5

The imaginary inner inside the cognitive science of religion

Christopher Hoyt

5.1 Introduction

As Justin Barrett notes, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) appears to be converging on the thesis that because of our evolved faculties of mind, human beings are predisposed to believe in gods and other supernatural phenomena.[1] Most CSR theorists fall into one of two camps: those who hold that religious beliefs are a by-product of cognitive systems evolved for other purposes, and those who believe that religious beliefs and practices themselves serve some adaptive need. But virtually all CSR theorists agree that religious belief emerges out of mental faculties that evolved long ago in human history and that the central project of CSR is to describe those faculties and the processes by which they produced religious belief and practice. From a Wittgensteinian point of view, CSR appears to be deeply misguided and confused. The causal explanations of religious belief promised by CSR are not really suited to answer the questions at hand, and the mental faculties posited by CSR are ontologically unfit to do the work claimed of them. To understand religious belief and practice, Wittgenstein's philosophy suggests, we are better off employing entirely different modes of explanation. Real understanding of religious beliefs mainly comes out of perspicuous representations of religious phenomena, not instrumental accounts of their underlying causes.

Why are Wittgenstein and CSR so far apart? The question is a good one since both Wittgenstein and CSR seem to begin with roughly the same naturalistic view of religion. In his 'Remarks on Frazier's *Golden Bough*', Wittgenstein consistently urges us to see that religion is an 'extension of instinct' and that religious life and language evolved through a natural-historical process.[2] It is the combination of our animal nature and our historical past that explains the formation of particular religious phenomena, Wittgenstein suggests. Religious ritual, says Wittgenstein, springs from the awe and reverence naturally inspired by fire, sex, birth, death and the many other phenomena important in human life around which rituals are built. Rituals might be called 'instinct-actions', he argues, comparable to beating the ground in spontaneous expression of anger.[3] Wittgenstein writes:

> [The] characteristic feature of the awakening mind of man is precisely the fact that a phenomenon comes to have meaning for him. One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal. . . . That is, one could begin a book on anthropology by saying: When one examines the life and behavior of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion, etc., etc., etc., men also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions.[4]

Our ritual responses rise up naturally in response to our context. A forest-dwelling people that is 'united in a community of life' with its trees might worship the oak, for example, and 'If fleas developed a rite', Wittgenstein continues, 'it would be based on the dog'.[5] However, there is no room in Wittgenstein's philosophy for the sort of psychological explanation of religion that CSR theorists offer. To understand why, let us focus on the work of one particular CSR theorist, Pascal Boyer. Given our general interest, Boyer's work is suitably representative while the relevance of Wittgenstein to CSR will only become apparent when we look at specific problems and theories.

5.2 Perspective posing as science

Boyer is a CSR theorist of the first variety, viz. those who believe that religious beliefs are the byproducts of cognitive systems that evolved for other purposes.[6] Just as the brain evolved to support language and we got music as a happy side effect,[7] Boyer maintains that sundry cognitive systems developed to yield a wide variety of evolutionary advantages and only accidentally gave us religion as well. For example, our anxiety about corpses probably has its roots in a fear of contagion, but it is also the foundation of burial rituals.[8] To take another example, consider that evolution provided us with a host of moral feelings to support social cooperation – guilt felt for cheating others, pride for helping and so on. According to Boyer, one function of the concept of *god* is to justify or substantiate our intuitive moral feelings, to offer us a way of rationalizing those feelings.[9] In this and many other cases, our religious ideas and practices are parasitic upon prior cognitive systems.

Not all CSR is hostile to religion, but a lot of it is, and Boyer's condemnatory view is largely representative of the field. Boyer regards religious beliefs and practices as the effects of mental blunders, of cognitive misfires. For example, Boyer argues that gods are sometimes introduced into rituals to satisfy an instinctive but misguided yearning to posit agency and causality where they don't actually exist. Thus, people are prone to the false belief that their ritual actions can have causal effects in the world via the mediate agency of the gods.[10] Why are people prone to believe such obvious nonsense? Boyer blames our evolved *inference systems*. These are the supposed mechanisms of mind that produce our thoughts and feelings. According to Boyer, there are two overactive inference systems to blame for the false idea that rituals can invoke divine causes. First, the *causal inference system* inclines us to see causal connections where none exist. Rituals look like things that have effects, and due to the burden of an impetuous *causal inference system*, we are apt to see cause–effect relationships that

simply are not there. Second, when faced with significant events such as illness or death that we cannot otherwise explain, we are likely to assume that a malicious actor must be to blame. Boyer writes:

> What matters to rituals and makes them relevant is that one construes the social effects as the *result* of the actions prescribed. This inevitably creates a causal gap. Because of the massive salience of agency in our mental systems, most humans fill this gap with concepts of agents.[11]

In other words, the belief that gods are the causal agents at work in ritual amplifies the more basic mistake of thinking that rituals have any causal power at all. While science offers us a way to overcome such bungles and see the world aright, religious believers are the epistemological victims of their animal instincts.

The grand picture behind all of Boyer's work is the idea that the 'mind is a complex set of biological machines that produce all sorts of thoughts. For many thoughts there is no reasonable reason, as it were, except that they are inevitable results of the way the machines work'.[12] The machinery that Boyer imagines operates below the limits of consciousness in the 'mental basement'[13] where inference systems continuously calculate, scheme, judge and perform other cognitive functions but only reveal themselves to our conscious minds through their products. In social contexts, for example, your unconscious mind continuously performs 'precise calculations' about the intentions and trustworthiness of others, according to Boyer. Yet you consciously experience only 'vague concepts' like 'this person is "likeable," [and] this group is "friendly"'. Here and elsewhere, we suffer a 'lack of access to inference systems' that guide our actions, and instead consciously experience only emotions and intuitions.[14] Boyer's primary aim is to lay bare the precise workings of these unconscious inference systems by making use of the 'experimental resources of cognitive science'.[15]

Boyer's reductive and dismissive account of religion is rooted in the particular inference systems that he posits as the causes of belief. Take, for example, Boyer's account of burial and funerary rites. These are rooted, says Boyer, in the confused thoughts and feelings we have when we see corpses, especially those of loved ones. Our reactions are explained, says Boyer, by the inconsistent behaviour of at least three distinct inference systems:

(1) The *intuitive psychology system*, which 'creates automatically a particular description of what a situation is like as seen by the people we interact with'.
(2) The *animacy system*, which 'is activated by the sight of any object that moves in a purposeful manner. It produces expectations and inferences about animals and persons'.
(3) The *person-file* system, 'a kind of mental Rolodex or *Who's Who* of the person's social environment'.[16]

When we look upon the corpse of a beloved, says Boyer, our complicated reactions are explained by the inconsistent outputs of these three systems. The animacy system is 'quite clear' that the dead are 'ex-persons' without goals, etc. On the other hand,

the 'person-file system just cannot "shut off"'. It keeps producing inferences about the deceased as though he were still alive. 'A symptom of this incoherence is the hackneyed phrase we have all heard or used at funerals: "He would have liked it this way."'[17] We are inclined to respect the wishes of the dead, then, because our inference systems are inadequately evolved to handle the sight of a corpse. The *person-file system* is clever in how it deals with the living, but it can't keep up with the *animacy system* when it comes to dealing with the dead. According to Boyer, the religious belief that the soul can survive the death of the body derives from this same confused, inconsistent pattern of inferences going on in our unconscious minds. The 'confused impression' that the corpse maintains a shade of life is the by-product of the unfortunate confluence of our 'incompatible intuitions about dead persons'.[18]

Boyer's comment that you are *confused* if you say about a deceased loved one that 'he would have wanted it that way' is strange. The expression, when used sincerely, is so clearly one of piety that it's hard to stomach or to understand Boyer's insensitivity. I don't mean merely that Boyer has been impolite, but that he seems blind to the actual meaning of the expression. If man is a ceremonial animal whose mind is awake to meanings, Boyer's response sounds pretty sleepy. A grieving atheist wanting to express his love and his sorrow might explain his choice to serve drinks at his father's wake by saying, 'he would have wanted it that way'. The son need not be confused, there need not be even a small part of him that believes his father will judge or punish him. The words are an expression of sorrow and reverence that have little or nothing to do with any specific beliefs about the causal or cognitive powers of the dead. The meaning of the expression might be better explained by comparing it to the idiosyncratic gesture of respect made by Schubert's brother upon his death. Wittgenstein writes:

> Recall that after Schubert's death his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave such pieces, consisting of a few bars, to his favorite pupils. This act, as a sign of piety, is just as understandable to us as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores that too would be understandable as a sign of piety.[19]

The brother's gesture was one of respect and grief, not misguided magic. It was an attempt to express his love and his pain and to locate his brother's death within the context of his own life, in a manner of speaking. 'Someone who is affected by the majesty of death can give expression to this through [his manner of] . . . life', Wittgenstein remarks a little earlier in the same text.[20] The concept of a mistake has no foothold here.[21] The same thing can be said about many formal religious ceremonies. Many Jews who don't believe in an afterlife still perform funerary rites and pray for the dead.

Boyer's theory and his blindness to the religious meanings are both strongly reminiscent of James G. Frazer, who posits not three *inference systems* but two principles of magical thinking, two principles that supposedly explain the specious causal reasoning that underlies primitive religion and ritual. First, the Law of Similarity states that an action or an object tends to produce its likeness. Second, the Law of Contagion states that things once in contact tend to continue to effect

each other through action at a distance. Based on these two laws, Frazer claims to explain why so many primitive peoples believe that they can causally control the rain, for example: Russian peasants try to conjure rain by drumming out the sound of thunder; Omaha Indians spill a barrel of water near their crops in the hope of drawing water to water; Zulus evoke the tears of heaven by sacrificing a sacred bird.[22] Wittgenstein chastises Frazer for missing the real meaning of these rituals and for making them look stupid through his own misunderstanding. Were those primitives so foolish as Frazer suggests, says Wittgenstein, surely they would perform their rain dance at the beginning of the dry season and not only after it has come to cause real suffering.[23]

Whereas Frazer claims to have discovered the underlying psychological mechanisms that render natives susceptible to foolish habits of mind, Wittgenstein says that what he has actually done is to lay out a certain perspective, a way of seeing the facts at hand, but it is just one way amongst many. 'The historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development,' says Wittgenstein 'is only *one* way of assembling the data – of their synopsis'.[24] There are many ways of looking at a rain dance or at a man saying of his dead father 'he would have wanted it that way', but Frazer and Boyer insist that such occasions be regarded from just one condescending vantage from which they appear irrational. Over and over, the two disregard the perspectives that make sense of religious action in favour of a perspective that makes them look dumb. In a long passage that is particularly helpful here, Wittgenstein writes:

> The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It denotes the form of our representation, the way we look at things. . . . This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we 'see connections'. . .
>
> But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of *facts.* As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle, *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.
>
> But I can also see the evolutionary hypothesis as nothing more, as the clothing of a formal connection.[25]

In other words, the evolutionary hypothesis might take on the false appearance of natural history when its real function is to yield a particular outlook, a vantage from which to regard religious forms of life.

Boyer's proposed faculties of mind are really nothing more than the clothing of a certain outlook that is numb to religious meanings from the outset. Each of the *inference systems* that he posits is really only a metaphor in the guise of an evolutionary hypothesis. People often behave *as though* they were compelled to see things from the perspective of their fellows; people often respond to others and to objects *as though* they could not resist positing animacy; people often behave *as though* they carried

a Rolodex around inside them. These are metaphors that Boyer parades as scientific discoveries. The real value of a metaphor is to guide us to a particular way of seeing matters, and Boyer constantly applies his in the service of showing religious belief and action in the most unflattering light. Boyer encourages us to see belief in God as an exact parallel to belief in Santa Claus, for example, but he dresses his perspective in the formal clothing of an evolutionary-psychological hypothesis about the supposed cerebral processes of ontological thinking that lead to misfires that spit out beliefs in God and Santa at different moments.[26] He invites us to see belief in a judicial god as the hypostatization of our moral intuitions.[27] He invites us to see rituals as meaningless analogues to obsessive-compulsive behaviour (OCD) by postulating a single cerebral dysfunction at the core of both.[28] In these and many more cases, Boyer offers us these metaphors dressed up as evolutionary theory.

It is important to acknowledge that if we regard Boyer's *inference systems* as metaphors for tendencies in human thought and behaviour, as we should, they can be helpful. Boyer is certainly right that our evolved reactions of disgust to maggots, rotting meat and so on are related to our burial rites. It is nearly impossible to imagine a people who would simply leave their dead to decompose wherever they might fall, and Boyer is right to suggest that our common reactions are rooted in instinct. However, there are miles of open road between the fact that there we are instinctively disgusted by the smell of rotting flesh and the claim that such disgust will inevitably feed into a process of inference that will lead a person (at least a layman untrained in science) to a state of cognitive dissonance when a parent dies. When we look at that hypothesis as the dressed-up metaphor that it is, we see that its real effect is to render us blind to the aspect of the funerary rites he claims to explain. If Boyer can't follow why someone would say at a loved one's funeral that 'he would have wanted it that way', that is not because he has transcended his primitive instincts through the power of science but because he has lost touch with certain dimensions of human experience. In this regard, Boyer makes exactly the same mistake that Wittgenstein attributes to Frazer: 'Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages [whose rituals he describes]', writes Wittgenstein, 'for they are not as far removed from the understanding of a spiritual matter as a twentieth-century Englishman'.[29] Contrary to Frazer and Boyer, Wittgenstein consistently aims to help awaken our modern sensibility to the wondrous aspects of the world that serve as the grounds of religion. Why do primitives burn effigies of their enemies? Their actions are not confused attempts at magic, Wittgenstein remarks, but rather more like kissing the photograph of one's distant beloved.[30] A primitive rain dance might be no more based on false causal thinking than singing hymns in church is meant to make a congregation wealthy.

In the next two sections, I aim to clarify and deepen the points introduced so far. First, we turn to evidence from evolutionary psychology itself that Boyer's theories are conceptually confused. Briefly put, Boyer borrows terms from ordinary language that evolved to operate in social contexts and he takes them on holiday assuming from the outset that they refer to theoretical posits. Then, in the final section of the chapter, I describe in more detail and with greater nuance the nature and form of understanding the religious beliefs and practices of other people.

5.3 The snake eats its own tail

To explain the fundamental error of Boyer's psychological hypotheses I draw from insights made by evolutionary psychology itself regarding our evolved capacity to see and to talk about other minds. This strategy is intended to do double-duty: first, it elucidates why it is incoherent to construct a theory of hidden mental mechanisms using a vocabulary of ordinary language psychological terms like 'thinking' and 'calculating'. Second, it demonstrates how evolutionary psychology can be done well and provide valid insights relevant to a wide variety of subjects, including religion. Furthermore, in combination these two insights allow me to give credit where credit is due. Boyer's research can and does offer some valid insights into religious life that remain after we subtract his untenable hypotheses and explanations.

I want to borrow and expand on an idea proposed by John Canfield in a kindred attempt to triangulate Wittgenstein, evolutionary psychology and religion. Canfield meshes a speculative account of early hominid language development with current primate research to explain how pronouns like *I*, *me* and *you* likely evolved. Pondering the proto-languages of early hominids, Canfield asks how our distant ancestors might have first begun to graft systematic vocalizations onto existing patterns of social interaction. Following Wittgenstein, Canfield proposes the following model: 'Both the before-language hominid and the pre-linguistic child engage naturally in certain behavior patterns basic to speech.'[31] Instinctively, vocal gestures are integrated into these behaviour patterns. Whines, grunts and cries are basic to human life and are elicited by reasonably constant stimulus conditions. Gradually, those vocalizations become socially constrained and eventually they evolve into words. 'In the simple language-game, the symbol qua symbol takes over the role of gesture.'[32] Mother and infant exchange gestures of pleading and offering which include smiles and wide eyes, whines and coos. Indeed, primate research shows that chimpanzee mothers and infants engage in behaviour patterns, including vocal behaviours, much like those of humans.[33] Gradually, however, the human babies are trained into patterns that the chimpanzee babies are unable to acquire, especially increasingly specific and complex patterns of vocal behaviour.[34]

The foundations of language, Canfield proposes, likely lie in the basic behavioural patterns acquired early in life: requesting, greeting, naming, refusing, pretending and possessing.[35] At much later stages of development, language allows us to describe ourselves and others in longer narratives that extend beyond the present in both time and space while seeming to track a single *self*. The *I* of my childhood is spoken about as though the same *I* exists within me now in a transformed body and context. Through such linguistic patterns, the myth of the inner *self* emerges with such seeming certainty that it is almost irresistible.[36] If true, Canfield's account might help make sense of why the urge to misunderstand the logic of our language is so powerful that it seems to have a hold over people from every culture. As we will see later, Justin Barrett walks right up to the line, seeing that the very object of his own research and theory is likely a fiction, and yet he cannot resist the urge to continue with his endeavour. Canfield might be onto a good explanation why.

While Canfield's speculative natural history may help us achieve a Wittgensteinian perspective on the nature of the self, further results from primatology and evolutionary psychology can amplify his ideas to help us think clearly about the nature of psychological language and the mind. Evolutionary psychologists are deeply interested in how it is that we evolved to suppose that other people have minds at all, or to do *theory of mind* (ToM), a phrase that psychologists use differently from philosophers. For psychologists, ToM refers to the human capacity to effectively postulate other people's mental states in order to predict and influence their behaviour. For philosophers, the phrase refers to the unprovable claim that other people have private mental states at all. We will return to this distinction and its relevance shortly. Many or most evolutionary psychologists who write about ToM hold that humans have either an entirely unique capacity to explain and predict the behaviour of others or else one that is uniquely well-developed in the animal kingdom. Boyer and many other evolutionary psychologists assume that ToM evolved because it usually renders advantageous predictions of others' behaviour and insights that allow us to influence their behaviour. That is to say, this evolutionary-psychological hypothesis is that ToM is a reasonably good lay scientific theory constructed by the unconscious to predict and control things in the social environment in order to gain a reproductive advantage.

If ToM really is a theory of private mental phenomena, it is empirically unwarranted whether or not it is an unconscious compulsion. The philosopher's objection applies to postulates of unconscious systems as surely as it applies to the postulates of people. That is to say, behavioural evidence is always insufficient to prove the existence of private mental phenomena in others so long as we conceive of those phenomena as images, ideas, beliefs, etc. passing through conscious and unconscious spaces inside of the person, hidden from view. This truth is not lost on Justin Barrett, whose model of mind and whose critique of religion are virtually identical to Boyer's except for the particular mental systems that he proposes. Barrett writes that 'belief in minds is not empirically supported' and yet 'belief in minds is obstinately universal'.[37] This universal urge to illicitly posit other minds is blamed on the evolutionary pressure to quickly spot and understand other agents, other people who are the most challenging problems we face in our quest to propagate. 'Belief in minds arises from our species' biology working in the sort of environment in which we live', writes Barrett.[38]

In a truly remarkable moment of self-awareness, Barrett acknowledges that his own enterprise of describing the unconscious systems that are the focus of his book, along with the enterprise of most cognitive psychology itself, can be described as an investigation of that same thing – other minds – that is illicitly called into being by our animal unconscious. He writes, 'Ultimately, what psychologists study is human behavior, including the behavior of brains and nervous systems. Psychologists and cognitive scientists *interpret* behaviors in terms of mental states and the functions of minds. However, *minds* are not accessible to direct investigation and have not even been proven to exist.'[39] A few pages later, Barrett writes, 'Both belief in God and belief in other minds arise from the operations of nonconscious mental tools generating nonreflective belief.'[40] Ultimately, says Barrett, he cannot take the idea that other minds don't exist seriously because his animal nature compels him to believe otherwise. 'Belief in minds is *natural*.'[41] In other words, despite the evidence that belief in other

minds is scientifically untenable, our animal natures present it so compellingly that Barrett cannot resist the temptation to make other minds the focus of his research.

Barrett's double-think is all the more remarkable given the premise of his book: our unconscious systems operate like little scientists, but they make mistakes and sometimes produce serviceable but false religious beliefs. Early in the book, he establishes his position that we can protect ourselves from the pseudoscience of the unconscious by invoking the real science of reflective conscious scrutiny:

> Reflective determination of plausibility is something that people rarely engage in unless they are formally trained to do so by scholars. Rather, they just 'feel' that the belief is sensible. Unless one is trained in logic or empirical reasoning, even when required to offer justification, whatever 'pops into mind' first may seem a good enough justification. This 'popping into mind' typically amounts to nothing more than a fragmentary reiteration of the nonreflective plausibility determination. . . . Indeed, much of the training in the social and natural sciences is teaching skepticism and how to find alternative explanations. It does not come easily.[42]

Why back down in the face of the apparent *reductio ad absurdum* of his research? Why give in to the mere feeling that other minds are real? The answer isn't clear.

The fact that people around the world do tend to posit other minds appears to be undeniable, but it is relevant to note that the particulars of their 'theories' vary substantially. Lisa Feldman Barrett notes:

> Not all cultures understand emotions as internal mental states. Himba and Hadza emotion concepts, for example, appear to be focused on actions. This is also true of certain Japanese emotion concepts. The Ifaluk of Micronesia consider emotions as transactions between people.[43]

On the same note, in his remarkable history of scientific psychology, Kurt Danziger explains that he gave up thinking of the mind as a thing whose nature could be discerned and described by science when he learned that in Indonesia, China, Uganda and other non-Western cultures, both laymen and psychologists posit entirely different mental functions and they work on entirely different problems. Were the findings of psychological science objective, he argues, surely there would not be such radical divergence around the world.[44]

Ironically, the evolutionary psychology of ToM may offer us a way out of the mobius illogic that brought us to this point, but we will have to separate its empirical findings from wayward theories of interior processes and belief structures such as those that Boyer and Barrett propose. What surely evolved in us are certain capacities and tendencies of *behavior*, broadly understood, and it is those capacities that underlie religious practices, the project of psychology, natural science and countless more human endeavours. The hominid capacities to do ToM and to use language appear to have evolved primarily due to the intense pressure of social life, not those posed by the wider environment.[45] Modern-day baboons, whose anatomy

and natural environment are considerably more like those of our distant hominid ancestors than our own, remind us of the primary functions of ToM and speech. To survive and propagate, an individual baboon must remain acutely aware of the alliances and rivalries within her own troop and make 'nuanced decisions about when to join, whom to join, whom to threaten, and whom to ignore' at any given moment.[46] Through their copious research, the primatologists Dorothy Cheney and Richard Seyfarth furthermore demonstrate that baboon vocalizations are thoroughly integrated into their social contexts.[47] A successful baboon must master the arts of interpretation and expression that give any given coo or cry the meaning that it has in a particular case. She must track who said what to whom, as well as how, where and when it was said if she is to anticipate its effects on the troop and its significance for herself.

What Cheney and Seyfarth neither see nor say is that their research suggests that human evolution favoured the propensity and the capacity to *speak* about ourselves and others *as though* each person were ruled by a Cartesian ego. To navigate the social world, it is handy to frame and execute our political plans in a language that attributes systematic causes to human behaviour and that provides us tools with which to influence them. The brain and the rest of the human anatomy most certainly did evolve in ways that make it possible for individuals to acquire these language-games, these forms of life. However, there is no evolutionary imperative that our language, whose essential function is social, also describes a realm of hidden phenomena. If our *H. sapiens* ancestors spoke of *thoughts*, *ideas*, *dreams* and *hopes*, they were speaking about social facts, and it is a category mistake to suppose that they were – or that we are – really speaking about some peculiar processes hidden away beyond the reach of perception. Between the ears of monkeys and men there is nothing but matter: nerves, blood vessels, glial cells, etc. While it is useful to speak about others as conjuring memories, pondering options and feeling pains, the value and the meaning of all of these expressions can be cashed out in terms of their social significance. They are only so many linguistic behaviours integrated into our animal nature and our animal capacities that allow us to navigate our social environments. It is to this point that Wittgenstein speaks when he says:

> Believing that someone else is in pain, doubting whether he is, are so many kinds of natural behaviour toward other human beings; and our language is but an auxiliary to and an extension of this behaviour. I mean; our language is an extension of the more primitive behavior. (For our *language-game* is a piece of behaviour.)[48]

To interpret our talk about other minds as though it referred to actual hidden processes is to categorically misunderstand the logic of our language. Wittgenstein again:

> I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.[49]

Language, including our ways of speaking about other people's thoughts, did not evolve to articulate a theory or to describe theoretical posits. Indeed, the idea that such basic forms of language evolved around a complex theory of unprovable postulates is patently absurd. Language evolved to serve the human animal in its social and physical context, and both philosophy and psychology can only be written in that same language. When psychologists like Barrett and Boyer speculate about the interior processes of *memory, belief, thought*, etc., they are guilty of taking 'language on holiday',[50] that is, of using the terms that evolved to explain social facts as though they referred to some entirely different facts, viz., processes hidden from both perception and introspection, which is to say, wholly theoretical posits.

None of this is meant to say that understanding ourselves or others is easy or simple. The thrust of Wittgenstein's thousands of remarks on psychological concepts points in the opposite direction, towards the conclusion that our difficulties reading each other and understanding ourselves are a fundamental part of the human condition. Late in life, Wittgenstein wrote to Piero Sraffa:

> The older I grow the more I realise how terribly difficult it is for people to understand each other, and I think what misleads one is the fact that they all look so much like each other. If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish, one wouldn't *expect* them to understand each other and things would look much more like they really are.[51]

And in his notebooks from the early 1930s, Wittgenstein makes the following remark:

> My self-knowledge is this: When a certain number of veils are left on me, I still see clearly, namely the veils. But if they are removed so that my gaze can get closer to my ego, my image begins to blur before my eyes.[52]

The challenges of understanding others and of knowing ourselves are inescapable parts of human life, and these difficulties are reflected in the complicated grammar of our socio-psychological language. Wittgenstein again:

> But is it not peculiar that there is such a thing as this reaction, this confession of intention? Is it not an extremely remarkable instrument of language? What is really remarkable about it? Well – it is difficult to imagine how a human being learns this use of words. It is so very subtle.[53]

Our ways of speaking about the mental lives of others and of ourselves did not evolve to describe the systematic workings of hidden mechanisms, they evolved as elements of the byzantine social patterns that are woven onto and into our animal capacities. Our talk about *beliefs, intentions, emotion*s, etc. is as much a part of our animal origins and our animal lives as our capacities to sweat, to whistle a tune or to keep our eyes fixed on prey while we jog, and it is a category mistake to interpret them as names of interior phenomena. One might protest that the psychologist's aim is to describe the mechanisms that underly those animal reactions and capacities to which Wittgenstein

himself alludes. Indeed, there are methods of doing that, but they are not the methods employed by Boyer. Though claiming to investigate hidden brain processes, virtually all of Boyer's hypotheses describe the sorts of psychological facts that actually exist only at a social level. They are pseudo-explanations of religious life born out of the idea that hidden internal systems can be literally described in a vocabulary that evolved for very different purposes as if the brain had beliefs and intentions rather than the person we recognize in our social environment.[54]

5.4 Meaning, ritual and thick description

Keeping in mind these lessons about the origin and nature of language, let us return to the topic of rituals. Boyer's chapter on rituals begins with brief accounts of four rituals, followed by the following remark:

> These examples were taken from Java, India, Nepal and Central Africa, but I could have chosen virtually any other continent or religion to illustrate the point.[55]

The fact that Boyer is not interested in the details of each ritual and its context is both jarring and instructive. It is no small matter to assume from the outset that all rituals from all around the world share one essential form. Boyer's explicit reasoning is that ritual behaviours are motivated by unconscious thoughts and the vague intuitions that bubble up from them to consciousness, and so they have no logic, no sense, that their practitioners know anyway. In fact, Boyer claims flatly that rituals simply don't have meaning:

> We often hear that ceremonies are *meaningful* to the people who perform them. Through ritual, people perhaps grasp important messages about themselves, their relationships to each other and their connection with gods and spirits. . . . But do rituals really convey much meaning? To be blunt, what does it *mean* to bite a ram's tongue or to get some mean-looking character to pretend he is killing your children? What is the information transmitted? Not much, apparently.[56]

The real motives for ritual are generated by unconscious processes to which a person has no direct access. The ritual participant is at best aware of only the 'vague intuitions' that bubble up from the unconscious into consciousness. Only the scientist can know the true origins and meaning of those intuitions, according to Boyer[57] since the subject has no direct perception of them in himself or in others.

Readers already familiar with Wittgenstein will recognize that Boyer's picture of meaning is the same one that Wittgenstein works so hard to liberate us from in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Boyer assumes that a *meaning* is something apart from the ceremony itself. He assumes that if a ceremony had meaning at all, that meaning would be something that accompanies the ceremony, it would be a piece of information conveyed to the mind of a ritual participant where it might then be restated in the form of a verbal assertion. It is because rituals have no meaning that people cannot explain

their sense to others. According to Boyer, the fact that rituals don't travel with paired meanings explains 'why people's exegesis of their own rituals is often vague, circular, question-begging, mystery ridden and highly idiosyncratic'.[58]

Wittgenstein works assiduously to liberate us from this 'primitive idea' of meaning[59] by urging us again and again by way of countless remarks, aphorisms, thought experiments and the patient pursuit of misguided ways of thinking to their self-defeating ends. By whatever means he can muster, Wittgenstein gradually presses his readers towards a conception of language as activity much like the conception that emerges from Cheney and Seyfarth's primate research. Namely, language is a kind of human behaviour that develops as a component of a much larger, more encompassing family of acquired gestures built on and out of our instinctive animal ways of being. We naturally respond to the other's gestures of pain, and we gradually acquire the habit of asking 'where does it hurt?' We naturally wince with our own pain, and gradually learn to say 'Ow!' when we suffer small injuries. The meaning of an expression is its *use,* as Wittgenstein emphasizes over and over again, not a mental accompaniment. 'Hence it would be stupid to call meaning a "mental activity", because that would encourage a false picture of the function of the word.'[60]

Trapped by a false picture of meaning, Boyer embarks down the wrong path to uncover the sense of our rituals. If rituals convey no information, why perform them at all? Boyer's first, preliminary answer is that they are compulsive behaviours closely akin to OCD, an idea borrowed from Alan Fiske. The superficial similarities between ritual behaviours, which often prescribe specific sequences of action without any clear explanation why, 'suggest that some elements of rituals trigger activation of those particular mental systems that work in overdrive, as it were, in obsessive disorders'.[61] However, this explanation would seem to be more an irresistible slight than a serious proposal since Boyer goes on to provide another account that is wholly independent and largely incompatible with this one. Boyer's considered explanation of ritual is that it arises out of our unconscious intuitions to provide us ways to modify relations between people. 'Without clearly knowing why, the participants feel that the special "game" they are playing produces important changes in their relations. Which it does, although people could not readily explain how it works.'[62] Births, brisses, weddings and funerals are all rites that alter our social realities. Much as a baboon's social context can be altered by an interloper, a fight, a death, a well-timed grunt or well-received grooming, so too our context can be modified by successful ceremony. According to Boyer, our subconscious systems are performing 'precise calculations' about the social effects our actions will have like 'sophisticated game theorists', but we consciously experience only those vague intuitions mentioned earlier.[63]

Boyer's theory makes no real sense, however, since it borrows the terms of our evolved, socially governed language and takes them on holiday. Language evolved as part of our behavioural repertoire, and our words have no meaning or valid application that transcends their social reality. The concept of 'calculating' is as much a product of our evolved social behaviour as the words 'mama' and 'milk'. *Infants* want milk, not unconscious thinking machines inside them. So too, *rivals* calculate their odds of overthrowing the king, not unconscious processes. I don't mean to imply that our evolved intuitions and compulsions regarding social relations are irrelevant to the

meaning of rituals. It may be that we are driven to alter our social relations by means we do not fully understand, much as Boyer says. My point is that Boyer's account of 'precise calculations' going on in a 'mental basement' is both categorically confused and, at least as importantly, profoundly misleading. If evolution produced in us compulsions to perceive social dynamics that we don't consciously grasp, then rituals and magic are valid solutions to solving problems posed by those compulsions. We might compare David Buss's evolutionary psychology of human sexual preferences and mating patterns. Buss often refers to our unconscious 'desires' and 'calculations' and the pressures they exert on our behaviour, but he never loses sight of the fact that these formulas exist in us *only* in the form of instincts, tendencies, urges, etc. Expressed otherwise, evolution calculated our best reproductive strategy, but what it handed off to our minds is nothing more than the tendencies that embody its results. Witness how Buss writes about the unconscious drives that influence married partners to stray:

> In evolutionary terms, it makes perfect sense that infertility and infidelity are the most prevalent causes of divorce worldwide. Both represent the strongest and most direct failures to deliver the reproductive resources that provide the evolutionary *raison d'etre* for long term mating. People do not consciously calculate that their fitness suffers from these events. Rather, infidelity and infertility are adaptive problems that exerted selection pressure on human ancestors for a psychology attuned to reproductive failures. Just as having sex tends to lead to producing babies although the people involved may have no awareness of the reproductive logic involved, so anger leads to leaving an unfaithful or infertile mate without requiring conscious articulation of the underlying adaptive logic.[64]

What evolution produced in us are the drives that we experience, the fears, the wants, the tendencies towards sex and violence and much else. It did not supply us with cognitive machines that unconsciously recreate the calculations of millions of years of evolution in the blink of an eye. To speak of such unconscious calculations may be a useful metaphor, but to treat it literally is terrifically confusing. The result, in Boyer's case, is a pseudoscience that undermines our attempt to understand ourselves and others better. The fears and desires that we experience are the brute facts upon which human forms of life are built; they are the foundation of meaning. One culture might build a legal code stipulating legitimate grounds for divorce to solve certain problems of human life while another culture might develop a system of rituals or magic to serve much the same purpose.

This is why Boyer's lack of interest in the particulars of the rituals he mentions is so galling; he cuts off our first and best hope of understanding what meaning those rituals have for participants. It may be hard for a westerner to understand why a Kham Magar shaman would bite a ram's tongue, but surely it is only decent to make an effort. My point is not that *all* rituals have meaning. I argue elsewhere that it is possible for some rituals to survive as vacuous customs,[65] much as Boyer suggests, but each case requires individual consideration. In a sensitive, ponderous essay about the challenge of understanding other cultures, Clifford Geertz reflects on the report of a nineteenth-century Dane, L. V. Helms, describing a Balinese ritual

in which the dead king's three widows jumped to their deaths. Helms describes in some detail the eleven-story tower from which the women leapt, the great crowd of onlookers and the variety of offerings they carried, the gold and black sticks placed under the wooden image of a lion, a priest who shot a flower from a bow at a stuffed and colourfully painted snake. Helms is sensitive to the artistry and the complexity of the affair, even admiring of its ornament and pomp, yet he also reveals his own biases when he refers to the widows as 'deluded women' and to the whole event as a 'terrible spectacle'.[66] Geertz interprets Helms's complicated reaction as indicative of the profound difficulty we face when trying to make sense of something so alien and so frightful: on the one hand, we must strive to find our common humanity with the other and to see the world from her perspective. And at the same time, we can never fully transcend the frame of our own perspective, the concepts and values through which we see and describe the world. It is a kind of paradox, yet nonetheless it is possible to understand other people and their cultures, Geertz insists.[67] The process may be imperfect and plodding; we may need to double-back and think more than twice about what we bring to our account, but it can be done. Interestingly, Geertz includes this warning against the sort of psychological explanations that Boyer attempts:

> [The notion] of the material determination of consciousness . . . [may have some use] . . . but so far as understanding the construction of how other peoples' imaginations connect to those of our own, [it will] head us off in precisely the wrong direction – toward isolation of the meaning-form aspects of the matter from the practical contexts that give them life.[68]

The challenge is to imagine our way into the other's way of seeing the world so that we too grasp the 'meaning-form aspects' that he sees, so that the gestures and words he finds significant make sense to us.

To express Geertz's point in Wittgenstein's idiom, we must strive to see the other's context under the same aspect that he sees it. Weddings, divorce proceedings and infidelity hold meanings for us that any normal person (i.e. anyone who does not suffer serious emotional damage or brain damage) who participates in our forms of life can grasp even if he cannot verbalize them well. What does it mean to say that a mother baboon *understands* the import of her infant's plea for milk? It simply means that she responds to its gestures, both bodily and vocal, in some way that shows that she understands what is being asked of her. A mother baboon who consistently showed no response to her infant – not even a response that subtly signalled deliberate neglect – would be said not to understand her baby, and we might suppose that she suffered brain damage or profound emotional damage. There are criteria by which we judge whether a baboon understands the gesture of her baby just as 'there are certain criteria in a man's behaviour for the fact that he does not understand a word: that it means nothing to him, that he can do nothing with it'.[69] Baboons and people have animal natures that allow them to acquire complex forms of life into which are woven grunts, glances, social history, immediate context and more. A gesture or a word has meaning just in so far as it has a role to play 'in the stream of life',[70] to grasp a meaning is to know

how to use that word or gesture and how to participate. Stanley Cavell expresses this crucial point regarding our animal capacity to take up meanings this way:

> To this human capacity for seeing or for treating something as something, Wittgenstein attributes our capacity for understanding, for what we might call the innerness of meaning we attach to words and gestures.[71]

In his book, *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion*, Mikel Burley both describes and demonstrates a method of understanding religions and religious practices by striving to imaginatively occupy the perspective of participants. More accurately, Burley proposes not a particular method but suggests that we use 'a plurality of methods, unconstrained by conventional disciplinary boundaries'.[72] We must be prepared to wander, to invent, to attend closely to details, and, ultimately, to look for insight wherever we can find it. Burley informally labels the sort of account that works 'thick description', a phrase he borrows from Geertz who himself borrowed it from Gilbert Ryle. The term is not a technical one and Burley is clear that we should not demand that it be defined precisely.[73] His point is that we must find descriptions that help us build up from those thin threads of our common humanity to which Geertz alludes towards an imaginative recreation of the other's 'way of being human'. Helms's account of the Balinese sacrifice and countless more examples from religions around the world remind us how hard it can be to acknowledge that 'human life can be like that',[74] as D. Z. Phillips says, that there are forms of life deeply unlike our own.

To make sense of cannibalism, a shocking and shockingly alien form of life, Burley notes that our first step must be to recognize that there are different cases and different varieties of cannibalism, each of which must be understood on its own terms. In the recent past, the Wari' of Brazil ritually ate both enemies killed in battle and their own deceased tribe members, but the two acts did not hold the same meaning for them. To make sense of the Wari' practices, says Burley, we must recognize that they did not conceptualize the distinction between animals and people as we modern westerners do, and so the boundary between bodies and food was also different. 'In the case of warfare cannibalism', Burley writes, 'the bodies of slaughtered enemies would in fact be treated with *less* respect than those of animals killed for food. . . . [Thus] the very treating of them as food serves the symbolic purpose of denigrating and humiliating the victims'.[75] The Wari' ritual eating of tribe members carried another meaning: 'The consuming of the body was interfused with highly ritualized performances signifying the deep mutual dependencies between different members of the community.'[76] Thus did the Wari' use rituals to transform social relations.

Because Boyer imagines that inside the Kham Magar shaman there are cognitive systems doing their best to follow the logic of science (but sometimes misfiring and sometimes miscalculating, as primitive things will do), he is unable to grasp the sense of their forms of life. Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for this mistake, again and again, that is, the mistake of supposing that deep within all human beings we all hold the aims and values of western science. 'What a narrow spiritual life on Frazer's part!' Wittgenstein erupts in exasperation. 'As a result: how impossible it was for him to conceive of a life different from that of the England of his time!'[77]. Our human nature

and human experience pose a great variety of problems, each of which admits a great variety of solutions. We might put the point this way: once evolution settles on a strategy of providing us capacities and tendencies of pride, fear, love, lust, jealousy and so on, thereafter individuals and cultures must find ways of satisfying the problems of life. Wittgenstein speaks to this point in a remark targeting Frazer's scientism that applies equally to Boyer's:

> Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is *obviously* not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.[78]

Boyer is aware of this same mistake in Frazer, but he attempts to avoid it by moving the methods and aims of science out of consciousness and into hidden, unconscious systems. Boyer labels Frazer's mistake 'intellectualism', or the mistake of believing that people construct explanations for phenomena they don't understand and that 'primitives' (Frazer's word) hit upon false hypotheses. 'The mistake of [Frazer's] intellectualism was to assume that the human mind is driven by a *general* urge to explain. . . . Our minds are not general explanation machines. Rather minds consist of many different, specialized explanatory engines.'[79] The result of Boyer's simplistic move is predictably disappointing. His dismissive accounts of religion and religious life appear to be just as narrow-minded, just as colonialist in their judgements, and possibly even less able to help us truly understand religious ways of being human. To understand the religious lives of others, we must strive to see the world as they do, to see how their solutions to the problems of life work for them.

Notes

1 Barrett and Church 2013, 312 and see Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Bering 2011; Bloom 2007; Boyer 2001. Guthrie 1993; McCauley 2011; Pyysiäinen 2009.
2 Wittgenstein 1993, 151.
3 Wittgenstein 1993, 137.
4 Wittgenstein 1993, 129.
5 Wittgenstein 1993, 139.
6 Boyer 2003.
7 Deutsch, 2010.
8 Boyer 2001, 215.
9 Boyer 2001, 177–91, 202.
10 Boyer 2001, 258.
11 Boyer 2001, 262.
12 Boyer 2001, 94–5.
13 Boyer 2001, 21.
14 Boyer 2001, 250.
15 Boyer 2001, 33.
16 Boyer 2001, 218–19.

17 Boyer 2001, 223.
18 Boyer 2001, 227.
19 Wittgenstein 1993, 127.
20 Wittgenstein 1993, 123.
21 Wittgenstein 1993, 127.
22 Frazer 1981, 13–19.
23 Wittgenstein 1993, 137.
24 Wittgenstein 1993, 131.
25 Wittgenstein 1993, 133.
26 Boyer 2001, 90.
27 Ibid., 201-2.
28 Boyer and Lienard 2006.
29 Wittgenstein 1993, 131.
30 Wittgenstein 1993, 123.
31 Canfield 2007, 37.
32 Canfield 2007, 40.
33 Canfield 2007, 45–8.
34 Canfield 2007, 48–57.
35 Canfield 2007, 45–57.
36 Canfield 2007, 80–96.
37 Barrett 2004, 95.
38 Barrett 2004, 96.
39 Barrett 2004, 96.
40 Barrett 2004, 98.
41 Barrett 2004, 104.
42 Barrett 2004, 28.
43 Barrett, 2017, 53.
44 Danziger 1997, 1–5.
45 See Tattersall, 2012.
46 Cheney and Seyfarth 2007, 64.
47 Cheney and Seyfarth 2007, 223.
48 Wittgenstein 1980a, §151.
49 Wittgenstein 1969, §475.
50 Wittgenstein 2009, §51.
51 McGuinness 2008, 450.
52 Wittgenstein 2016–, Ms-183:90-91. My translation.
53 Wittgenstein 1967, §39.
54 See Robert Vinten's chapter in this same collection for a further analysis of Boyer's category mistake.
55 Boyer 2001, 231.
56 Boyer 2001, 232.
57 Boyer 2001, 257.
58 Boyer 2001 233.
59 Wittgenstein 2009, §2.
60 Wittgenstein 1967, §20.
61 Boyer 2001, 240.
62 Boyer 2001, 246.
63 Boyer 2001, 250.
64 Buss 1994, 176.

65 Hoyt 2012.
66 Geertz 1983, 38–9.
67 Geertz 1983, 41–4.
68 Geertz 1983, 48.
69 PI §269.
70 Wittgenstein 1982b, §913.
71 Cavell 1978, 251.
72 Burley 2020, 2.
73 Burley 2020, 63.
74 Phillips 2007, 205.
75 Burley 2020, 131.
76 Burley 2020, 131.
77 Wittgenstein 1993, 125.
78 Wittgenstein 1993, 123.
79 Boyer 2001, 15.