Design: just a trick of the mind?

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Life looks like it was designed. Even Richard Dawkins admits it: "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose."[1] It seems biology cannot do without design language. However, evolutionists say life is a result of mindless processes, not design. So, if life is not designed, why does it fool us so readily into thinking it is? Some evolutionists try to explain why the appearance of design in biology is convincing though misleading—with a phenomenon called 'apophenia'. Apophenia is 'seeing meaningful connections in random phenomena'. Put simply, the idea is that the appearance of design in biology is just a trick of the way our brains work.

Skeptic Michael Shermer has developed specific terminology for this, such as 'patternicity' (that we tend to see meaningful patterns where there are none) and 'agenticity' (the tendency to infer invisible causes control the world).[2] Shermer says that we have an 'overactive agency detection device' that has evolved because those of our ancestors who tended to err on the side of caution and presume agent activity in uncertain predator-prey circumstances were more likely to survive than those not so cautious (figure 1). Shermer then extrapolates this to all our beliefs about gods, spirits, conspiracies, and so forth, since we have 'a developed cortex and a theory of mind'. He says they are all just the product of an overactive agency detection device in our heads, regularly inferring patterns and agents where no such things exist.

From the start, however, there is a heady self-referential confusion in Shermer's claims that apophenia-type misunderstandings are so broadly applicable. Apparently, Shermer *knows* that there are no invisible causes controlling the world, and yet scientists regularly appeal to invisible causes to explain patterns they think they observe. How can we trust our brains when we infer one set of invisible causes and not another?

Agenticity: insufficient grounds for rejecting biological design

Arguing from a general tendency toward agential 'false positives' to a *specific* instance of a 'false positive' conclusion is a logical misstep. Even if we are hardwired to err on the side of a presumption of agency, it does not mean we are always wrong to do so. We intuitively infer agency in many instances where a much more rigorous abductive argument, which considers non-agential alternatives, could be constructed to provide objective justification for a conclusion to agency. In other words, we are not unable to test inferences to agent causation against alternatives. As such, the mere presence of an 'overactive agency detection device' is not a sufficient reason to conclude that a particular design claim is false. Scientists routinely use instruments that measure too much—it's called 'noise', and it is routinely accounted for in other ways.

Indeed, agenticity is not itself an argument against design. Rather, it is an explanation for why people see design in things that are *clearly* not designed. For it to be applicable to an argument against design, it must be *clear* that what we believe we are seeing agency in does not in fact

Figure 1. Evolution supposedly gave us an overactive 'agency detection device' as an extension of a big brain and our ancestors' predisposition to assume the rustling in the bushes was a predator.

Figure 2. Naturally formed indentations in rocks can sometimes look like recognizable shapes, such as this footprint-like indentation in an igneous rock.

result from agency. For bunny shapes in clouds and footprints in igneous rocks[3] (figure 2) this is not hard to demonstrate—these are clear-cut examples of purely natural phenomena. For presumed predators in bushes, it is also easy to figure out whether a predator is there or not. Unlike these examples, however, providing a plausible naturalistic account for the origin of the first free-living cellular life has proven practically impossible.[4] As such, it is anything but clear that cellular life is a clear-cut example of a purely natural phenomenon. Unless evidence can be brought forward that our 'agency detection software' *is* in fact wrong regarding the appearance of design in life, citing apophenia or agenticity as an argument against design begs the question—the only reason given to believe that life is not designed is the assumption that life is not designed.

Agenticity and the design inference

Citing agenticity against biological design assumes that we just rely on our intuition and/or an inchoate analogy to man-made objects in inferring design in biology. This is plainly false. Indeed, if agenticity inherently undercut our warrant for discerning the difference between design and mindless processes, then the SETI program and archaeology could only be viewed as pointless exercises, since we would not be able to overcome our innate tendency to false positives to discern the difference between design and coincidence.

Moreover, works on information theory and design detection have grown significantly in the creationist and ID literature.[5] For instance, we have various well-developed design concepts, such as William Dembski's 'specified complexity',[6] Werner Gitt's 'Universal information',[7] Royal Truman's 'Coded Information Systems',[8] Michael Behe's 'irreducible complexity',[9] and Alex Williams' 'Irreducible Structure',[10] just to name a few examples. These ideas make specific claims that enable us to discern the difference between designed and non-designed objects. Not only that, but in many cases only certain types of designed objects will register a positive signal according to these definitions.

Is 'agenticity' a bad thing?

Shermer is right that an increasing body of literature is showing that humans, and especially children, are strongly predisposed to viewing the world in teleological and religious categories.[11] Indeed, if God designed our cognitive faculties to intuitively see the hand of a transcendent designer in nature, then a predisposition to recognize agency makes sense. This does not mean our agency detection devices are foolproof, but it would mean that we cannot simply write off as wrong belief in God just because it was intuitively formed.

Of course, our 'agency detection device' is not merely applicable to spirits; it applies to everyday interactions as well. Our ability to distinguish human speech and writing from gibberish is rarely inaccurate, even if we often struggle to understand what people are trying to say. Our natural ability to distinguish man-made objects from natural objects rarely misfires, even though it is not perfect. If these features of our cognitive framework were *generally* unreliable, our ability to communicate and design things would be severely crippled.

This is not merely true for modern man; it also applies to the ancients. While ancient people were often wrong about things they had no ability to investigate, the things they could investigate were common knowledge. They were wrong about the scientific details of reproduction (in many respects seeing it as akin to farming—the woman as the passive 'soil', and the man supplying the active 'seed'), but they knew that babies arose from sex. They had many wrong ideas about medicine, but they knew that dead people stayed dead. They could clearly reason causally and come to reliable conclusions, even if their extrapolations about the details (which they often reasoned to by analogy from what they did know) were often wrong. And it was this ability to reason causally that meant they could tell the difference between hieroglyphics and footprints, snakes and stones. In the most relevant senses for a preliminary intuition of design in biology, the cognitive faculties of the ancients were indeed reliable.

Theism, agenticity, and causation

If we are predisposed to believe patterns have meaning, what sort of meaning do they have? If we are predisposed to seeing invisible agents as explanations of patterns, what sort of an explanation is an agent? An agent is a *cause*, something or someone that *produces* effects (usually) for purposes. Even natural causes, though they may have no apparent purpose behind them, are still causes. Not only is the principle that effects have causes common and crucial to 'patternicity' and 'agenticity', it is a much broader and more foundational assumption of human (and animal) cognition than either, and fundamental to science.[12]

As such, since our predisposition toward belief in a divine designer comes from a sense of patterns and causality, then apart from *presuming* naturalism it's still not clear why the inference should simply be considered wrong. When we wrongly infer that there is a predator behind the bushes, we are still *not* wrong to infer a *cause* for the rustling of the bushes. Indeed, it is this principle of causality hardwired into us that is the necessary precursor for any supposed 'overactive agency detection device' in our heads.

However, what happens if we apply that principle of causality cosmically? What sort of cause could produce the whole of the contingent reality we see around us? Non-theists in times past denied that the reality we see is contingent. But since we now have very good reason to think the universe had a beginning,[13] it's clear that it doesn't *need* to exist.[14] Atheists now typically throw away the principle of causality when it comes to the universe; instead positing that the universe supposedly just popped into being from nothing, by nothing, and for nothing. But why throw the principle of causality away as an explanation of the universe when it works so well for everything in the universe and is so fundamental to the entire scientific enterprise? They know that the only viable alternative is an agent cause that transcends the universe, such as God.

Naturalistic evolution, agenticity, and the eclipse of reason

The irony is that this argument from 'agenticity' may be pushed further than the theorist bargained for. Naturalistic evolution may itself have rendered our cognitive faculties unreliable. Without some way to separate the cognitive faculties we intuit design in biology by from other far-reaching cognitive faculties, such as our 'hardwired' belief in causality, naturalistic evolution makes such wider-ranging cognitive faculties inherently defective for finding truth. Ironically, those faculties include the formation of a belief in naturalistic evolution (and even a belief in science itself). Therefore, if our cognitive faculties are only as reliable as this line of thinking suggests, then the belief in naturalistic evolution is itself likely formed by unreliable cognitive faculties, and is thus a self-referentially incoherent belief to hold.[15]

Agenticity: without excuse

Romans 1:19 emphatically declares the reliability of our 'design-biased' faculties for recognizing God behind it all. In fact, they are reliable enough that we are *morally culpable* for not responding to the revelation of God in nature appropriately. We are without excuse if we ignore the Designer of nature. Indeed, taking God out of the picture calls into question our ability to reliably believe *anything* our brains come up with, not just its belief in the God who designed biology.

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