The nonexistent purpose of people

Have our minds evolved to see human beings as types of artefacts?
Jesse Bering investigates some big questions.

To see an inherent purpose in life is to see an intentional, creative mind – usually God – that had a reason for designing it this way and not some other way. If we subscribe wholly and properly to Darwin's theory of natural selection, however, we must view human life generally and our own lives individually as arising through solely non-intentional, physical means. This doesn't imply that we are 'accidents', rather, we simply 'are'. To state otherwise, such as saying that you or I exist for a reason, even an accidental reason, constitutes an obvious category error, one in which we're applying purpose-based thinking to something that was neither designed creatively nor evolved as a discrete biological adaptation.

Yet, by all appearances, this type of 'purposeful life' reasoning is ubiquitous. And we're about to find out why.

questions

What does the cognitive science of religion imply for belief in God?

Is the 'purpose of life' question one that is more for psychological scientists or philosophers and theologians?

resources

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During a 1945 lecture in Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre offered the following useful metaphor for God:
When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a superior artisan... When God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. Thus, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding.

Nonsense, said Sartre. We simply come to exist, just as beads of condensation form on a glass of water or spores of mould appear on bread. But Sartre (1946/1974) cautions us not to see this startling truth as reason to despair. Since God hasn't fettered any of us with a particular function in mind, obligating us to preordained tasks, we've no grounds to stew over our incorrigible and immovable 'fates'. Instead, our purpose is entirely our own affair – we decide who we are, not God. Sartre believed that if everyone appreciated this, and were true to their 'authentic selves' rather than what others thought they ought to be, then people would ultimately choose good over evil.

Sartre's revision wasn't entirely accurate either, however. He historically downplayed the role of biology in human behavior and decision making (see Levy,

2002). One person may indeed be freer than another to be 'good' than 'evil' given their inherited individual differences (such as in temperament and general intelligence) in combination with their prior experiences. In reality, we're only as free as our genes are pliable in the slosh of our developmental milieus (see Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2001). Still, as a secular humanist, Sartre almost succeeded in single-handedly shooing the faithful out of their pews in the French cathedrals.

Rethinking the question of human meaning

The notion of God the creator is still rampant today, however. For example, although sceptics might scoff at the success of pastor Rick Warren's (2003) best-selling 'spiritual manual', *The Purpose Driven Life*, the author's central message resonated deeply with readers. To understand why, we must not limit ourselves to critiquing the epistemological value of Warren's claims. Rather, we must look at his appeal through the lens of psychological science.

Warren tells his (mostly Christian) audience that:
You exist only because God wills that you exist. You were made by God and for God – and until you understand that, life will never make sense. It is only in God that we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning, our purpose, our significance and our destiny. Every other path leads to a dead end.

Warren's theistic answer is almost certainly a fairy tale, but, again, it strikes a strangely common chord with most people. Whereas Sartre refuted such traditional 'arguments' on the basis of his existential philosophy, contemporary atheists tend to turn to the natural sciences when countering the religious majority.

For example, in *The God Delusion*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006) attacks creationist ideas with great

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Jean-Paul Sartre argued that our purpose is entirely our own affair – we decide who we are, not God

verve. Scientific atheists aren't claiming that science presents us with an alternative way of deciphering the mysterious purpose of life, rather they argue that, in fully comprehending Darwin's basic idea of natural selection, we can begin to understand why there's really no riddle there at all. A rather tetchy Dawkins was once asked, 'What is our purpose in life?'

> If you happen to be religious, you think that's a meaningful question. But the mere fact that you can phrase it as an English sentence doesn't mean it deserves an answer. Those of us who don't believe in a god will say that is as illegitimate as the question, why are unicorns hollow? It just shouldn't be put. It's not a proper question to put. It doesn't deserve an answer.

Yet we would be justified in disagreeing with Dawkins on one crucial point, which is that this non-question does deserve an answer, or at least a closer look. The theory of natural selection should have vanquished God (or at least a God concerned with human affairs), just as

Dawkins so elegantly shows us in his works time and again – except it hasn't, even among those who claim to understand it deeply (Murray & Goldberg, 2009).

In philosophical terms, asking about the purpose of life may indeed be analogous to asking why unicorns are hollow. But that's an anemic comparison. People aren't normally very preoccupied with uncovering the secret attributes of unicorns. The same doesn't necessarily hold true for God, however. Many people don't believe in God, yet they still ask themselves about the purpose of life and can't easily shake their curiosity about this seemingly grand mystery. For psychological purposes, we needn't concern ourselves over whether the 'whys' are good questions, bad questions, or non-questions. We just want to know why they're so cognitively seductive and so recalcitrant in the face of logical science.

Does God ever really go away?

In spite of his atheism, even Sartre had fleeting theistic inclinations. We are privy to these only because his partner, Simone de Beauvoir, had the good sense to keep a meticulous diary of her conversations with Sartre in the years leading up to his death (de Beauvoir, 1985). What she discovered was an especially lucid mind, a man who was unusually aware of his own contradictions in thought and willing to acknowledge the niggling sense that, at least in the theatre of his own consciousness, there was a lingering, strange tension between his explicit beliefs and a very subtle, very particular type of creationist cognition. 'I don't see

myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world,' he confessed to de Beauvoir:

> …but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth. In short, as a being that could, it seems, come only from a creator… It contradicts many of my other ideas. But it is there, floating vaguely. And when I think of myself I often think rather in this way, *for want of being able to think otherwise*. (p.197; italics added)

This is an amazing admission made by someone who claimed to have rid himself of God back as a schoolboy. But Sartre didn't allow this glandular feeling to persuade him that God actually existed. Rather, he considered it to be a trick of the mind. Such self-surprising insights about the atheist's vulnerability to feel as though he were the product of intelligent design would seem to suggest that logical thought in this domain runs against the grain of our basic psychological architecture.

Like Sartre, Jean Piaget (1965) was sceptical of atheists' claims of entirely escaping a psychological bias of seeing the natural world in intentional terms. To Piaget, young children weren't simply less knowledgeable than older children and adults, but they were qualitatively different 'types' of thinkers operating under cognitive constraints that were systematically shed with age and over discrete stages of development. His concept of 'artificialism' referred to young children's seeing the natural world as existing solely to solve human problems, or at least meant for human use. Yet Piaget (1965) suspected that artificialist beliefs never really went away; rather, they'd continue cropping up in the nonbeliever's mental representations in very subtle ways. 'A semi-educated man,' wrote Piaget (p.257), 'may very well dismiss as "contrary to science" a theological explanation of the universe, and yet find no difficulty in accepting the notion that the sun is there to give us light.'

Seeing purpose everywhere

Although more recent findings reveal that young children possess a more scientific understanding of natural events than Piaget assumed (e.g. Carey, 2009; Inagaki & Hatano, 2006), one basic aspect of his arguments has continued to hold up under controlled experimental conditions. This is the finding that children reason in terms of an inherent purpose when it comes to deliberating about origins (Casler & Kelemen, 2008; Evans, 2000; Kelemen, 2004; Lombrozo et al., 2007).

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Human minds are biased toward reasoning in this teleo-functional manner, which simply refers to people's thinking that something exists for a purposeful reason rather than, well, because it's just there. It's logical to say that a showerhead sprays clean, plumbed-in water over dirty bodies because it's designed for such a purpose. But it would be bizarre to claim that a waterfall is 'for' anything in particular, in spite of the fact that, if one were standing beneath one, it might serve the very same purpose as the showerhead. As an artefact, the shower is the product of human intentional design, and thus it has an essential purpose that can be traced back to the mind of its creator. In contrast, the waterfall is simply there as the result of some naturally occurring geographical configuration.

Yet young children endow such natural, inanimate entities – waterfalls, clouds, rocks, and so on – with their own teleo-functional purposes. Because of this tendency to over-attribute purpose to the natural world, Kelemen (2004) refers to young children as 'promiscuous teleologists'. For example, when asked why mountains exist, seven- to eight-year-olds overwhelmingly prefer teleo-functional explanations ('to give animals a place to climb') over mechanistic, or physical, causal explanations ('because volcanoes cooled into lumps'). It's only around age nine that children begin replacing teleo-functional answers with scientifically accurate accounts. And without a basic science education, such thinking remains a fixture of adult thought. In research with uneducated Romanian Romani adults, Casler and Kelemen (2008) revealed the same preference for teleo-functional reasoning as seen in pre-scientific minded children. Likewise, science-literate adults afflicted with Alzheimer's disease also display this preference (Lombrozo et al., 2007), indicating that teleo-functional reasoning isn't so much replaced by degradable scientific knowledge as it is consciously overridden.

Of course, sensible teleo-functional reasoning doesn't only refer to artefacts. Evolutionary adaptations are similarly 'for' specific purposes. A turkey vulture's small, diamond-shaped, featherless head is for rooting around inside the meaty looms of carcasses. Similarly, with artificial selection, where human beings domesticate and selectively breed organisms to accentuate particular traits, teleo-functional reasoning also makes sense. My dog, Gulliver, has

the typically shaped head of a border terrier, a hunting breed whose streamlined cranium resembles that of an otter. This skull design is the product of people breeding for this cranial morphology, which allows for burrowing into holes and flushing out foxes.

Again, however, young children are promiscuously teleological when reasoning about happenstance properties of non-biological, inanimate objects. When asked why rocks are pointy, the seven- to eight-year-olds in Kelemen's studies endorse teleo-functional accounts, treating rocks as something like artefacts ('so that animals could scratch on them when they get itchy') or like organisms with evolved adaptations ('so that animals wouldn't sit on them and smash them'.) (see Kelemen, 2004).

Children even display teleo-functional reasoning when it comes to the existence of whole organisms. One wouldn't say that turkey vultures are on this earth for cleaning up roadkill. Dogs, as a domesticated species, may have been designed for human purposes, but, like vultures, canines as a group aren't for anything either.

> "One wouldn't say that turkey vultures are on this earth for cleaning up roadkill"

Rather, they simply are; they've come to exist; they've evolved. And yet, again, Kelemen and her colleagues find that when children are asked why, say, lions exist, they prefer teleo-functional explanations ('to go in the zoo').

Evolved human minds favour creationist beliefs

Such findings have obvious implications for our ability ever to truly grasp the completely mindless principles of evolution by random mutation and natural selection. According to Evans (2000), creationist beliefs are due in large part to the way our cognitive systems have evolved. Irrespective of their parents' beliefs, when asked where the first member of a particular animal species came from, five- to seven-year-old children give either spontaneous generationist ('it got born there') or creationist ('God made it') responses. By eight years of age, however, children from both secular and religious backgrounds give almost exclusively creationist answers. If not God, then 'Nature' is personified, seen as a deliberate agent that intentionally made the animal. It's at this age, then, that teleo-functional reasoning turns into a full-blown 'design stance', in which children envisage an actual mental agent as creating the entity in question for its own personal reasons. It's only among

the oldest children she's studied, the 10- to 12-year-olds, that Evans uncovers an effect of parental beliefs on explicit beliefs.

All of this suggests strongly that thinking like an evolutionist is hard work because, ironically, it works against the grain of evolved human psychology. Evolutionists will probably never outnumber creationists since the latter have a paradoxical ally in the way natural selection has lent itself to our species' ability to reason about its own origins.

Destiny beliefs as 'extreme' teleo-functional reasoning

When it comes to religion, most believers reason that we're here 'for' some divine purpose. Even if they're not particularly religious, people often reference some vague purpose to human existence, such as 'to love one another'. As Albert Camus wrote, 'revolt against man is also directed against God'. But many of us go one step further than this, saying that individual members of our species exist 'for' a special reason (Bering, 2006).

To see how odd this extreme form of teleo-functional reasoning actually is, simply change the nominal species from human beings to, say, horseflies. It's peculiar enough to ascribe some teleo-functional purpose to horseflies as a whole, such as saying that they exist to annoy equestrians or to make horses' rear ends shiver in anticipation of being stung. But to suggest that each yet-to-be horsefly still pupating under a damp log is here for a special, unique reason may have us institutionalised. But this is precisely what we do when it comes to reasoning about individual members of our own species; and, curiously, the concept of destiny doesn't strike us as being ridiculous, insane, or conceptually flawed at all. It feels quite natural.

Destiny beliefs may seem harmless enough but applying teleo-functional reasoning to our very selves can go monstrously awry, too. In 1997 Osama Bin Laden granted a rare interview to an American reporter, who asked him about Al-Qaeda's increasingly frequent strategy of training young men for suicide missions. Bin Laden responded: 'We believe that no one can take out one breath of our written life as ordained by Allah. We see that getting killed in the cause of Allah is a great cause as wished for by our Prophet.' It's not just warmongers that tempt the young and gullible into unwise fatalistic thinking, either. Our modern social environments are blanketed by a vocational wilderness in which one's job title is often perceived as one's essential
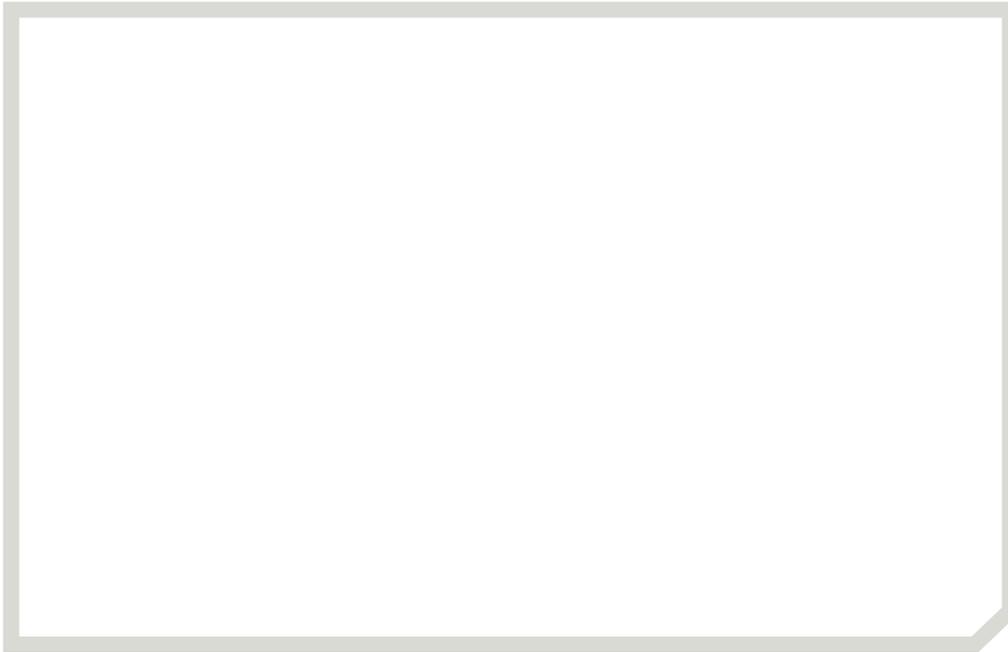
When asked why mountains exist, seven- to eight-year-olds overwhelmingly prefer teleo-functional explanations over mechanistic, or physical, causal explanations

purpose. Young people are told to 'discover themselves', like sleuths working on a case. Is it not surprising we so often feel we're 'not doing what we're meant for' when shackled to more utilitarian realities?

Does 'functional fixedness' apply to our self-concepts?

What's even more unfortunate than feeling out of sync with one's essential purpose, however, is our vulnerability to the illusion that we're 'design flaws'. Consider the strange phenomenon of functional fixedness, defined by German and Barrett (2005, p.1) as, 'being slower to solve a problem by using an artifact for an atypical purpose when the design function is primed immediately prior to the problem presentation than when the design function is not demonstrated'.

German and Barrett (2005) conducted their most convincing experiments with a group of young people from remote Shuar villages in the jungles of Ecuador. The Shuar participants, who'd never seen these exact items before and so had little (if any) preconceived notion about what they were supposed to be used for, were shown a spoon, two Styrofoam blocks, a cup filled with rice, a smaller plastic cup, a lollipop stick, a Ping-Pong ball and an eraser. Next they were told the following story about a rabbit and a bear said to be standing on the Styrofoam blocks placed 7.5 inches apart from each other. Between them was a fast-moving river. The rabbit needed to get across, but couldn't swim and couldn't

jump; rather, one of the objects could be used to get across. In fact, there was only one way to solve the problem, and that was merely to balance the spoon between the two Styrofoam blocks.

The Shuar had been randomly assigned to one of two conditions, where a single slight difference in the presentation of the objects significantly affected how they thought about the rabbit's problem. It was simply this: either they were first presented with the spoon inside the cup with rice, or shown the spoon outside the cup with rice and lying next to it. The Shuar who saw the spoon inside the cup suffered functional fixedness – just like their Western peers, they couldn't think to use the spoon for something other than its apparent purpose. Those who never saw the spoon inside the cup, meanwhile, easily solved the puzzle.

Functional fixedness is an innocuous enough phenomenon when applied to problems like this one. But if human beings do reason about their existence implicitly as they do for artefacts, it can turn quite tragic when we think about the child or adult who's constantly reminded that he or she is useless or 'can't do anything right' (see also Carnevale, 1998).

Function and morality: Natural bedfellows

Teleo-functional reasoning isn't simply a quirky way of thinking, therefore. It may have real consequences for how we come to live our lives. It may also relate closely

to an important error in our social reasoning, one that lures us into thinking in deontic terms – that we 'should' and 'ought' to behave a certain way because that is what we are made for. This is at the heart the naturalistic fallacy, the conceptual error made in claiming that what is natural is also inherently good, proper or right (Curry, 2006). Ongoing sociopolitical debates concerning homosexuality, for example, demonstrate how morality is curiously entangled in our minds with normal function.

The naturalistic fallacy plagues especially the discipline of evolutionary psychology, since researchers in this field often uncover aspects of the human psyche that are 'natural' (unlearned and largely invariant across cultures) but hardly desirable in terms of societal mores (Curry, 2006). Evolutionary psychology is continually embattled by emotion-fuelled claims that tug at our moralistic penchant for design reasoning, and must repeatedly defend itself against such misunderstandings by clarifying through ever more creative language that what is natural is neither good nor bad, but simply is. Adaptive design offers no prescriptions for moral behavior.

Conclusions

Recent findings of a strong teleo-functional bias in human minds demonstrate that our species' ability to conceptualise origins is seriously constrained by cognitive factors. Although research in this area has thus far focused only on the psychological mechanisms underlying essentialist reasoning about artefacts and more general categories of natural kinds (e.g. inanimate natural objects, biological traits and whole organisms), these empirical developments have striking implications for proverbial existential questions, such as, 'Why are we here?' and 'What is my purpose in life?'

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