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# The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life

Jonathan Jong<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Otago, New Zealand

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Jonathan Jong  
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO,  
NEW ZEALAND

## The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life

By Jesse Bering

London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011. 288 pp., hb. £ 16.99; ISBN: 978-1-85788-560-6.

‘God (and others like Him) evolved in human minds as an “adaptive illusion,” one that directly helped our ancestors solve the unique problem of *human gossip*’ (p. 7). Thus goes the central thesis of Jesse Bering’s debut book. True to form, *The God Instinct* is both erudite and endearing. Bering draws from academic research and autobiographical reminiscences, masterfully merging data from psychological experiments and personal experiences as he makes his case. Make no mistake, it’s not an easy case to make; *The God Instinct* presents a minority report among scholars in the field, with its evolutionary adaptationism and emphatic atheism. In grinding his theoretical and ideological axes, Bering is therefore sticking his neck out; a bold, laudable move for a young scientist writing his first book.

Bering begins the book by explaining and narrating the evolution of our ability and tendency to attribute mental states to others (i.e., our “Theory of Mind”). He proceeds to argue that our somewhat over-enthusiastic theory of mind accounts for the naturalness, almost inevitability of quasi-religious beliefs: it renders us unable to imagine complete psychological extinction, which leads to afterlife beliefs; it incorrigibly generates perceptions of meaning or purpose or design in all kinds of objects and events; it makes belief in supernatural agents possible, even plausible. Finally, these arguments culminate in the claim that such beliefs in ‘a morally-invested, reactive Other’ (p. 194) were selected *for* in evolution. The reproductive advantages conferred by such beliefs, held consciously or otherwise, *explain* their existence, character, and distribution. In other words, we believe in God because our ancestors who did were more likely to produce offspring than the ones who didn’t and that this belief is passed down the generations in some way. Finally, Bering throws caution to the wind, audaciously asserting that this adaptationist account of “the God instinct” is unavoidable, given the logic of evolution and the current evidence.

At this point, at least Bering’s confidence is mistaken; there is nothing unavoidable about his conclusion. Like most evolutionary psychological theories, Bering’s is massively under-determined by data. In support of his claim, Jesse in supernatural retribution for seemingly successful crimes, (b) more populous



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communities are more likely to believe in moralizing high gods (as opposed to disinterested minor deities), (c) thinking about God increases self-awareness and prosocial behaviour, and (d) being told that there is or might be an invisible supernatural agent present decreases cheating behaviour. On the face of it, we seem to have plenty of evidence for Bering's thesis, but this is somewhat ironically illusory. Since at least the publication of G. C. Williams's 1966 classic *Adaptation and Natural Selection*, evolutionary theorists have been careful neither to mistake effects for functions, nor to move too quickly from the former to the latter. One effect of sleeping, for many people, is that our hair becomes disheveled in the morning; it is absurd, however, to think that the function of sleep is to mess up our hair. These effects of thinking about God or believing that there might be an invisible observer in the room do provide *some* evidence for Jesse's adaptationist claim (in that they constitute failures to falsify it), but we are a long way from an unavoidable conclusion.

The anthropological fact Bering alludes to – and it's curious that he only provides one – is just another example of the phenomenon he's trying to explain, not an explanation of it. Perhaps Bering is attempting to mount a case for adaptationism from pan-culturalism: the God instinct is a psychological universal, therefore it's probably an evolutionary adaptation. If so, he's on slightly firmer argumentative ground, but universalism is no guarantee of adaptationism. After all, the redness of blood is a biological universal among our species, and that's certainly an evolutionary by-product, not an adaptation.

Finally, the strongest piece of evidence for Bering's claim comes from a 2003 cross-cultural analysis which found that larger populations were more likely to include the concept of 'supernatural watchers concerned with human morality' (p. 193). This certainly seems to imply that such concepts develop in response to situations that commonly occur in larger groups. Jesse argues that larger groups provide a (false) sense of anonymity, which puts individuals at greater risk of behaving in socially-unacceptable, gossip-generating ways; so, such moralizing god concepts are more useful (and therefore more common) in larger groups to keep people in check and out of the tabloids. Taking a group-selective perspective, however, theorists like David Sloan Wilson would argue that co-operation and cohesiveness – traits that confer reproductive fitness to the entire group – are more difficult to foster in larger groups, and that moralizing god concepts develop more in these groups to increase these adaptive group-level traits. That is to say, while this cross-cultural finding might provide strong support for an adaptationist account of a specific kind of god concept (as opposed to god concepts more generally), it's unclear which adaptationist account it favours.

I must admit that I find Bering's adaptationist account, emphasizing as it does impression management and mate selection considerations, very appealing. Furthermore, I think it has a lot going for it as a scientific theory. *Pace* some critics of evolutionary psychology, such theories are empirically testable if just not to the same degree as their cousins in the biological sciences. For example, to adjudicate between Bering's and Wilson's theories, we could check to see if moralizing high gods were particularly common in communities where gossip

was more effective. The data collection might not be easy, but then it rarely is with such interesting causal questions.

As if the scientific case wasn't difficult enough to make, throughout the *The God Instinct*, Bering attempts to argue that his theory of religion renders theism improbable: 'Never mind the mind of God' (p. 204-205). God, Bering contends, is surplus to requirements when it comes to explaining natural phenomena such as biological and psychological facts. Naturalistic – and, in particular, evolutionary – explanations do the job perfectly well without reference to divine intervention. If God is completely explanatorily redundant, Bering argues, parsimony demands that we disbelieve. So far so good. Perhaps Bering is right, that – taken on a case-by-case basis – we'd be hard-pressed to find a phenomenon that requires or even warrants a supernatural proximate explanation. But then, Christian theists are, or ought to be, much less concerned with supernatural proximate explanations than with ultimate explanations. Cosmological arguments from Aquinas onwards seek to establish the God of traditional theism as the ultimate cause of all events and entities. Of course, theists have their work cut out for them on that front, but to treat the failure of theistic proximate explanations of phenomena as disproof of theism is to misconstrue at least Christian conceptions of divine action. Furthermore, evolutionary psychologists like Bering should appreciate this talk of proximate and ultimate causes, of levels of causation. After all, they often market their Darwinian explanations as ultimate explanations on top of proximate social psychological explanations; theologians ought to make a similar move, this time on top of evolutionary explanations.

Besides a general charge of theological redundancy, Bering seems to think that successful evolutionary explanations of religious belief in particular count heavily against theism. However, as I have alluded to, *pace* Bering, theists don't need an account of a tinkering God, stepping in to fiddle with genes and whatnot so that we'll turn out equipped with a natural penchant for religious belief. Indeed, to think of God as a proximate cause among other proximate causes is just bad (Christian) theology; it places God as some sort of quasi-physical object or force alongside moving billiard balls, gravitational forces, and human decision-makers. However, if – as many theologians and religious believers claim – God is interested in some kind of relationship with human beings, then God would have to make religious belief psychologically possible. The fact that such beliefs are possible – indeed, that they are natural and intuitive – is the minimum of what we would expect from a God who is interested in relating to us. So, naturalistic explanations of God instincts are not, in principle, powerful threats to traditional theism. Of course, different naturalistic explanations might contain different elements which may render theism more or less likely. For example, if the cognitive mechanisms which produced God beliefs were massively unreliable, then we should be skeptical about our God beliefs (and other beliefs generated by these mechanisms). The reliability of a cognitive system at tracking truth is, however, a difficult thing to measure, especially since it's bound to vary across contexts and domains. Once again, tackling this question at depth would require much more space; we can conclude, however, that naturalistic explanations of religious belief are not automatically antithetical to religious belief, and that even

on a case-by-case basis, it's difficult to know if any given theory renders theistic belief more or less rational. Bering might be right or wrong about God's non-existence, but it doesn't flow logically out of his science.

Speculation about the origins of religion and its repercussions for religious belief has gone on for millennia, but rigorous empirical research on the matter is a relatively new phenomenon. As such, it is still too early to tell if Bering's particular adaptationist theory of religion is true; it is interesting and promising, but there are more empirical challenges to be faced before we should accept it. Similarly, the philosophical and theological implications of naturalistic theories of religious belief are certainly less clear than Bering suggests and are bound to be contingent on specific features of the theory in question. There are, perhaps unsurprisingly, no silver bullets against theism here.