

behavioral pattern X is explained by its function Y for group Z if and only if:

- (1) Y is an effect of X;
- (2) Y is beneficial for Z;
- (3) Y is unintended by the actors producing X;
- (4) Y (or at least the causal relationship between X and Y) is unrecognized by the actors in Z;
- (5) Y maintains X by a causal feedback loop passing through Z."²²

Elster admits that "a closer analysis of purported functionalist explanations shows that in virtually all cases one or more of the defining features are lacking." He then argues that "it is close to impossible to find any cases of functional analysis in sociology where the presence of all features (1)-(5) is demonstrated."²³ Given the strong definition entailed in the "if and only if" clause, this is not a surprise. We are back to Hempel's argument. How would anyone claim that an institution or behavioral pattern X is explained by its function Y if and only if "Y is beneficial for Z?" Elster goes on to assert that there is a "naive brand of functional analysis... that from the presence of features (1), (3) and (4) concludes to the presence of feature (2) and often of feature (5). [Moreover,] there exists a more sophisticated brand of functionalism (represented by Merton) that from the presence of features (1)-(4) fallaciously concludes to the presence of feature (5)."²⁴ I think that Elster's argument is correct. Feature (5) is precisely the mechanism, often called a "self-regulating system," which is fallaciously inferred from the presence of the other features.

In other words, functional explanations in the social sciences have turned biological explanations upside-down. Elster's quarrel with Cohen and other functionalists rests on this fundamental point. In his review of Cohen's book Elster asserts that "I believe that I have seen no other mechanism that comes closer to being for sociology what natural selection is for biology, even if this is not, to repeat, to say that it comes very close. Cohen, however, does not even attempt to provide such a mechanism, which is why I believe that his enterprise must be judged a failure."²⁵

What we must not lose sight of in this particular debate is where we began. We began with the problem of why a particular social institution or behavioral pattern exists or persists in a society! In the

complex and often confusing debate, this problem seems to disappear. Nevertheless, it remains the central issue, and as far as I can see it has not been answered or explained. As Anthony Giddens puts it, "I agree with most of the elements of Elster's critique of functionalism, and I take as radical a stance as he does in suggesting that functionalist notions should be excluded altogether from the social sciences."²⁶ I think this is good advice.

In the discussion of phenomenology of religion, I pointed out that functionalism is often described as an auxiliary science for the study of religion. Although this claim is often held in contradiction with the claim that such an explanation is reductionistic, we often find anthropology, psychology, and sociology linked up with a phenomenology of religion as useful (and sometimes necessary) for a complete understanding of religion. We can abbreviate this claim by saying that for many phenomenologists of religion a complete study of religion must include both the nature (i.e., the essence) and the function of religion.

This partnership is an illusion. It is an illusion because functionalists do not attempt to explain the "essence" or nature of religion as The Sacred because they want to leave this research to other scholars of religion. The slogan "religion is what it does" is a clear indication that functionalist approaches to religion also involve a rejection of all forms of essentialism.

When biblical scholars, historians and phenomenologists of religion discover the theological roots of their discipline, they are often tempted to become unregenerate or revisionist functionalists. Both Drijvers and Leertouwer among others, seem to have yielded to this temptation. In their "Epilogue" they offer the following advice: "Van Baaren inquires what cultural function of religion still subsists when a great number of persons in the culture no longer feels any emotional or rational tie with religion. This question is not dependent on theological developments, but on the loss of function of the Christian religion in Western culture. In such a situation it becomes urgent to find the function of religion tout court."²⁷ If my analysis of functionalism is accurate, I believe there are good reasons for not following this kind of methodological advice.

Given the nature of the problems we have described thus far, it would seem that we have reached a theoretical and methodological impasse in the study of religion. I think we have no one to blame but ourselves for this situation. The utter lack of concern about the