
Assessing Methodological Adaptationism: an Historical Approach

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Abstract

In his 2001 paper Peter Godfrey-Smith distinguishes between 'Three Kinds of Adaptationism', arguing that three related but independent views have been conflated under this term. He then suggests that distinguishing between these three ideas sheds light on the debate regarding the testability of adaptationism, showing how this is relevant in the case of empirical adaptationism.

In the present work I follow Godfrey-Smith's taxonomy and focus on an often neglected aspect of it, addressing the issue of the testability of methodological adaptationism. In the attempt to respond to Gould and Lewontin's criticism that adaptationist methodologies are sterile, I propose to test the validity of adaptationism as a heuristic device through an analysis of the history of evolutionary biology.

I will argue that, under a reasonable account of what scientific success is, both the actual and potential validity of methodological adaptationism can be assessed historically.

The conceptual tools to carry out this analysis are based on Lakatos' Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes, namely on his account of scientific progress in terms of progressive problem shifts and his distinction between internal and external history. These will provide the criteria to evaluate the success of adaptationist heuristics and understand the reasons for such success.

After having outlined my proposed methodology and addressed some of the obstacles it might encounter, I suggest it to be applied to (a rational reconstruction of) the history of evolutionary biology to show its effectiveness in assessing methodological adaptationism.

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