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The role of absorption in making God real

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Absorption is a central term in Tanya Luhrmann's *How God Becomes Real*. Absorption, we read, is “a human capacity—an orientation—that can be both innate and trained” (p. 58). It is a “capacity to be immersed in the world of the senses, inner and outer—and those who have a talent for it and who train to develop it are more likely to experience invisible others as present” (p. 60). The Tellegen Absorption Scale measures “a character trait, a disposition for having moments of total attention that somehow fully engage all of one's attentional capacities—perceptual, imaginative, conceptual, even the way one holds and moves one's body” (p. 70). Absorption, we learn on page 120, is a proclivity.

It goes without saying that this capacity, disposition, or proclivity must be distinguished from the mental states, the “moments of total attention,” to which it may give rise. Luhrmann seems to be aware of this, because she compares the two (if I understand her correctly) to hypnotizability and trance respectively (p. 75). And yet, in the same paragraph, she distinguishes between “what the scale identifies” and “the ability that practice trains,” thus suggesting that mental state and “ability that practice trains” are the same. This is odd, for what is the difference between an ability and a capacity? Elsewhere, she says that she has “a proclivity for absorption” (p. 61). We must assume that this does not refer to a *proclivity for a proclivity* and cannot but conclude that the word *absorption* here, for once, refers to the resulting state. This is not however explicitly stated. Indeed, the state that certain people are disposed to reach (the “moments of total attention”) receives virtually no attention in the book.¹

I propose to use the expression *trait absorption* to refer to the proclivity measured by the Tellegen Absorption Scale, and *state absorption* to designate the mental state that it may give rise to.² As pointed out already, state absorption receives next to no attention in *How God Becomes Real*. It may yet be worth our while to give it some thought.

We know that state absorption may consist of “moments of total attention”. We also learn that one of the results of trait absorption is that “concentration states [are] deeper” (p. 62). It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that state absorption is, or is accompanied by, deep concentration. This simple and uncontroversial observation allows the following reflections.

One defining feature of concentration is that, by focusing on one thing, it excludes or weakens others. These other “things” can be sensory perceptions (e.g., sounds in our surroundings) or mental associations (e.g., memories, distracting thoughts). Many scholars have observed that our awareness of the world is deeply “colored” by associated mental contents, not all of which are normally accessible to consciousness.³ Consider now the following. The concentration that is, or accompanies, state absorption excludes or weakens not just conscious perceptions and associations with mental contents, it also weakens associations with certain mental contents that are not normally accessible to consciousness. Unavoidably, the result will be a changed awareness of the world, which may exceptionally even be experienced as a different world altogether.

What I propose is that depth of concentration is variable and can reach in certain circumstances (and especially in people with trait absorption) far greater depths than it does ordinarily.⁴ This simple assumption accounts for some of the phenomena discussed in Luhrmann's book. She observes, for example, that for people who practiced magic "their immediate experience became different; what they felt through their senses was not the same as it had been" (p. 64).

With this in mind let us turn to the following important paragraph in Luhrmann's book (p. 76):

At the heart of the religious impulse lies the capacity to imagine a world beyond the one we have before us. To do so requires a narrative, but it also requires the capacity to hold in abeyance the matter-of-fact expectation that the world of the senses is all there is. That is why absorption and inner sense cultivation are central to religion.

Absorption in this passage no doubt refers to *trait absorption* (even though this expression is not used in the book, neither here nor elsewhere). However, if we bring *state absorption* into the picture, this same paragraph sheds new light on religion, as will be clear from the following.

The argument that narrative is required to make sense of most if not all religions is, in my opinion, most convincing. However, narrative does not explain "the capacity to hold in abeyance the matter-of-fact expectation that the world of the senses is all there is." State absorption, on the other hand, does just that. State absorption takes us to "a world beyond the one we have before us." It is true that state absorption by itself does not fill this other world with the beings—gods, etc.—that religions place in it. But it does tell us that this other world is near us, or even in us. It also convinces us that this other world is real, as real as anything else we experience, if not more so. State absorption does not make God real, but it provides him (or them) with a solid place of residence. The paracosm is real (i.e., not imagined), but different religions decide who are allowed to inhabit it.⁵

Notes

1. Also, a recent article on absorption by Luhrmann and others (Lifshitz et al., 2019) deals with what I call *trait absorption* and virtually ignores what I call *state absorption* (see below).
2. I am not alone in making this distinction; see, e.g., Glicksohn and Dotan Ben-Soussan (2020).
3. Remember: "[I]t is generally accepted in neuroscience today [that] the brain performs a wide range of *mental* functions that do not enter consciousness" (Solms, 2021, p. 80). These further include concepts and predictions (Solms, 2021, p. 142).
4. See, e.g., Mohr (2018). No generally accepted scale to measure this depth has been developed as yet.
5. For more about state absorption and religion, see Bronkhorst (2017, 2021).

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