

For those who are interested in contemporary philosophy of religion, especially in the analytic tradition, Brümmer's book provides a helpful introduction to many questions concerning the nature of prayer, and shows how all of these questions are related to one another. But as indicated, those who are interested in technical debates among professional philosophers will find the book disappointing because the arguments are often brief and sketchy. Some of the sources cited are also a bit outdated, in the sense that positions outlined therein have been superseded by much more detailed and complete accounts generated by the many philosophers working in the philosophy of religion since the first edition of Brümmer's book was published in 1984.

In conclusion, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* is a substantial and important contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion, a contribution that will be especially interesting to those who wish to explore and elucidate a distinctively Christian conception of the life of prayer.

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Jesse Bering, *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011.

In the last 20 years cognitive science has gone where others have recently feared to tread: developing and testing explanations of religious beliefs and behaviours. Not only has their work flourished, but it has also captured the imagination of a segment of the reading public. Several surveys of the field for the general reading public have already been published – from Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* (2001) to Justin Barrett's *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (2004), Todd Tremlin's *Minds and Gods* (2006), and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006) (not to mention more scholarly works such as Scott Atran's *In Gods We Trust* (2002) and Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray's (ed.'s) *The Believing Primate* (2009), as well as Robert Hindé's *Why Gods Persist* (1999/2010) and David Sloan Wilson's *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002)). Jesse Bering, a leading researcher in the cognitive science of religion and one of the principle investigators on the Explaining Religion Project, has penned his own entry in this

crowded field: *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*.

Bering's book falls squarely in the genre, 'popular science writing that tackles "big, traditionally-humanities, issues" like human nature, the nature of happiness, the meaning of life, the nature of morality, and God's existence'. As such, it faces a dual challenge: 1) to explain the scientific experiments and theories accurately and accessibly, while also supporting and illustrating the main ideas with references from literature and pop culture and other accessible sources, and 2) to clearly explain the implications of these scientific experiments and theories on the traditional issues. Bering clears the first hurdle easily, but stumbles over the second.

Bering's performance on the first hurdle is impressive indeed. His descriptions of key experiments and summaries of experimental findings are lucid. He displays an incredible range of knowledge of literature, theatre, film, and pop culture, with references from Gorgias, Sartre, *Le Ballon Rouge*, Miss California Carrie Prejean, to Camus, Andre Gide, the band Kansas, and the Sopranos television series, amongst many others. He also skilfully weaves in anecdotes of his own experiences with supernatural beliefs and sentiments and feelings of purpose. All of these references and experiences are nicely tied into the issue at hand.

Bering begins the book arguing that humans are distinct from other animals in our possessing a Theory of Mind (ToM). The ToM is a natural ability to see other beings as having minds, with intentions, desires, and beliefs. Citing the solipsist Gorgias, Bering rightly notes that we don't directly see other people's minds; we only experience our own. We could doubt whether other minds exist, like Gorgias, or we could simply not entertain the thought that other beings have minds. But, in fact, humans naturally believe that other humans, and some other animals, have minds and treat them accordingly. Bering grants that some of the great apes may have a rudimentary ToM, but he thinks the evidence is not clear, and at any rate no other creatures have nearly as developed a ToM as humans.

Having a ToM was adaptive for our ancestors because it enabled them to better predict the behaviour of others, which was an important skill for creatures that thrive in communities. Knowing others' mental states gives you power over them – you can predict what they will do, take advantage of their ignorance, try to trick them, or try to cooperate with them for mutual benefit.

Having a theory of mind gives one another very interesting ability –one can think about agents that are not physically present, including invisible agents such as ghosts, dead ancestors, and gods. Bering thinks that the ToM plays a key role in explaining why humans believe in gods. However, it is somewhat difficult to decipher precisely what role Bering thinks ToM plays in explaining beliefs in gods. In particular, it is not entirely clear whether he thinks that the ToM merely enables one to believe in gods (and the fact that one does believe is explained by other factors), or that ToM itself naturally leads to or encourages a belief in a god of some kind. Bering writes,

it would appear that having a theory of mind was so useful for our ancestors in explaining and predicting other people's behaviors that it has completely flooded our evolved social brains. As a result, today we overshoot our mental-state attributions to things that are, in reality, completely mindless. ... What if I were to tell you that God's mental states, too, were all in your mind? ... It may feel as if there is something grander out there ... watching, knowing, caring. Perhaps even judging. But, in fact, that's just your overactive theory of mind. (p. 37)

This passage suggests the latter interpretation – that ToM itself overflows into beliefs that God exists and that he has such-and-such intentions. However, I think that later chapters of the book better fit into the former interpretation. In addition, the above quote follows a discussion of Heider and Simmel's 1944 study in which subjects were shown a film depicting the movements of a large triangle, small triangle, and small circle and, upon being asked to describe what they had seen, described their behaviours using mental-state terminology. For example, the large triangle was described as 'bullying' the small triangle. However, at best this study shows that it is easy for humans to see and describe inanimate things as though they were minded. This does not show that anyone actually believed that the triangle on the screen had mental states. Perhaps people saw the shapes as characters in a story and took those characters to have mental states. But, surely nobody believed that any actual triangle (vs. fictional triangle character) had mental states. So, perhaps ToM makes it easy for humans to see inanimate things as though they were minded, and makes it easy for humans to interpret events as though they were caused by a mind of some kind, but ToM doesn't all by itself seem to explain why humans believe in gods and other invisible agents.

So, what is the explanation, according to Bering? First, let's get clear on what is to be explained. Bering offers evidence that belief in gods is not only widespread in humans, but that 'our minds are heavily biased toward reasoning as though a designer held a conception in mind' (p. 54). He adds, 'recent findings from the cognitive sciences suggest that, just like a crude language sprouting up, at least some form of religious belief and behavior would also probably appear spontaneously on a desert island untouched by cultural transmission' (p. 54). He cites, as evidence, the accounts of 'deaf-mutes who, allegedly at least, spontaneously invented their own cosmologies during their prelinguistic periods' (p. 50), presumably earlier than they could have learned such cosmologies from their culture. He also refers to the work of Deborah Kelemen, who has shown that young children, 'regardless of their parents' religiosity or irreligiosity' (p. 56), attribute functions to all manner of inanimate objects. For example, they are disposed to accept that rocks are pointy 'so that animals could scratch on them when they get itchy' (p. 57). Margaret Evans has found that by eight years of age most children, when asked, say that God or nature personified created the first member of a given animal species – again, regardless of the religious beliefs of their parents and of whether or not they attend a religious school.

So, our minds are disposed to believe in a god, or a creating invisible agent, of some kind or other. Why? Bering describes several aspects of the human mind that, together with our active ToM, dispose us strongly to accept that a god of some kind exists and interacts with the world. These aspects include:

- (1) A disposition to see all kinds of objects – living and non-living – as having a purpose (see Kelemen, again). He also argues that humans often see their individual selves as having a special purpose (not just that humans as a kind have a purpose).
- (2) A disposition to think that the human mind is immortal and separate from the body. He argues that we have this disposition because we are unable to simulate our minds going out of existence.
- (3) Based on two different studies, psychologists Kurt Gray and Daniel Wegner argue that 'because we're such a deeply social species, when bad things happen to us we immediately launch a search for the responsible human party' (p. 138). They go on to argue that when we can't find a responsible human agent, we suspect some agent is responsible, and so are disposed to find God responsible.

- (4) As social psychologists have known for a very long time, most people are guided by expectations of a just world. But God lurks in these shadows. If the world is perceived as being just (even, as studies show, among many nonbelievers), then wouldn't some watchful, knowing agent be required to keep tabs on people's social behaviors, adjusting the scales of nonhuman justice?' (p. 147)
- (5) Narrative psychologists have argued that most people see their lives as following a narrative, 'one with the promise of an intelligent narrative climax that will eventually tie all the loose ends together in some meaningful, coherent way' (p. 158). However, we experience events that our outside of our control, often unforeseen, that change the course of our lives. It is very easy to fit such events into the narrative of our lives by supposing that God causes such events to move us along our narrative path.
- (6) Our active ToM makes it very easy for us to interpret many natural events as messages from God (or some other invisible agent). Bering's own Princess Alice studies – fascinating, but unfortunately too detailed to summarize in the space I have here – are cited as evidence for this claim.

The above is but a brief summary. Bering effectively supports these claims with various studies and anecdotes from history, literature, and pop culture.

According to Bering, these features of our mind make it very easy for humans to believe in gods. The notion of an invisible God who cares about what humans do and acts to communicate with humans fits quite naturally with these mental dispositions, and so we are quite disposed to believe in some such god.

In addition, Bering argues that natural selection pressures favoured individuals who possessed such mental dispositions towards belief in some kind of watchful, morally concerned God. For beings with a ToM, gossip is a powerful deterrent to anti-social behaviour. Act in some anti-social way while others are watching, and there is a good chance that they will tell others, which could negatively affect your interactions with other people in your community. But, sometimes we can benefit from doing something anti-social – by stealing from someone, for example. We are more inclined to do something anti-social if we believe that nobody is watching, or if we believe that we can't be identified. However, it is very easy for us to mistakenly believe that nobody will discover our identity, and so to suffer the consequences of attempting to get away

with something anti-social. Belief in a god who always watches us, and is aware of what we are doing and thinking, and who cares about what is right and just, will deter us from making such mistakes – mistakes that could negatively affect our fitness.

As I said earlier, all of these claims are described well and supported with interesting examples and studies. Bering's book succeeds here to a greater degree than many of the other popular-level books on the cognitive science of religion.

However, Bering stumbles over the second hurdle – he does not clearly explain the implications of his claims and theories on belief in God. Throughout the book Bering states, or rather presupposes, that his findings show that belief in God is an illusion. Chapter six is entitled, 'God as Adaptive Illusion'. He writes, 'the illusion of God, engendered by our theory of mind, was one very important solution to the adaptive problem of human gossip' (p. 192). Elsewhere, 'consider, briefly, the implications of seeing God this way, as a sort of scratch on our psychological lenses rather than the enigmatic figure out there in the heavenly world' (p. 38). Sadly, Bering doesn't back up such strong language with much of an argument. And we need an argument, because 'God is an illusion' implies that God does not exist, but God's non-existence does not obviously follow from any of his findings or theories. Bering gives no argument that his experimental results or theories make God's existence even moderately unlikely. God could easily have used these processes to get his creatures to believe that he exists, and there isn't any clear reason to think that God wouldn't, or likely wouldn't use such processes – at least, none that Bering discusses.

Bering offers something approaching an argument in a few scattered passages (pp. 38, 74-5, 107-9, and 195). It seems to go like this: evolution and psychology explain why people believe in God. God could exist and have created us this way, but we should favour the simpler hypothesis, which is that God doesn't exist, but evolution created us this way. This argument faces several challenges. First, it assumes that God's existence should be assessed as a scientific hypothesis, but many philosophers – most notably Alvin Plantinga – have argued that belief in God can be properly basic, like perceptual and memorial beliefs. Second, God's existence might have lots of explanatory power with respect to other data – e.g. the existence of the universe, religious experiences, accounts of miracles – that Bering doesn't consider, and so be a stronger hypothesis than naturalism, as Richard Swinburne has argued extensively.

It is unfortunate that Bering doesn't spend more time thinking about the implications of his theory for the rationality of religious belief, because I think there are some interesting discussions to be had (see, e.g. the essays in Schloss and Murray's *The Believing Primate* (Oxford: Oxford, 2009), and my essay 'Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational? The Epistemic Consequences of the Cognitive Science of Religion' (*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Aug. 2013)). For a scintillating and entertaining presentation of recent work in the cognitive science of religion, Bering's book is a great place to go. But, for a thoughtful discussion of the implications of such work, the reader will want to look elsewhere.

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John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Betz's study of the German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) sheds light on a relatively obscure figure usually mentioned in connection with the philosophers and linguists Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Hamann is a Christian philosopher who has been marked by an awakening experience. John Betz teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame and tackles Hamann from a clearly religious angle, which seems to be in keeping with the book series 'Illuminations' launched by Blackwell. The editors claim that the series 'is unique in exploring the new interaction between theology, philosophy, religious studies, political theory and cultural studies'.

In the preface Betz explains that the title 'After Enlightenment' is supposed to "get over" and beyond the Enlightenment, i.e., over and beyond the cherished illusion that reason alone is able to provide a sufficient basis for morality or culture' (p. xii) and refers to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, which was 'also proposed as a way forward that we look again to tradition (which the Enlighteners for the most part spurned as a source of wisdom)'. The central question is if Betz (together with Blackwell's book series) is really looking forward or if this post-secular project is taking us back to a 'Before Enlightenment.'