The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life
Jesse Bering – Nicolas Brealey publishing 2013

Summary – The basic argument in this book is that the evolution of the human brain, some 150,000 years ago, introduced consciousness and a theory of mind that includes teleology (the concept that things (including humans) exist for some specific purpose) and that some supernatural entity exists to judge our thoughts; sending us signs and judgements through natural events and catastrophes. Further, the author suggests that the illogical concept of the mind having a continuing existence after the death of the brain arose as part of human evolution. There is an implication in the book that the evolution of these features in the brain has been important for development of the species. – RH Brown

Chapter 1 – The History of an Illusion

As an atheistic psychological scientist, who studies religion, he wants to know the origin of the ideas about a God offering us protection and promising not to hurt us as long as we pay up in moral currency. Could it really be possible that these ideas are innate? Is there perhaps something like a God instinct?

The author considers how we can never really see the mind of another person – we can hear words they say and get some idea of emotions through the expression on their faces, but we never really look into the mind itself. He then examines the work of a variety of people who have tried to understand how the mind of various animals – chimpanzees apes and others – operates and he develops the “theory of mind”.

He quotes the movie the red balloon, in which a young boy and indeed the audience watching this movie begin to see the balloon, an inanimate object, take on a personality and we are very sad when rough boys kill it by sticking a needle into it. It is clear that humans have the ability to develop emotional feelings towards inanimate objects – cars and other things. Maybe we have created a personality for a supernatural entity we call God?

The author suggests that the exotic cross-cultural religious beliefs are really presenting God as another mind – one with emotions, beliefs, knowledge, understanding and perhaps intentions? Thus theologians are really just playing the role of gods translators and every holy book ever written is merely a detailed psychoanalysis of God?

Further we might feel that God “wilfully” created us as individuals “wants” us to behave in particular ways, “observes” and “knows” about our otherwise private actions, “communicates” messages to us in code through natural events, and “intends” to meet us after we die. These ideas would have been felt by our Pleistocene ancestors (10,000 or more years ago).

This notion of God as an illusion is a radical idea. It raises the question about God as an autonomous independent agent that lives outside human brain cells, instead of a phantom cast out upon the world by our species own particular evolved theory of mind. Or did God create the human theory of mind with the evolution of the human brain from bestial animals.

Chapter 2 – A Life without Purpose

Charles Darwin while writing “On the Origin of Species” (1859) felt a little uncomfortable that he along with all humanity might be the result of blind chance. In fact he was expressing views as a “deist” – belief in an intelligent
God who created the world but exerts no causal influence over natural phenomena. The concept of “theory of mind” as a psychological specialisation of the human brain had not been developed.

Jean-Paul Sartre believed there was no God and hence metaphysical meaning is only a mirage. This frees us to define ourselves as we please – God has not fettered us to any particular function, nor has he selfishly obligated us to preordained tasks. We decide who we are on humanistic schools. Thus Sartre believed people would ultimately choose good over evil.

God according to Sartre, doesn’t endow each man with a prewritten underlying purpose. Purpose is a human construct. The author of the current book (Gene Ber) doesn’t agree with Sartre on this point, he posits that we are only as free as our genes are pliable and to our prior experiences permit.

Sartre’s message was well accepted in his day in France, but today many books and presentations have reignited the notion of God as creator – for example Rick Warren has written a spiritual manual “The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?” (2002) with the central message that God created you for a special function to satisfy His demands. This general message has been widely accepted throughout the world.

Modern atheists have turned to mechanistic principles of evolution when countering the religious majority. Richard Dawkins is one person who has strongly presented that idea. Dawkins has pressed the argument that there is no specific meaning to life and indeed in his view the question is meaningless.

However many people, even if atheist, can’t easily shake off a curiosity about some meaning to life. It’s an itchy rash that science can’t seem to scratch away. The real mystery lies not in why we are here on this earth; but why this “purpose-of-life question” is so seductively recalcitrant in the face of logical science.

Teleo-functional thinking involves the idea that things exist to perform some function. For example in the case of religion many believers reason that human beings are here “for” some divine purpose.

Young people may be taught the ideas of teleo-functional thinking and they may be taught to believe that the purpose in life is to fight for God or Allah up to the point that their special purpose may be to operate as a suicide bomber. The author quotes a remark from Barack Obama in which he says that when considering some action he often has a conversation with his inner voice to tell him when he is morally on track or off track.

Teleo-functioning also tempts us into thinking that we should behave in certain ways because that’s what we were made to do by God’s moral intentions. With the theory of mind we have the capacity to ponder, squabble about, and kill each other over what God intended or didn’t intend for us to be doing.

Owing to our theory of mind and specifically to our undisciplined teleological reasoning we tend to see human existence in intentional terms. Our cognitive evolution leads us to believe in the authority of God that created us to act in specific ways because He knew best. He, it is believed, would become disappointed and angry if we fail to go along with his rules for human nature.

**Chapter 3 – Signs, Signs, Everywhere Signs**

Many religious people see the hand of God taking some physical action as a means of asserting His authority or giving a message to the human race. The book gives an example of a preacher in America saying that hurricane Katrina was sent by God as a message against homosexual people in Los Angeles and also against America’s
invasion in Iraq. Another example is given of Asian people not accepting the Christian God so that He sent a tsunami that killed many people. Both of these and other cases effectively claim some sort of personality for God.

The book then discusses how autistic people might try to interpret God’s personality through signs. It is suggested at this might be an interesting example of the human theory of mind, since autistic people are generally rather insensitive to the feelings of other humans.

Alief is a psychological and philosophical term used to describe people who have unrealistic feelings, even though they know them to be incorrect. For example a person standing on the glass floored skywalk over the Grand Canyon does not believe she is in any danger, yet she will feel insecure – similarly for a patron at a horror movie. The mental phenomena of alief can also explain why a person, who does not normally believe in messages from God, may occasionally have an emotional reaction to some occurrence that he/she experiences. The author gives an example of hearing wind-chimes and momentarily feeling that they were giving a message from his recently deceased mother.

The book mentions the Westboro Baptist church, which has a “delightful” website called GodHatesFags. It has regular postings of international tragedies and deaths, claiming these to be signs from God.

A British aristocrat – Francis Egerton (8th Earl of Bridgewater) left a considerable fortune to the Royal Society to study God’s purpose for the world. Seven naturalists wrote theses; one William Kirby claimed that God had placed the natural world before man for his interpretation. Most of the naturalists saw no conflict between their scientific study and their faith. This concept continues in modern times, as in Michael Dowd’s book “thank God for evolution” (2009); a great illustration of the theory of mind. The John Templeton Foundation follows this line – scientific developments claimed to reveal God, even though there is no evidence, only conviction.

Chapter 4 Curiously Immortal

For a psychological scientist the question of whether or not there is an afterlife is not central, but instead why this question arises at all. A question of what happens to us after we die is a staple in popular culture. In nearly every case it is assumed that we are more than our physical bodies – that our bodies contain an “essence” or a ”soul” that unhinges itself after death.

The only real mystery to the question of life after death is why are we so convinced that there is a life after death. After all the brain like all other organs ceases to operate when the body dies and the mind is what the brain does – why do we wonder where the mind goes after the body is dead?

The author’s own psychological research leads him to believe that these illogical beliefs, rather than resulting from religion or terror of nonexistence, are inevitable by-products of our theory of mind.

The reality is that once the cerebral cortex ceases to operate the brain will have as much cognition as a dead lettuce. Imagining what it is like is difficult. We’ve never experienced anything without consciousness. In essence it is like the nothingness before our own conception.

The theory of mind allows us to think of some mindful “essence” of the individual that is somehow curiously immortal. Experiments with children in Spain some from Catholic education and some from secular education, showed that regardless of education children up to age 5 or 6 believed in an afterlife, but beyond that age the belief depended on the cultural background – Catholics more likely to believe in an afterlife.
The simplest of all possible syllogisms:

the mind is what the brain does;
the brain stops working at death;
therefore, the subjective feeling that the mind survives death is a psychological illusion operating in the brains of the living.

To argue against this requires a demonstration that one or both of the premises is incorrect. It seems that many people try to deny the first premise; most accept the second.

Evolved human cognition – in particular theory of mind – is directly responsible for the illusions of purpose and destiny, further feeling of other worldly communicative messages and finally that our mental lives will persist after complete neurological death.

So far the book hasn’t considered the much asked question “why do bad things happen to good people?” The next chapter examines that, quoting many examples.

Chapter 5 – When God Throws People off Bridges

The author discusses the collapse of bridges in Yarmouth (1845), Oklahoma (2002) and San Luis Rey (1927) involving the death of children and good people. In the case of the San Luis Rey rope bridge, which killed five people, a resident monk Brother Juniper investigated the lives of the five people to see if there was evidence to justify their horrible end – in other words to detect the mind of a just and rational God, but he found nothing and expressed frustration at his failure. However his investigation rattled some of the townspeople of Lima (the location of the bridge) who searched their hearts and it was reported that some servant girls returned bracelets they had stolen from their mistresses.

It seems our minds have a great appetite for unravelling some meaning from these ambiguous “messages”.

Our ancestors sought causes that make things happen and having observed that many natural phenomena could be explained – such as sexual intercourse resulted in the production of children and planting of seeds yielded crops – they felt that other phenomena could be explained by an act of God.

Many scientists, including Richard Feynman, have suggested that as we have more scientific explanation for the operation of the universe, there is less need to invoke God. However Feynman suggests God can be invoked to explain those things we don’t understand, i.e. The God of the Gaps is useful.

The question of why do bad things happen to good people is thought to indicate that God’s moralistic logic is different to ours.

Every humans society that has been studied by anthropologists has seen uncontrollable tragedies as being caused by some mindful supernatural agent – such as God, or a disgruntled ancestor, or a tetchy witch. Often thought to result from some wrong we have done.

In many television shows and novels we expect the story to have some sort of satisfying end. The TV series “The Sopranos” ended with a scene that suddenly just cut to black. This upset many viewers, but as Bering points out, people often think of their own lives as a story, and some think that God is writing the plot. The end is inevitably a final cut to black.
Even many atheists suggest that random events which happen to them in their lives show them a message relating to how they have behaved in the past or how they should behave in future. All of this does not show us as suckers weak, ridiculous or even foolish. It just makes us human; at least in the evolutionary sense of the term.

Chapter 6 – God as Adaptive Illusion

For millions of years before the evolution of theory of mind, our human ancestors were just like other social primitives – namely, impulsive, hedonistic and uninhibited. This isn’t a character judgement against them; it just worked for them in maximising their reproductive success.

We can get some idea of the behaviour of early humans by studying chimpanzees. It is clear that they have no shame in their public sexual activities – they don’t care what others think about them. Without a theory of mind they lack the capacity to care.

Modern humans, unfortunately, are not as lucky as chimpanzees. Owing to our evolved theory of mind, other people’s thoughts about us weigh heavily on our minds. You may claim you don’t care, but most people suffer immensely when perceived negative aspects of their identity (moral offences, questionable intentions, embarrassing foibles or physical defects) are made known to others. In fact we are the only species for which negative social evaluation appraisals can lead to shame-induced suicide.

No other species diets, wears toupees, gets boob implants, bleaches teeth or brandishes Gucci handbags. This is because these vanities require a theory of mind, which other species don’t have.

The other awkward thing about theory of mind is the language – if someone observes behaviour that you might be embarrassed about, they might tell other people. This can result in ostracism or even execution. Humans are very prone to gossip – spreading stories that may go in all directions throughout the community in the world.

From early development of religions there has been a belief that some “other” is always watching all our actions. The unshakeable belief in God, the interpretation of “signs” from unexpected natural events, the misfortunes that are implied to result from some forgotten moral breach and the concept that God maybe watching has deeply influenced our mode of thought.

The cognitive illusion of an, ever present, keenly observant God has worked for our genes and that is enough to have kept the illusion vividly alive in human brains.

Chapter 7 – And Then You Die

Creationists have long held that Darwin “recanted” his theory of revolution on his deathbed – the author points out this doesn’t seem to be correct. However it does seem that even the staunchest atheists may come to God when they are sick and in pain.

Our evolutionary ancestors required a fictitious moral watcher of their animalistic impulses. But what happens now that we know the truth about God and about our “souls” and about the “afterlife”.

Voltaire famously said “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” (1768, during the French Enlightenment). Today we have many video cameras and other things watching us. We are the first generation to
be confronted directly by the full scientific weight of an argument that renders a personal God both unnecessary and highly unlikely.

We are all going to die sooner or later. Unlike all of our ancestors we are now reasonably well-informed by psychological science that the end of the brain is the end of cognition. So what’s it all for? In the end that’s probably a false reading. But never mind the mind of God, we can live for each other here and now, before it’s too late, sympathetically sharing snapshots from inside our still conscious heads – 7.2 billion of them. If you choose to ignore this precautionary tale there will be no hell to pay, only missed opportunities and then you die.

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