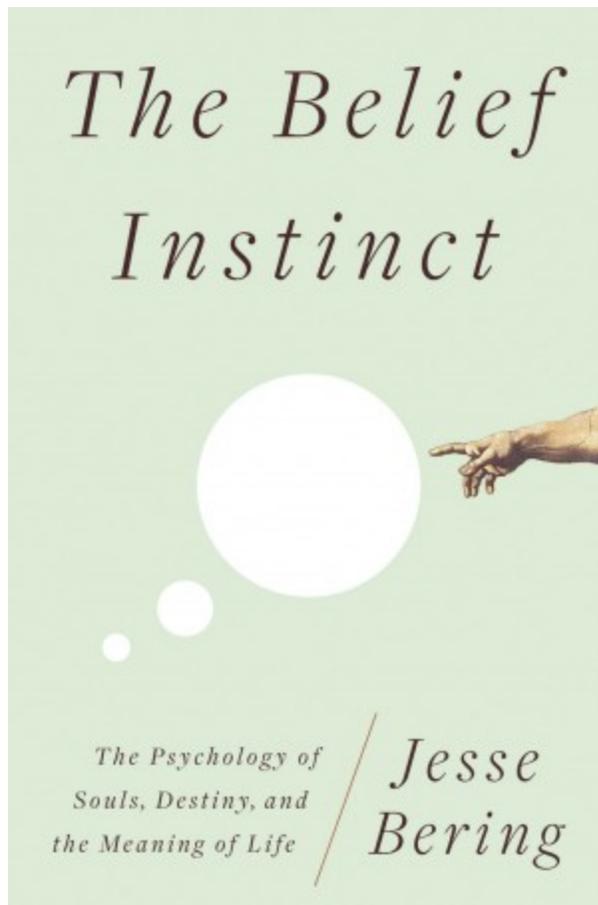


Author argues we've evolved beyond need for religion

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Jesse Bering is an evolutionary psychologist in Belfast, Ireland, whose research in cognitive science looks into why our ancestors believed that life had a meaning, purpose and destiny beyond this present existence.

Those beliefs were illusions, he writes in his new book, "The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life" (W.W. Norton & Company, \$26.95) and as a species we have outgrown our need for those illusions. The next step in our evolutionary development, he argues, is to escape them. He will discuss his book Tuesday evening at D.G. Wills Bookstore in La Jolla.

Question: You say in your book that our instinct as human beings is to look at a tsunami or a mass shooting, or even our individual lives, and believe there is a meaning or reason for everything. Why do our minds go there instinctively?

Answer: One of the aspects that makes us perhaps unique in the animal kingdom is we are constantly trying to figure out why things happen. I can tell you how the Tucson shootings happened, for instance, or why, by trying to psychoanalyze the shooter, but the bigger picture of why were those particular people in that particular location when the shooting happened to occur, why they didn't die instead of someone else, that's when we arrive at these religious explanations, a deeper reason for what happened. The reason is that our brains need to broaden into something more abstract, and we typically give a personality or faith to that, which is God, or a god, or dead relatives. We look at it as a mind that is intentionally giving us messages.

Q: But if that's where our instinct is sending us, doesn't that imply that it must exist?

A: No. It doesn't imply that at all. It doesn't necessarily mean that God exists; it just means that we have that sort of program, or logical mechanism that leads us to believe that there's a mind that's operating behind the scenes.

Q: But that doesn't mean God doesn't exist either, does it?

A: That's true. Philosophically, you can't disprove the existence of God. One can say that our minds have evolved over millions of years to detect the mind of God. I don't think that's a very convincing argument. Thinking that someone is watching us do things, interacting with us, with embedded messages in the form of natural events, that is convincing in an emotional psychological sense. But if it has the ultimate consequence of making us behave better, then it's just a mechanistic evolutionary process. It doesn't necessarily mean that God is there. It just means it evolved because it worked.

Q: But it doesn't have to exist just to keep people in line, does it? Don't some people just believe in God?

A: If you think about the basic mechanics, the common denominator is the assumption that God has a mind, and that mind is concerned particularly about our moral behaviors. There aren't a lot of cross-cultural variations on that, whether the mind is dead relatives or many gods.

Q: Is it your contention that we've evolved beyond needing that belief now?

A: We have technological advances that have replaced God. God served this monitoring function ---- this policing function. All that really mattered to our ancestors was that supernatural agents were watching them and would punish them for transgressions. If that prevented them from engaging in behaviors that would ultimately harm their reputations, that's all you needed. Belief in God is still effective in that way to some extent. But now we have hidden cameras and DNA tests and lie detector tests, so we stopped doing things because we thought we might get caught. We don't really need God any more. We have technology. It does the same thing as God. It might even be more effective. When people are reminded that they're being observed, you see genuine effects.

Q: What about people who are attracted to a concept of God because they believe God is love? Some are drawn to that more than they are to the idea that God is a judge, evening the scores.

A: I wouldn't doubt their theological commitment that that is the case, but I also would say that it is not the default stance. If people view God is love, and one day their child is diagnosed with a fatal disease like leukemia, my suspicion would be that their immediate response to that is "Why is this happening?" as though God has violated this mutual understanding that they had, where good things are supposed to happen to good people, and bad things are supposed to happen to bad people.

Q: You refer to "The Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church, where he says we are here for a reason, and then you describe us as no different from a horsefly on the rear end of a horse. Those two don't seem the same. Human beings are self-aware, and a horsefly maybe not so much. Isn't there a reason to think we're here for a purpose, since we can think about it?

A: What I was trying to get at was that there is no inherent purpose for any individual organism, whatever the species happens to be. We are one of billions of other species that have existed on the face of this Earth. If we can't apply that same kind of rational inherent purpose to these other species, then why does it make sense for human beings? If you accept evolutionary theory, there is an obvious tension there. I'm not saying people can't give themselves a purpose of life, or ascribe some meaning to their individual existence. What I'm saying is that there is nothing intrinsic to human existence that lends it meaning. Individual existence can be traced to our parents having sex, and a father's sperm cell penetrating a mother's ovum. The issue is that, if you take out all the attributions of meaning and purpose that our minds create, does meaning still exist? That's where we run into problems.

Q: So is meaning irrelevant?

A: It's not irrelevant. It's actually an important question, because people struggle so much with it. What's interesting to me as a psychologist is that this is the question we keep coming back to. No matter how persuasive or seductive evolutionary theory might sound to us, we still seem to be encumbered by this question of "What is the meaning of life?" What I try to do in this book is show why this question is so difficult to address and get our heads around. We can only understand the question once we get it to the mechanism of the theory of mind, which addresses that question of meaning. Even if we're self-aware and horseflies aren't, our being self-aware is the result of natural selection.

Q: So the question of meaning is important, but it doesn't ultimately matter, does it?

A: Matter in the sense of how we live our lives?

Q: Or in the grand scheme of things. Who cares?

A: It does matter in the theoretical framework I'm discussing in the book because this question "What's the meaning of life?" gives us this very convincing impression that we are here because there was a creator that held us in mind that wants us to do particular things, that wants us to behave in particular ways. We have a social relationship with this figure that Westerners conceptualize as God. The fact that this question won't go away is important because it creates the illusion that we are in a social relationship. And that relationship, which doesn't exist, influences our social behaviors.

Q: If you come to the conclusion that there isn't a meaning, doesn't that create other problems?

A: That would be a common-sensical assumption, that somehow viewing life as being meaningless makes one depressed. One of the things I try to get across in the book is that even though you can hold these explicit beliefs that you're atheist doesn't mean you don't experience psychologically the same illusions as everybody else. People can reject their own intuitions and experiences that tell them about the nature of reality. Believers trust their intuitions, and atheists reject them as reflecting what's happening outside their own heads. But the experience is the same, no matter what you believe.

Q: So would you say that atheists are more highly evolved?

A: No, I would definitely not say that. I would say that atheism is cognitively unnatural, and it does require more cognitive effort. You don't find atheism expressed in societies where scientific understanding of the world is not available. I think there are all sorts of reasons for what we believe. We don't know what makes one person an atheist and another person a believer. We don't understand the developmental sequence that leads to either position. One thing is clear, that atheism is not natural.

Q: That's an interesting tension, because it seems in your book that God is unnecessary, and yet atheism isn't really going to take hold because it is unnatural. What am I missing?

A: I don't think there is a tension between those two things. If the brain is envisioned in the way it should be, which is that it's an artifact of the ancestral past, evolution doesn't operate so quickly that the things that were problems for us on Earth 200,000 years ago have changed the nature of human cognition or the brain. For example, we should have more fear of cars than we do of snakes, but we don't, because we have modern brains that are living in the ancestral past. So the same thing is with religion. We may have these technological innovations now, but human cognition has not caught up quickly enough to accommodate technology, so we're still seduced by the illusion of God or the afterlife. That's why it's not likely that new atheism campaigns will eradicate the problem of religion or God, because this is the way our minds work. The best thing we can do is understand them as illusions, but it doesn't completely erase the experience. It's like an optical illusion of the two lines where one looks longer than the other. It doesn't matter how much we understand about the mechanics of the illusions; we still visually experience one line as being longer than the other.

Q: But the word illusion implies that it's not true.

A: Yes. That is what I'm arguing. There is no reason to assume that it's true.

Q: But just because scientists might say it's an illusion so it is not true, that in itself doesn't mean it's not true, right? You're saying that there isn't evidence to support it.

A: This is not a book that confirms the existence of God. This provides evidence for the cognitive systems that enable us to think about these questions in ways that show we could have evolved with these ideas without them actually being true. The work of new

atheists like (Richard) Dawkins and (Christopher) Hitchens is important and entertaining, but it's much more complicated and sophisticated than saying religious people are stupid and atheists are more intelligent. We all have the same brains. We all evolved the same. The interesting question to me is why some people buy into these psychological experiences and others reject them.

Q: This is Super Bowl weekend. What will you think when a player kneels in the end zone to thank God for helping him score a touchdown?

A: I'll think that this person is like most other people in the world in thinking that when good things happen, especially unexpected good things, that God is rewarding them somehow, or is trying to communicate a message that they're on the right path, or that he appreciates them or loves them. But in order to engage in kneeling after a touchdown, that person has to have a theory of mind to think about other minds, in this case God. You would not see behavior like that in any other species in the world except for human beings.

Q: But when you see it do you shake your head or shudder?

A: No. I'm an atheist, but I don't look down on people who aren't. I make it clear in the book that I'm as susceptible to these illusions as anyone else. And I've experienced them myself, and even felt that God was watching me or giving me a message. I just don't trust those intuitions as being true.

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His most recent book is "God Hides in Plain Sight: How to See the Sacred in a Chaotic World."