

The physical origins of purposive systems

Terrence Deacon and Jeremy Sherman

TELOS – (from the Greek *τελος*): projected end, purpose, goal, achievement, realization. As in teleology, entelechy, ...

1 Telos: A lost cause?

It is almost a core doctrine of organismal biology and cognitive science that any use of concepts that implicitly or explicitly evoke *telos* for explanatory purposes has imported illegitimate terms and fallacious causal assumptions into the science. The seeming teleology of organisms' systems – their information, function, adaptation, and goal directed behaviour – is presumed to be entirely reducible to nothing but mechanism. Emboldened by biologists' success at unpacking such molecular complexes to show their components, leading philosophers of biology grow strident in their admonition: "The evidence is in. All purpose is reducible to pure mechanism. It is time to 'get over' our attachment to 'folk' concepts of purposive action."

The humanities and social sciences are reluctant to do so. Indeed their work depends so heavily upon concepts based on teleological relationships that they are in no position to give it up without giving up everything. If Newton and Einstein represent the central dogma of physics, and Darwinism represents the central dogma of biology, then Aristotle's 'final cause' (that for the sake of which something occurs) is the tacit central dogma in the humanities and social sciences. Purpose is their common currency, the coin of their realm. So rather than dismantling their empires of purpose, many modern scholars within these fields have assumed a converse stance: arguing that meaning and significance are unanalysable givens that can neither be reduced to material processes nor grounded to them, except by arbitrary cultural habit of thought. But if all meaning is culturally constructed and irreducible, the concepts of function and causality in biology can hardly be culture independent. So in Aristotle's terms, the cultural battle lines have

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