The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life, by Jesse Bering. W. W. Norton and Company. 2011. 252pp. Hb. 26.95. ISBN-13: 9780393072990; Pb. \$16.95. ISBN-13: 9780393341263.

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There is a universal human tendency to believe in gods. Why is that and is it irrational? Jesse Bering writes a book that balances between being entertaining and accessible to the general public, whilst being informative enough to satisfy the academic society. As suggested by the title, the author believes that there is a belief instinct, something innate and adaptive that makes us all natural born believers. Until now, nothing sounds like a new story. What makes the book interesting and fresh is the cognitive and evolutionary mechanisms the author describes as the causal factors of *The Belief Instinct*.

In the first chapter, entitled *The History of an Illusion*, Bering travels us to the history of the conception of the idea of Theory of Mind (ToM); going back and forth, from Gorgias to Nicholas Humphrey (2007), from the movie *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and its subjective universe to Daniel Dennett's "intentional stance" (1996), and from Fritz Heider's and Mary-Ann Simmel's developmental research (1944) to Frans de Waal's (1999) and Roger Fouts' primatology research (2004), we get to know about our social brains, their evolutionary history, and about how god is in our mind as a result of this super-active ToM (the ability of attributing mental states to the others and understanding that the others have the same ability).

Having the above in mind, the author in the second chapter, which has the sad but true title *A Life without Purpose*, directs our attention to the purpose of life; no, he does not try to find if there is any purpose in life, instead he tries to answer why we, humans, are so enticed by this question: "What is our purpose in life?" Again, with examples from emotional (W. James 1892) and developmental psychology (D. Kelemen 2004), he demonstrates the irrational line of thought of attaching purpose to everything in a teleo-functional way. We do think like this, but that is not "our mistake", he claims. It is natural selection that favors ToM and as a result of that we end up believing in intelligent creators and gods. Irrationality though does not come alone and this cognitive illusion that makes us believe in destiny is not as innocent as it sounds as it brings with it wrong meaning attribution and fundamentalism.

In chapter 3 (*Signs, Signs, Everywhere Signs*), we learn how people are searching for signs everywhere. The cognition that triggers ToM and makes us see an intention into everything around us, is susceptible to irrational thinking. But not only that; if signs-seeing is the natural thing normal brains do then, Bering (and Simon Baron-Cohen 2008) argue that, brain disorders should tell us a different kind of story. Indeed, experimental studies of clinical psychology, with autistic or schizophrenic subjects, have shown that in these cases we have under or over-signs seeing.

In the next chapter (*Curiously Immortal*), Bering explains how our ToM creates one more illusion, this time about death. The main question to be answered here is why we even ask the question if there is life after death. The answer he provides is once again: Theory of Mind. The irrational (or illogical as Bering calls it) belief in life after death is a by-product of the fact that we cannot easily imagine what it is like to be dead. The hypothesis he offers simply states that we cannot switch off the illusions of purpose and destiny, of encrypted messages behind everything we encounter, and of intuitions of life after death.

“Life isn’t fair. But it isn’t unfair either. It just is” he writes in chapter 5 with the title *When God Throws People off Bridges*. The main point here is that people tend to ask the *why* question, and more specifically *why to us*. In order to answer the *why* question we need to attribute responsibility to someone else; to some intentional agent; someone like god. Furthermore, humans have a tendency and are naturally selected to like causal explanations, even-though causality here should be understood in its very broad sense. Both of the above explanations, according to Bering, make god a very intuitive agent.

Adaptation or by-product? This is the next question Bering aims to answer. And his answer is: god is an adaptive illusion. It is an instinct. But how did he come to this conclusion? His argumentation starts from the fact that we have an evolved ToM. Subsequently, he is talking about another evolved mechanism: language; a powerful, symbolic way of communication. These two mechanisms are information boosters. In other words, we know that other people have thoughts, we can handle that well, and we like to share them. It is important for our survival. So, how does god fit into this evolutionary picture? Bering claims that the feeling of being observed by some supernatural agent makes us moral. The question here is what is the mechanism? Is it the supernatural or just to be watched? He then carefully addresses the problem of religion as an adaptation or as a by-product, talking about the adaptive value of specific psychological mechanisms and not of religion as such. Our evolved cognitive-emotional capacities make us susceptible to different illusions, and what we may call religion just includes some of them.

Bering states that he never understood why “so many skeptics are intent on demonstrating their immunity to irrational or quasi-religious thought.” At the same time, this is exactly what this book does and what science should do: reveal to us our irrationalities, our illusions, help us to understand them and be able to predict them (Ariely 2008), and maybe avoid them. Maybe we are not immune to irrational thoughts, since they are of human nature, but we can predict them.

The book is a comprehensive and complete representation of Bering’s own research on children’s perception of god and belief in supernatural agents. Furthermore, the book offers a good balance between theory and experimental research, which is important when the case subject is so broad as belief in supernatural. Bering’s way of writing is entertaining and at the same time does not bend its academic standards. Its applicability spans various fields as there are chapters of interest to anyone from psychologists to philosophers and from cognitive scientists to scholars of religion. The chapters are thoroughly written and friendly to read, particularly the description of the experiments. The overall impression of the book is one of creative scholarship, and the most important aspect of it is that it has managed to achieve a significant goal, that is, to popularize the discussion about aspects of what we call religion, belief in gods and superstition.