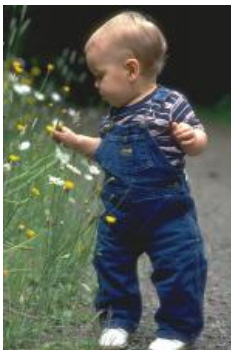


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# “Promiscuous Teleology” — Is This Why So Many Reject Evolution?

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A pair of psychologists at [Yale University](#) have a new explanation for why so many people reject the theory of evolution — our minds are hard-wired from birth to see design in the world around us. [Paul Bloom](#) is a psychologist at Yale and [Deena Skolnick Weisberg](#) is a doctoral candidate in psychology. Together, they argue that the roots of an anti-evolutionary impulse lie in childhood.

Their argument, found in the essay, “[Why Do Some People Resist Science?](#)” is published at [Edge: The Third Culture](#), a Web site associated with a group known as The Reality Club. That organization, by the way, humbly describes itself as including “some of the most interesting minds in the world.”

Those interesting minds are interested in knowing why so many Americans reject the theory of evolution. [Bloom](#) and [Weisberg](#) acknowledge that most evolutionary scientists assume that the rejection of evolution is rooted in theistic beliefs and a lack of scientific knowledge. If these were the reasons for this rejection, the advance of secularization and the massive increase in scientific knowledge should overcome this rejection. It is not happening that way.

As the authors explain:

*We believe that these assumptions, while not completely false, reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of this phenomenon. While cultural factors are plainly relevant, American adults’ resistance to scientific ideas reflects universal facts about what children know and how children learn. If this is right, then resistance to science cannot be simply addressed through more education; something different is needed.*

They go on to propose a different understanding of the problem:

*The main source of resistance to scientific ideas concerns what children know prior to their exposure to science. The last several decades of developmental psychology has made it abundantly clear that humans do not start off as “blank slates.” Rather, even one year-olds possess a rich understanding of both the physical world (a “naïve physics”) and the social world (a “naïve psychology”). Babies know that objects are solid, that they persist over time even when they are out of sight, that they fall to the ground if unsupported, and that they do not move unless acted upon. They also understand that people move autonomously in response to social and physical events, that they act and react in accord with their goals, and that they respond with appropriate emotions to different situations. .”*

*These intuitions give children a head start when it comes to understanding and learning about objects and people. But these intuitions also sometimes clash with scientific discoveries about the nature of the world, making certain scientific facts difficult to learn. As Susan Carey once put it, the problem with teaching science to children is “not what the student lacks, but what the student has, namely alternative conceptual frameworks for understanding the phenomena covered by the theories we are trying to teach*

This is a fascinating argument. Bloom and Weisberg believe that the minds of children are, in effect, hard-wired to see

design in nature and the world around them. The “intuitive psychology” they describe means that children infer a design in the world they experience. They assume an intelligence behind what they observe, and assume that a creative intelligence is a necessary part of any explanation of why things are as they are.

This, they argue, leads to a basic resistance to science:

*Our intuitive psychology also contributes to resistance to science. One significant bias is that children naturally see the world in terms of design and purpose. For instance, four year-olds insist that everything has a purpose, including lions (“to go in the zoo”) and clouds (“for raining”), a propensity that Deborah Kelemen has dubbed “promiscuous teleology.” Additionally, when asked about the origin of animals and people, children spontaneously tend to provide and to prefer creationist explanations.*

*Just as children’s intuitions about the physical world make it difficult for them to accept that the Earth is a sphere, their psychological intuitions about agency and design make it difficult for them to accept the processes of evolution.*

Just as obviously, Bloom and Weisberg, speaking on behalf of the scientific establishment, assume that there is *no* purpose or design behind the cosmos. Thus, to use their own examples, there is *no* purpose for lions or clouds. Their naturalistic worldview leaves no other option. Lions and clouds just *are*, and they must be explained in purely materialistic terms.

These psychologists also deny any mind-body dualism and any notion that humans possess any “soul” or consciousness apart from the merely physical and biological operations of the brain as an organ. As with evolutionary theory, they are frustrated that the general public rejects this worldview.

They go on to argue that deference to authority has much to do with this. When the public understands that these scientific claims are contested, they are likely to defer in their judgment to others. What frustrates Bloom and Weisberg is that so many persons defer to non-scientists.

From their article:

*In sum, the developmental data suggest that resistance to science will arise in children when scientific claims clash with early emerging, intuitive expectations. This resistance will persist through adulthood if the scientific claims are contested within a society, and will be especially strong if there is a non-scientific alternative that is rooted in common sense and championed by people who are taken as reliable and trustworthy. This is the current situation in the United States with regard to the central tenets of neuroscience and of evolutionary biology. These clash with intuitive beliefs about the immaterial nature of the soul and the purposeful design of humans and other animals — and, in the United States, these intuitive beliefs are particularly likely to be endorsed and transmitted by trusted religious and political authorities. Hence these are among the domains where Americans’ resistance to science is the strongest.*

While the authors acknowledge that the public is not stupid, they do believe that the public is wrong. In an incredibly revealing pair of sentences, they argue:

*The community of scientists has a legitimate claim to trustworthiness that other social institutions, such as religions and political movements, lack. The structure of scientific inquiry involves procedures, such as experiments and open debate, that are strikingly successful at revealing truths about the world.*

So we are supposed to see modern science as holding “a legitimate claim to trustworthiness” that other authorities — including religious authorities — lack. In the end, they propose that scientists combat resistance to science by convincing the public that scientists are worthy of trust.

I am not a scientist, but I would suggest that this falls short of a winning argument. The attorney who asks a jury, “What are you going to believe, my argument or what you see with your own eyes?,” has a fool for a client.

Bloom and Weisberg have written a truly fascinating essay. One of the most interesting aspects of their argument is the absolute dichotomy it affirms on the issue of design — you either believe in design and purpose or not. This is exceedingly clarifying.

In other words, this essay leads to the inevitable conclusion that you must indeed choose between Sunday School and modern science. If modern science insists that lions and clouds are purely accidental products of purely natural causes, this sets modern science in direct and unavoidable conflict with the claim that God made lions and clouds for a purpose — and ultimately for His own glory.

The earliest lessons taught in Sunday School are filled with what Deborah Keleman calls “promiscuous teleology” — the teaching that God’s design lies under every aspect of nature. The hard-wiring for design these psychologists identify as the problem may well be yet another sign of the *imago Dei* — the image of God that distinguishes humanity from all other creatures (another claim directly rejected by the scientific establishment).

This is precisely what Bloom and Weisberg, speaking for the scientific community, reject out of hand. These authors make that point clearly. Their argument also shows once again why “theistic evolution” is an incoherent proposal. The dominant model of evolution rejects *any* claim of design — end of argument.

Many polls indicate that a majority of Americans reject the dominant evolutionary theory and believe in some form of divine creation. This frustrates the evolutionary scientists to no end. But they are asking Americans to reject what they learned in Sunday School in favor of a theory that insists that the universe is a great cosmic accident. It’s not just children whose brains are hard-wired to reject that.

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