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Teleological Inference

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Abstract. How do we acquire teleological beliefs? A teleological belief is a belief that some event or process occurs for the sake of a purpose. Such beliefs include beliefs about actions, natural functions, and the meaning of life. This paper will advance a theory of teleological inference. I will argue 1) that we acquire teleological beliefs by statistical inference, 2) that we conceive of a purpose as a type of difference-maker, and 3) that we infer purposive relations as apparent difference-making relations. The proposed theory claims empirical, phenomenological, and theoretical support. Empirically, it best explains the teleological bias: the universal human disposition to endorse teleological explanations of phenomena. It also explains a range of observed interactions between causal, normative, and purposive judgment. The theory suggests that mental state attributions play no essential role in teleological inference.