now needed further convincing that what looked really bad was really bad. Luckily for us, waiting in some unused wing of the evolving brain was the kind of psychological mechanism postulated by the error theory, capable of overriding rational doubts about what we morally ought to do.

A&N's approach to religious capacities offers the beginnings of a more plausible line of response to the threat reflection poses to moral beliefs. The error theory of morality is right in that, with the capacity for reflection came the capacity to doubt the imperative moral goodness of cooperating when it looks like we can get away with not cooperating. And this blow to unreflective moral knowledge was certainly a serious blow to unreflective moral motivation. But why not suppose that moral knowledge and motivation were only shaken by this evolutionary event, not destroyed? Like other primates, we are adept at spotting such things as the moral badness of unjustifiable inequality, and like other primates, we are generally moved to do something about it when we spot it. But being reflective, we are unlikely to be motivated enough, enough of the time, for moral goods to trump individual goods reliably.

But if moral beliefs, commonly both functional and intuitive, can be placed in doubt by reflection, our capacity for religious belief can reliably support them. Like A&N, we need not require that this capacity evolved for the function of reinforcing or creating moral belief or motivation. That the capacity exists is enough to suggest that the error theory of morality is an unnecessary cog in evolutionary human psychology. Religious beliefs, unlike the illusory moral beliefs postulated by the error theory, actually are counterintuitive, but they nonetheless do the job of convincing us to cooperate when moral beliefs alone are not sufficient.

Although A&N flirt with the error theory of morality themselves, asserting that without religion, morality would collapse once "people learn that all apparent commitment is self-interested convenience or worse" (sect. 6, para. 8), this assumption is hardly central to their view. Moral commitment may be genuine (Nesse 2001) and religious belief (or something like it) still necessary for moral stability, at least until stronger justifications emerge. While other primates can be ingenuously deceptive, A&N are right to point out that the reflective capacities of human beings raise the potential for deception to a new and much higher level. But again, although new levels of deception might be supposed to have destabilized the capacity for morality in humans, they need not be supposed to have destroyed it. In any case, that counterintuitive beliefs psychologically support morality against self-interest is far from sufficient for denying the objectivity of morality.

Locating the causes of religious commitment

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Abstract: Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) survey a substantial body of theory and evidence on which there is broad agreement in the cognitive science of religion. Some parts of their argument (for instance, concerning the causes of costly commitment to religious beliefs) are more speculative and remain a focus of lively debate and further research.

Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) survey a wide range of features of human cognition that plausibly account for the historical and cross-cultural recurrence of religious behaviour, which they define as "passionate communal displays of costly commitments to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents" (sect. 1; see also Atran 2002a). Their argument is broadly consistent with a growing corpus of theory and empirical evidence assembled in the cognitive science of religion field over the last quarter of a century.[1] Although A&N's article may not provide a wholly accurate impression of that literature,[2] they develop an account that cogently introduces some of the key insights of the new field and that reflects its distinctively selectionist orientation in the study of cultural (including religious) transmission.[3]

Where A&N are most venturesome is in their attempt to account for the extraordinarily high levels of commitment that religious coalitions may evince from their members. This is an area in which no clear consensus of opinion has yet emerged among cognitive scientists, despite its obvious importance in a world where religious fanaticism poses ever more closely monitored threats to individual well-being and institutional stability. A&N's response to the issue raises a number of problems that are worthy of scrutiny.

Their starting point is that religious commitment is irreducible to prospective political, economic, or reproductive gains whether at individual or collective levels. Religious behaviour typically incorporates at least some nonrecuperable costs, and that requires an explanation.[4] A&N argue that people are induced to pay the unduly heavy costs of religious adherence because of natural cognitive (including affective) susceptibilities. Where problems arise is in A&N's account of *how* the cognitive susceptibilities (which we agree are there) give rise to costly religious commitments.

The essence of A&N's argument runs as follows: "Invoking supernatural agents who may have true beliefs that people ordinarily lack creates the arational conditions for people to steadfastly commit to one another in a moral order that goes beyond apparent reason and self-conscious interest" (sect. 6, para. 7). One might well be persuaded by this argument if: (a) the high level of commitment that we are out to explain correlated with the target variable, namely, the presence of beliefs in supernatural agents with special access to truth, which A&N propose as its *cause;* (b) this argument served to explain people's willingness to agree on the nature of their supernatural agents and the contents of the *truth* to which those agents are assumed to have privileged access. Neither appears to be the case.

Costly commitment to ideological principles correlates most strikingly not with the presence of *truth-controlling supernatural agents,* but with the presence of *ritually inspired expressions of commitment to the principles themselves.* These principles may or may not be attributed to a specific originating agent or agents, although they often are. And where the originating agency is specified, supernatural qualities may or may not be attributed.[5] While it is especially common for the sources of collective revelation to be attributed to supernatural agents, and partly for the reasons A&N identify (following many others), this does not explain why particular clusters of ideological principles should come to be seen as revelatory and persuasive, nor why they evince such costly commitment. The more fundamental causes of this would seem to lie in processes of ritualization, and especially the relative frequency and affective valence of rituals (see Whitehouse 2004).

With regard to the problem of ideological consensus, A&N assume but do not explain patterns of standardization of religious concepts. Religious coalitions vary dramatically in the extent to which they agree on the origins and nature of truth, on the proper mechanisms required to reproduce it, and on the costs they are willing to incur in its defence. Patterns of ritualization are also implicated in this variation, for it turns out that religious traditions that maintain elaborate orthodoxies also necessarily deploy routinized rituals as a principal mechanism for doctrinal transmission (Whitehouse 2004). And most religious traditions that elicit low levels of agreement on the content and origins of cosmological *truth,* but whose members are also deeply reflective on religious topics, also deploy relatively low-frequency, high-arousal rituals.[6] Furthermore, we may identify many interim scenarios as well, particularly those built around relatively intuitive (and minimally counterintuitive) religious concepts that are neither particularly homogeneous nor a focus for intense, if idiosyncratic, rumination.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Barrett (2000), Boyer (1994; 2001), Guthrie (1980; 1993), Lawson and McCauley (1990), McCauley and Lawson (2002), Pyysiäinen (2001), and Whitehouse (1992; 1995; 2000; 2004).

2. For example, A&N alter and problematize Boyer's widely accepted notion of "minimally counterintuitive beliefs" by describing these as being

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(additionally) "counterfactual" (which is not a distinguishing property). Or again, A&N's discussion of "hair-triggered folkpsychology" (now more commonly referred to, following Barrett 2000, as "hyperactive agent detection") seems to underplay evidence that the evolution of such mechanisms owed as much to the needs of developing hominid hunting and tracking techniques as to the avoidance of predators (see Mithen 1996).

3. Largely inspired by Sperber (1985).

4. Without disputing this argument, it may be noted that it could have been rendered more precisely. For example, how are nonrecuperable costs to be identified and quantified?

5. Obvious examples of agents assumed to lack any supernatural properties and yet whose teachings have evinced precisely the kinds (and intensities) of commitment that A&N restrict to the religious sphere, would be the 20th-century communist leaders of the USSR, China, Cuba, and elsewhere.

6. Ibid.

A proper faith operates with the acknowledgement of risk, and, hence, a true religion with that of sacrifice

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Abstract: The authors are working with a limited notion of religion. They have confined themselves to a view of it as superstition, "counterintuitive," as they put it. What they have not seen is that faith does in a real sense involve a paradox in that it projects an impossibility as a methodological device, a fictive ploy, which in the best interpretation necessarily involves a commitment to the likelihood of self-sacrifice.

Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) are operating with a too narrow and, therefore, distorting concept of religion. A first sign of this is their restricting their definition of faith to virtually one of superstition, but to put the objection in such a form would ignore the error of their starting point. In relying on early 20th-century anthropologists and sociologists (e.g., Durkheim 1915/1976; Malinowski 1922/1961), they fail to see what Clifford Geertz has emphasized: the prior importance of symbolic action as regards religion (Geertz 1973). One can go further than Geertz in claiming that religion can be seen to arise from the very nature of language, that is, what makes us human. Though this claim would form a "commitment theory," it does not fall to their criticisms that it cannot account for the "imperceptibility" of a deity nor for the demand for sacrifice (sect. 1).

It can be argued that the idea of a god as ideal guide and end of activity lies as a *presupposition* of the initial stance in an act of communication. Central to the latter is the notion of an ideal singular referent being projected intersubjectively as a guiding regulative idea (see, for example, the work of the psycholinguist Ragnar Rommetveit [1974, Ch. 4]; the sociologist Alfred Schutz [1962, pp. 3–47]; and the linguist Sir Alan Gardiner [1932, pp. 71–82]). This initial mutual act is required for the two partners in a communicative act to obtain what is only an *imperfect* coordination of their understandings (the logical subject of a statement), but it is one which allows enough of an overlap in understanding to allow a putative improvement of the hearer's perspective (via the provision of the logical predicate) upon the so-far-presumed-to-be-common "referent." This constitutes the dynamism of the informative statement, far removed from the static world of the sentence. A simple example: A says to B, "You know that mat that we both know about in the same way?" – "Yes," says B – "Well, we don't know about it in the same way, for it has a cat on it." As Rommetveit puts it, because of the differences in our individual sensory and perceptual takes on the world, we must "take a *perfect* intersubjectivity for granted in order to achieve a *partial* one" (Rommetveit 1978, p. 31; see also Wright 1992).

The implication is that the "everyday world of readily perceptible substances and events," the "commonsense ontology" (sect. 1.1), is only a convenient fiction that enables us to move our understandings around on the real. This is the "space of reasons" that Wilfrid Sellars proposed in which our concepts *move* (Sellars 1956/1997). It provides the human evolutionary advantage over other species, in that it enables the rate of adaptation to be increased throughout the species (for those lower down the evolutionary scale, the draconian device of the survival of the appropriate variation-by-mutation being the only mode of adaptation).

The further implication is that, when this act first occurred in evolutionary history, this initial coordination was achieved by chance, but this did not necessarily involve a *conscious* act of trust. The partners on the first and succeeding dialogues took it for granted that a *singular* entity was being sorted out mutually, for, when the statement had taken its course, the idealization of singularity could move on to its new position apparently seamlessly. Nevertheless, the act which looks for all the world like an act of trust (that A and B were both referring to the "same mat") is only a pseudo-trust. This pseudo-trust can only become a proper faith when the partners acknowledge the risk of real contingency in whatever has been agreed upon in the act of communication. (A&N rely on an unexamined notion of "trustworthiness" [sect. 1.2].)

A proper faith, and this has been acknowledged in the best of religion, has consequently to accept the fact of risk, a stance which is at the opposite pole from superstition (Wright 2002). Again at its simplest: Each says to the other, "We are taking for granted that we are neglecting all that we consider negligible," but to *take for* granted is not to know, because what A is considering negligible – that is, so not worth mentioning as to be ignored by her – may not be what B considers not worth mentioning. The risk in what is left unsaid cannot be discounted in the philosophical analysis, for the result, at its worst, could possibly be tragic, requiring the *sacrifice* that a true faith implies. Faith – and religion that inevitably comes to take account of its open paradox ("Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief") – is therefore more than mere superstition and, significantly for A&N's argument, has its scientific origin earlier than they have characterized it.

Furthermore, it restrains them from using their keyword "counterintuitive" of what faith is, for, if it is a mutual hypothesis held merely as a regulative idea, a *methodological* ploy, it has an unreal aspect as an act of reciprocated imagination as well as a real one; and it is this that has misled them into seeing religion as centred on the unreal. It is clear that A&N are taking an unduly rationalist view of religion. Persons imagining something together and each knowing that they are doing it, are doing something perfectly "intuitive," obviously real. This brings the notion of faith well within a scientific view which rejects the idea of a realist god and yet which sees an openly imagined goal of faith as a necessary performance for language as for society in general. Such a view, that of an *as-if* god, is being put forward by many radical theologians, of whom Don Cupitt is a notable example (Cupitt 1980), and an "as-if" god is an "imperceptible" one. Durkheim, typically, was quite unable to recognize the possibility of religion based on the imagination, specifically rejecting the notion as counterintuitive (see his castigation of Comte for proposing an "artificial religion"; Durkheim 1915/1965, p. 474).

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