

Cognitive Science of Religion

Lecture 5

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What is Cognitive Science?

- It is the interdisciplinary approach to the study of how the human mind works. In attempts to understand the processes in the mind to explain human behaviour.
- It draws insight from psychology, philosophy, anthropology, evolutionary science, neuroscience, linguistics, and artificial intelligence.

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What is Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)?

- It is the interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of the cognitive processes related to religious beliefs and behaviour.
- It brings together evolutionary studies of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and anthropology of religion.
- The first use of the term "cognitive science of religion" was introduced by Justin L. Barrett in 2000.

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Important Questions within CSR and the contributing authors

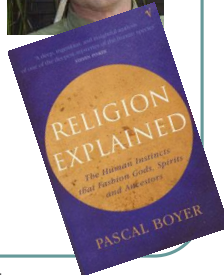
- Is the human mind hardwired for belief in supernatural agents?
- How did this hardwired condition evolve? ([Pascal Boyer provides some anthropological conjectures](#)).
- How does this hardwired condition for belief benefit the human species?
- If belief is not a learned behaviour as CSR claims then are children natural believers? ([Justin Barrett answers this and other questions through experiments](#))

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Pascal Boyer

- is the Henry Luce Professor of Individual and Collective Memory. He teaches in the Psychology and Anthropology departments at Washington University, in St Louis, Missouri. His work centers on questions concerning the understanding of culture and its scientific investigation as it relates to the mind and the brain. Most of his research is focused on the cognitive processes involved in acquiring, storing and transmitting cultural knowledge, norms and preferences.



Boyer, Religion Explained

Boyer, Religion Explained: a Summary

1. Intellectual Scenarios
2. Emotional Scenarios
3. Social Scenarios
4. Religion (not) as a Cognitive Illusion

Boyer, Religion Explained

1 Intellectual Scenarios

- × **Humans created religion to explain puzzling phenomena:**
natural – like rain, thunder;
mental – like dreams, spirits;
origin of things - evil and suffering.

✓ Belief is not just passive acceptance of what others say. But the fact is that human mind has a way of selecting what it finds plausible.

Boyer, Religion Explained

Intellectual Scenarios – Counter evidence

- It is not true that the human mind always tries to fill the “gaps” (in explanation) with some speculations. Human mind only accepts explanations that are plausible based on its inference systems.
- Religious concepts too have their own inference systems.
- Evans-Pritchard: if a house collapses due to attack by white ants (immediate cause), what is the human wonders: why at this time, to this person... the answer to the latter questions could lie in supernatural causes.

Boyer, Religion Explained

2 Emotional Scenarios

- × **Religion only serves to deal with mortality and angst.**

✓ Our emotional programmes are an aspect of our evolutionary heritage, which may explain how they affect religious concepts.

Boyer, Religion Explained

Emotional scenarios: Counter-evidences

- Religious concepts do not always provide reassurance or comfort. They also create fear and guilt, for instance!
- Reassuring religion is not always found only in places where life is significantly dangerous.
- (New Age mysticism says that all people have enormous “power” (consider the book: *The Secret*)... and this belief is in the secure and affluent society!)

Boyer, Religion Explained

3 Social Scenarios

- × **Religion holds society together. It was invented to perpetuate a particular social order. Fear of God is a better incentive to moral behaviour.**

✓ The study of the social mind can show us why people do have beliefs about morality and how they are related to the supernatural.

Boyer, Religion Explained

Social scenarios: Counter-evidences

- Religion cannot be explained by the need to keep society together.
- Society is product of the social brain.
- “Religion does not really support morality, it is people’s moral intuitions that make religion plausible” (p.193).
- Certain moral principles go beyond religion.
- Gods make moral principles *intelligible*, not *compelling*

Boyer, Religion Explained

4 Cognitive Illusion

- ✗ **Religion was created (by the powers that be) to encourage sleep of reason**

✓ Belief is not just passive acceptance of what others say. But the fact is that human mind has a way of selecting what it finds plausible.

Boyer, Religion Explained

Intellectual Illusion?

- Beliefs are not “mental negligence” (p.344), but part of nature of human mind to work with counter-intuitive features in ontological categories. The mind has tremendous capacity to register and recall, “counter-intuitions”.
- We cannot say some people invented religions. Religious concepts are highly complex to be invented by a group of people. Religion is a composite reality. (p.370)
- Even if invented, people would not pass on the belief if not plausible!
- We make a lot of conclusions in daily life just because they are plausible, not because we have clear proofs of it.

Boyer, Religion Explained

Minimal Counter-intuitiveness

- The human mind has tremendous capacity to register and recall, what Boyer calls, “minimal counter-intuitiveness”. ‘Counter-intuitive categories’ include “information contradicting some information provided by ontological categories” (Boyer, 2001, p.74).
- At the same time, in dealing with counter-intuitive categories the human mind has its own logic. While conceiving a tree that can talk, seems logical, a tree that gives birth to an animal seems an exaggeration, and hence unacceptable. This logic is *minimal counter-intuitiveness* (Eg. Tree can talk, but may not give birth to animals).

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Hypersensitive Agency Detection

How are counter-intuitive categories extracted from human epistemic experience?

- The human mind is like a workshop; it makes use of different tools. One of the tools that it uses in dealing with religious beliefs is what Barrett calls, the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (Barrett, J., 2004; Barrett, J.L., 2007). It is the ability of the human mind to recognise intentional and non-intentional cause in events in the world of phenomena.
- If we see the branches of the tree moving, by observing the patterns, we know if the movement is caused by the wind, or an animal, or another human being. Originally, this was a device to protect other human agents from possible harm.

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Hypersensitive Agency Detection 2

- The hypersensitive agency detection device is capable of delivering false-positives; that is, when there is only a non-intentional agent, for the sake of safety of humans, the mind may detect it to be an intentional agent (Guthrie, 1992, as cited by Barrett, 2007, p.5).
- This hypersensitivity could account for the genesis and persistence of human beliefs about a world populated by invisible agents, both benevolent and malevolent: tree spirits, demons, gods, angels, ghosts and so on.

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Justin Barrett: Divine Epistemic Access:

- Available ethnographic data further demonstrate that belief in the existence of supernatural agents is also accompanied by an awareness that these agents possess a privileged access to human mental states. This is what is called the Divine Epistemic Access (Barrett, 2007).
- Studies made on children demonstrate that even before they acquire a theological system, they acknowledge that the divine mind is capable of having access to their own mind, unlike any other human agent (Rickert & Barrett, 2005; Knight, Sousa, Barrett, & Atran, 2004). This divine knowledge is perceived to be infallible. Further, it is no particular problem to children that ‘God’ is unseen.

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Moral Connotation of Divine Epistemic Access:

- Divine epistemic access has a strong moral association. Children know that God does not harbour false beliefs.
- They make a distinction between how human agents know things, and how God does (Bering & Johnson, p.121).
- Boyer (2001): People do not associate God's knowledge with trivial matters. No one theologises on whether God knows what is in the refrigerator of their household. However, if they have the severed head of an enemy in the refrigerator then they are aware that God knows what is in there.

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Evolutionary advantage of these beliefs

- Evolutionary psychologists argue that the human mind evolved to accommodate these beliefs.
- These beliefs were duly passed on to children, in a system of reward and punishment, to avoid social exclusion or death.
- The punishments were perceived to be borne by the transgressing individual or the innocent community.
- Thus, the fear of adverse effects readily encouraged confessions of covert actions and secret intentions. As a result, the human mind got wired for divine epistemic access.

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Are children natural believers?

One of the claims of recent research in cognitive science of religion is that children, at least by the age of seven, have a concept of God that goes beyond a merely anthropomorphic image; they are able to acknowledge that this supernatural agent has access to their thoughts and intentions; the supernatural agent is considered to have a Privileged Epistemic Access that is quite different from the way human agents know.

Rebekah Rickert and Justin L. Barrett, "Do you see what I see? Young children's assumptions about God's perceptual abilities", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15 (2005) 283-295;

Nicola Knight, Paulo Sousa, Justin L. Barrett, and Scott Atran, "Children's attributions of beliefs to humans and God: cross-cultural evidence", *Cognitive Science*, 28 (2004) 117-126.

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Evaluation

- The valuable contribution of cognitive science of religion is the insight on the propensity of the human mind for dealing with supernatural agents, and their ability for access to the human mind. Science has the expertise on nature. These insights on nature serve as a platform for further understanding religious phenomena and truth-claims.

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