heritable variation or competitive selection) of data is impactful enough, the whole model collapses (see 34). Finally, 3) The model is a comparative one, yet Runciman frequently uses terms like “unique”, “uniqueness”, and “uniquely” (124, 126, 133, 194, 203), which have been appropriately problematized by J.Z. Smith (Drudgery Divine, 1990, ch 2). Future editions of this book should eliminate the term.

David A. Kaden
Department and Centre for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto
david.kaden@utoronto.ca