In fields ranging from reasoning to linguistics, the idea of humans as perfect, rational, optimal creatures is making a comeback – but should it be? Hamlet’s musings that the mind was “noble in reason ....infinite in faculty” have their counterparts in recent scholarly claims that the mind consists of an “accumulation of superlatively well-engineered designs” shaped by the process of natural selection (Tooby and Cosmides, 1995), and the 2006 suggestions of Bayesian cognitive scientists Chater, Tenenbaum and Yuille that “it seems increasingly plausible that human cognition may be explicable in rational probabilistic terms and that, in core domains, human cognition approaches an optimal level of performance”, as well as in Chomsky’s recent suggestions that language is close “to what some super-engineer would construct, given the conditions that the language faculty must satisfy”.

In this talk, I will argue that this resurgent enthusiasm for rationality (in cognition) and optimality (in language) is misplaced, and that the assumption that evolution tends creatures towards “superlative adaptation” ought to be considerably tempered by recognition of what Stephen Jay Gould called “remnants of history”, or what I call evolutionary inertia. The thrust of my argument is that the mind in general, and language in particular, might be better seen as what engineers call a kluge: clumsy and inelegant, yet remarkably effective.

Language as Kluge
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