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Cognition is a Form of Agency, not Computation

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The way organismic agents come to know the world, and the way algorithms solve problems, are fundamentally different. The most sensible course of action for an organism does not simply follow from logical rules of inference. Before it can even use such rules, the organism must tackle the problem of relevance. It must turn ill-defined problems into well-defined ones, turn semantics into syntax. This ability to realize relevance is present in all organisms, from bacteria to humans. It lies at the root of organismic agency, which arises from the autopoietic organization of living beings. In this talk, I will argue that cognition is an evolutionary elaboration of such basic organismic agency, with the process of relevance realization at its heart. This process is beyond formalization: it is not amenable to algorithmic solutions. This implies that cognition is not computational in nature. Instead, I show how relevance is realized by self-manufacturing dynamics that span several levels of organization. To be alive means to generate one's own meaning. This ability is a fundamental aspect of life, and a key characteristic that sets living systems apart from non-living matter.

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