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Fear over Hope

A Review of *God is Watching You* by Dominic Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2016)

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We all need someone to look at us. We can be divided into four categories according to the kind of look we wish to live under. The first category longs for the look of an infinite number of anonymous eyes...The second category is made up of people who have a vital need to be looked at by many known eyes...Then there is the third category, the category of people who need to be constantly before the eyes of the person they love...And finally there is the fourth category, the rarest, the category of people who live in the imaginary eyes of those who are not present. –Milan Kundera (1984), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

In *God is Watching You* Dominic Johnson explores the idea of ‘supernatural punishment’ as an adaptation for the maintenance of cooperation. He argues that the sense of ‘being watched’ is universal to human societies and that it is this which prevents individuals from acting in an otherwise selfish manner. The book builds on Johnson’s own prior research into ‘moralizing high gods’ (MHGs) and social cooperation, in which he demonstrated a positive relationship between the presence of moralizing high gods and high measures of social cooperation and complexity (Johnson, 2005). While God is conspicuously absent in the above quotation from Milan Kundera’s seminal novel this is understandable given its setting in Soviet-era Prague, where the eyes of the state had almost completely replaced the eyes of the Church. Yet, despite the official eradication of God from public life the characters all still ‘perform’ for different eyes. In just this way, Johnson observed self-professed atheists to practice supernatural rituals in daily life, as if performing for a supernatural log-book, expecting rewards to come to them as a result. In *God is Watching You* Johnson argues for the universality of the ‘eye’ and he also views religion in an overwhelmingly positive light; the text stands apart from the negative trends in popular texts about religion and contrasts heavily with the New Atheists’ view that religion is maladaptive and should be eradicated (eg Dawkins, 2006), with Johnson instead arguing that religious behaviour is both

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adaptive and impossible to eradicate. We are told that supernatural thought is integral to humanity and to remove it would require a neurosurgeon.

The central thesis of the book is that a belief in supernatural punishment maintains social cooperation through preventing 'defectors' from behaving selfishly to the detriment of the rest of the group. Johnson sets out his argument using the logic of game theory. Formal analyses of situations such as the Prisoner's Dilemma indicate that a rational actor will receive a better payoff (in this case a lesser punishment) by defecting rather than cooperating. In experimental conditions participants are shown overwhelmingly to defect in such games. However, in experimental cases where punishment for defection in public goods games has been introduced, defection has been shown to be reduced (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). Thus, it is argued that punishment is necessary to ensure cooperation in society, where the logical action would be to defect and betray one's peers. The 'stick' is therefore shown experimentally to be far superior to the 'carrot' at ensuring co-operation. Johnson argues throughout that fear trounces reward in getting people to behave; the lowest crime rates are observed in countries where belief in Hell is high, while belief in Heaven is less significantly related to crime rates. Experimentally, again, it is seen that people are more motivated to prevent loss than they are by the prospect of gain; fear triumphs over hope in human psychology.

While Johnson agrees with the New Atheists that a belief in God is not necessary for the existence of a moral compass, he still finds that MHGs are correlated with cooperation and morality. He argues that while the state has replaced MHGs in many cases, that the state is simply not as effective as an 'eye' as a supreme being. For example the MHGs of the Abrahamic tradition are believed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; no police state can equal this God in perceived power, even the authoritarian and surveillance-driven soviet states of the 1960s. This is how Johnson explains the low crime rates in countries where belief in MHGs is high, and he cites his own analysis of MHGs and cooperation among 186 contemporary societies, where he observed a link between the presence of MHGs and levels of social cooperation (Johnson, 2005). Elsewhere other authors have found similar correlations between the presence of moralizing high gods and the accoutrements of complex society (Botero et al, 2014; Watts et al 2015). While he cites counter-examples of complex societies that functioned without MHGs, notably the Ancient Romans and Babylonians, he argues that in these cases the state picked up where God left off, with secular concepts of honor and citizenship filling the void of the MHGs in the Roman case. Johnson argues that while all forms of 'eyes' may aid group cooperation, it is the eyes of a supernatural deity or deities that Johnson argues have been demonstrated time and time again to provide the

greatest benefits in tempering our selfishness and allowing complex society to develop.

Johnson returns repeatedly to the notion of superstitious behaviour and syncretistic beliefs as evidence of enduring supernatural tendencies. People are inclined to look for agency in everything, explaining the peculiar rituals shown by sports fans in moments of high tension. Supernatural behavior is regularly practiced by atheists, with little regard for the supernatural references that they are making. Thus, the eye is truly everywhere. Interestingly it's long been noted that humans tend to anthropomorphize inanimate objects, and this has been cited as pivotal to the development of religion (Guthrie, 1993). Many forms of indigenous religion are based around ancestor veneration, rather than the veneration of a creator deity. Johnson talks us through the Hawaiians' experience of ancestors observing them, and the necessity of theory of mind for the development of religious behavior is apparent. Our innate propensity to look for the human in the world may certainly have been a factor in the development of early religious beliefs. The universality of superstitious beliefs and endurance of superstitious behavior even among secular society points to an early evolutionary origin for the 'eye in the sky'. Johnson argues that belief in supernatural agency became possible following the appearance of theory of mind and of language capabilities in our evolutionary trajectory. Thus, all categories of 'eyes' that we perform for are likely to have a similar evolutionary origin, becoming possible only after this psychological leap enabled our ancestors to attribute understanding to others. Whether one's transgressions are exposed in the eyes of living kin, ancestors, or MHGs, the awareness of others watching and judging our deeds only became possible after the development of theory of mind capabilities.

While the social benefits of reducing defection and Machiavellian behavior seem intuitive, the issue of whether religious beliefs are a group-level adaptation or are primarily beneficial at the individual level has been heavily debated. The topic of group versus individual selection in the biological literature remains highly controversial. Influential figures such as Dawkins (1976) and Williams (1966) argued that the gene is the fundamental unit of selection and that the features of biological systems mean that natural selection cannot often operate beyond the level of the individual, and thus cannot create group-level adaptations. On the other hand, others such as Wilson & Sober (1994) argue that the group may serve as the vehicle of selection, in much the same way that Dawkins describes the individuals as the *vehicle* of selection for the gene. Johnson admits that his book 'glides over' these debates, arguing that group selection is not required for supernatural beliefs to evolve; belief in supernatural deities is beneficial to individuals and groups alike and we need not disentangle the level of selection in order to see the adaptive advantages of religious behavior.

While the debate about the levels and units of biological selection rages on, Johnson firmly supports cultural evolution at the level of the group, arguing that cultural group selection is a powerful mechanism for the spread of ideas. Certainly, the expansive nature of many religions and the fervor with which their proponents seek new converts means that we see religions spread spatially at the expense of others. Unlike biological features, cultural traits such as religion are not only dependent upon sexual transmission and reproduction, although pro-birth movements in many contemporary religions do give some of them a demographic advantage.

Despite this demographic advantage and the adaptive benefits of beliefs in MHGs, Johnson notes the apparent decline in organized religion in the industrialized Western world. However, this is a topic that is full of contradictions, largely because of the complex, rich, and varied nature of religious beliefs globally. *God is Watching You* is seasoned with anecdotes about superstitious behavior from secular and even atheistic individuals, cited as evidence for our natural propensity to believe in supernatural phenomena, even when not explicitly subscribing to a named religion. However, the diversity of religious practice in the modern world inevitably creates confusion when attempting to make generalizations about modern religious beliefs. We are told in one breath that the proportion of the global population identifying as Hindu, Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim increased from 50% to 60% between 1900 and 2000 AD. Yet, the next paragraph tells us that ‘the eyes of God may be misting over as official religion declines.’ Repeatedly Johnson flits between the notion that organized religion is declining in favor of superstition, syncretism, and big government, and the notion that the major world religions are, in fact, expanding. While undoubtedly the picture is complicated, and varies from place to place, these contrasting statistics were peppered throughout the book.

One further small criticism of the text is the limited use of archaeological data. For a text that is concerned with the evolution of supernatural punishment and MHGs there is very limited discussion of the earliest evidence for symbolic and ritual behavior. Only the earliest known examples of jewelry, dating to 50,000 years BP, is cited as evidence for the development of theory of mind. However, there is no discussion of the evidence for symbolic behavior or theory of mind amongst other hominid species, which would have been interesting. Some discussion of Neolithic ritual practices would have been enlightening, given the abundant evidence for ancestor worship in the Neolithic, from sites as diverse as Jericho, where plastered skulls are buried under floors (Goren et al, 2001), to the long barrows of Wiltshire, where disarticulated human remains are repeatedly manipulated and reinterred (Bayliss et al, 2007). The table presented on p. 205 draws clear distinctions between Pleistocene and Holocene religion in terms of the purpose of supernatural punishment to these societies. I would argue that the

boundaries between supernatural punishment in the Pleistocene and Holocene cannot be as clear as Johnson implies. For example, the spirits and ancestor worship that Johnson places in the Pleistocene column are apparent in the Early Holocene of the Near East, as well as more recently in South America where the remains of deceased Aztec rulers continued to officiate at ceremonies. Very little can be known about the nature of Pleistocene religious belief, as cave paintings and burials could be associated with myriad forms of religious beliefs. I suspect that Johnson's deduction of Pleistocene supernatural punishment is largely based on contemporary ethnography, a controversial proxy for Paleolithic behavior given that modern hunter-gatherers have been marginalized. In any case, Johnson does not state whether his definition of Pleistocene supernatural punishment is based on archaeology, ethnography, or both, but in either case I believe the evidence is unsuitable for drawing such conclusions.

Overall *God is Watching You* is a neat argument for the supernatural punishment hypothesis. Johnson synthesizes a number of experimental game theory studies demonstrating how punishment is vital to achieving cooperation in human society. He summarizes an interesting selection of cross-cultural religious case studies, as well as secular anecdotes, to argue that superstitious behavior and the tendency to feel agency everywhere is a universal human phenomenon. The work presented here builds largely on Johnson's own prior work, and synthesizes other experimental studies together with anecdotal tales to present an interesting, readable, and sustained argument for the supernatural punishment hypothesis. The persistence of superstitious beliefs in the contemporary world is certainly fascinating and I would be inclined to agree with Johnson that the universality of this 'watchful eye' points to a deep evolutionary history for supernatural beliefs.

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