

Veblen's Theory of Evolution and the Instinct of Workmanship : An Ethological and Biological Reinterpretation*

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Abstract :

Since his first, harsh attack on the pre-Darwinian assumptions of mainstream economics, Thorstein B. Veblen has been known as a founding advocate of a Darwinian evolutionary science of economics. Nonetheless, there is still little consensus even among Veblen scholars regarding either his methods of evolutionary science or his theory of evolution. This paper shows Veblen's evolutionary methods to be close to modern biological methodology, as in K. Lorenz's ethology and E. Myer's evolutionary synthesis. The accumulative process of evolution can be interpreted as a complicated interaction between instinct and purposeful emulation. The former is necessary for the preservation and prosperity of the species, and the latter is useful in maintaining stability in social order. I also examine the multilayered structure of Veblen's concept of human nature — old norms do not die out and may be revived —, his idea that cultural evolution accompanies reversions, and the ways in which his evolutionary economics is a composite science made up of economic anthropology and a biological theory of evolution.

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I The Problem

Among the three founding fathers of Institutional Economics, T.B. Veblen has been known in Japanese academic circles more as an iconoclast and radical, while W.C. Mitchell and J.R. Commons have been known as progressive reformers. However, before answering the question whether Veblen was a reformist or radical revolutionist, it seems necessary to confirm that Veblen's theory of evolution is fundamentally compatible with idealistic socialism or reformism by close

inspection of his thought.

Through the bold and precise reinterpretation of his evolutionary theory of society, I hope not only to demonstrate that Veblen's method is ethological and biological one, but also to shed light on a problem whether Veblen's method is anthropological, ethnological and sociological rather than biological (Jennings and Waller 1994 ; 1998) or is evolutionary science on a Darwinian and evolutionary metaphor from biology (Hodgson [1993]1996, 124).

While it seems quite right that "Veblen's most comprehensive and mature account of

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