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Opinion

Religion as Memory

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Abstract: This paper will argue that memory from early childhood underlies many practices and beliefs that we commonly refer to as "religious". The consciousness of young children does not yet have certain features that characterize adult consciousness. This paper will concentrate on four of these: (I) a reality that is recognizable; (II) a sense of temporal duration; (III) a sense of self; (IV) an experience of the world that is deeply affected by our acquaintance with (a) language. The absence of these features presumably characterizes the consciousness of infants. It also often characterizes mystical experiences. The paper will argue that the human tendency to engage in so-called religious practices and beliefs makes the most sense based on the assumption that adults somehow preserve the memory of their state of being in childhood.

Keywords: religious experience; consciousness of infants; language

1. Preliminary Remarks

This paper will not define religion, considering that "The history of science has demonstrated many times over that useful definitions evolve in tandem with scientific understanding, serving as scaffolds for scientific progress, rather than as starting points, or ends in themselves" ([1], pp. 20–21). Having said that, Dunbar's ([2], p. xvii) recent definition comes close to what we will be dealing with: "belief in some kind of transcendental world (that may or may not coincide with our observable physical world) inhabited by spirit beings or forces (that may or may not take an interest in and influence the physical world in which we live)" (It is worth remembering that comparative research "indicate[s] that the oldest trait of religion . . . was animism . . . Belief in an afterlife emerged, followed by shamanism and ancestor worship. Ancestor spirits or high gods who are active in human affairs were absent in early humans . . ." ([3], p. 261)).

2. Standard Perception

We start from the observation that standard perception is "controlled hallucinations" and "that we're all hallucinating all the time. When we agree about our hallucinations, that's what we call reality" ([1], p. 104; further [4], pp. 11–13). Our hallucinations—i.e., our experience of the world—are profoundly colored by mental contents: memories, attitudes, emotions, expectations, concepts (See, e.g., [5]. Note that "conceptual knowledge is stored as patterns of neural activity that encode sensory-motor and affective information about each concept, contrary to the long-held idea that concept representations are independent of sensory-motor experience" [6]), etc. We do not have immediate conscious access to all these mental contents: some are not conscious.

This raises the following theoretical question: What would experience be like without these associated mental contents? Here are some a priori plausible guesses:

– Without implicit or explicit memories, we would not recognize (i.e., re-cognize) the world and the objects in it.
– If all the conscious or unconscious mental contents that contribute to our sense of self were to be prevented from playing a role, we would not experience our ordinary sense

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of self, i.e., of the self that is part of our personal history and is involved in our actions, past, present, and future.
- Since the standard experience of time is a mental construct that depends on a remembered past and an anticipated future, there would be no experience of duration if memory and expectations could play no role in it.
- If the network of relations that we impose upon our experience when learning our first language were no longer involved in our awareness, we would have an experience that was beyond language, ineffable.

Put differently, without the various mental contents that contribute to the formation of our standard—i.e., "normal"—awareness, we might experience:

i. An unrecognizable reality, different from "ordinary" reality
ii. A different sense of time, culminating in a sense of timelessness
iii. A different sense of self, different from the ordinary self that is involved in one's actions
iv. Ineffability

Note that all the points on this list are negative: they remove (if only hypothetically) features from standard awareness. The features they remove are responsible for the following characteristics that standard consciousness presents us with:

I. A reality that is recognizable
II. A sense of temporal duration
III. A sense of self
IV. An experience of the world that is deeply affected by our acquaintance with (a) language

3. The Awareness of Infants

We have acquired many of the (conscious and unconscious) mental contents that play a role in standard awareness during our lifetime since earliest childhood. Memories have been laid down, and a sense of self, as well as numerous conceptions about the world, have developed; our acquisition of language greatly contributed to the organization of reality, which helps us find our way in the world.

Young infants do not yet have these mental contents, or if they have them, then they only have them in rudimentary form. It could therefore be argued that the four points of List 1 come close to describing the lived experience of young children. Young infants do not, of course, experience reality as different, for they know no other reality. They will not have a different sense of time since they have nothing to compare it with. Since their sense of self has not yet developed, they will not experience a different sense of self. And not having yet gone through the process of language learning, it is not surprising that their experience will be ineffable. And yet, keeping these provisos in mind, it makes sense to think that young children experience the world in this manner. That is to say, it seems plausible that they experience reality, time, and their self differently from us adults and that this occurs in a manner that resists description. Put differently—assuming that young children have experience at all—their experience will be without the impositions (including memory, sense of duration, sense of self, language) that characterize standard consciousness.

All of this may sound speculative. Do young children really have consciousness? Few specialists believe they do not. To quote Paul Bloom [7], "Almost nobody believes anymore that infants are insensate blobs" (Kouider et al. [8] argue "that the brain mechanisms underlying the threshold for conscious perception are already present in infancy but undergo a slow acceleration during development"). But if infants are indeed conscious, is their consciousness not far weaker than our adult consciousness? Does it make sense to attribute to them an awareness worthy of the name? Alison Gopnik is a psychologist who studies young children. She sums up the outcome of a number of reflections and observations in the following words:

It's plausible that babies are actually aware of much more, much more intensely, than we are. The attentional *spotlight* in adults seems more like an attentional *lantern* for babies. Instead of experiencing a single aspect of their world and shutting down everything else they seem to be vividly experiencing everything at once.

Babies also seem less subject to certain kinds of unconsciousness than we are. Less of their experience is familiar, expert, and automatic, and so they have fewer habituated unconscious behaviors. While they inhibit distractions less well, more of the field of consciousness will be available to them [9] (Also see [10] and watch [11]).

These remarks are worth contemplating. They suggest that in the process of growing up from a baby into an adult, constructions build up in the mind that limit consciousness from the attentional lantern of babies to the attentional spotlight of adults. And our reflections so far allow us to say something about the nature of these constructions: the mental contents that play a role in our interpretation of the world—memories, expectations, concepts, emotions, etc.—are somehow part of these constructions. Without the associated mental contents, our awareness would presumably be more like the awareness of babies.

4. A Return to Infantile Awareness

We discussed the idea that young children have awareness that is in many respects different from adult awareness: it does not yet have many of the features that characterize standard consciousness. Furthermore, the change from children's awareness to adult awareness appears to be related to the development of mental contents. These mental contents gradually limit a child's awareness so that the child's initial attentional lantern slowly turns into the attentional spotlight of an adult. Children's awareness, it would seem, irreversibly develops (perhaps one should say: narrows down) into adult awareness (For further reflections on one of the ways in which children's awareness narrows down into adult awareness, see below).

Is this true? And is this process irreversible? The four points in List 1—which specify what we would experience if our mental contents stopped influencing our awareness—often figure in reports of what we will call mystical experiences. Those who have such experiences, too, speak of a different reality, which they may characterize as a "higher" reality. They, too, report having experienced a reality in which there is no sense of duration, so that time appears to have stopped. The disappearance of the ordinary sense of self—sometimes described as the discovery of a different self, one's "true self"—is a recurring feature of such mystical experiences. And the observation that the mystical experience is ineffable is an oft-repeated claim in the relevant literature. According to the "Mystical Experience Registry" (http://www.bodysoulandspirit.net/mystical_experiences/; accessed on 10 January 2023; http://66.84.40.85/mystical_experiences/learn/define.shtml, accessed on 28 May 2023), mystical experiences are marked by all or some of the following feelings/insights:

- A sense of unity or totality
- A sense of timelessness
- A sense of having encountered the ultimate reality
- A sense of sacredness
- A sense that one can not adequately describe the richness of this experience

All but one ("sacredness") correspond to the points discussed in this paper.

How is this possible? Does this mean that there are people who, at least sometimes, are taken back from standard adult awareness to child-like awareness? If so, what mechanism could bring this about?

Recall that the development from children's awareness to adult awareness is accompanied by an increasing number of associations with mental contents (memories, concepts, expectations, etc.). As a result of these, awareness becomes ever more interpreted and moves steadily away from the less interpreted awareness that we attribute to young children (Another factor that appears to play a crucial role in this development is the accumulation of traumatic experiences in childhood; see Bronkhorst, *Psychological trauma and mystical*

experience (under preparation)). Is there a way to suppress the influence of these associated mental contents?

There is an obvious answer to this question. All human beings—and presumably certain other animals as well—have the capacity to reduce unwanted influences on their awareness. This is called concentration. People who concentrate on a task may, to at least some extent, be oblivious to what happens inside and outside of them. They may not notice certain sounds, forget their next appointment, or inadvertently skip their lunch. The faculty of concentration weakens the associative links with other mental contents, whatever their origin.

Concentration is a faculty that we all possess. And yet, we do not all have mystical experiences. Most of us do not have experiences of the kind discussed. Why not?

The answer must be that there are different depths of concentration and that most of us fail to go beyond a certain depth ("[R]esearch ... suggests that there is something fixed about the depth of the absorbed state which any particular individual can reach" ([12], p. 143)). Those who succeed will suppress ever more associations with mental contents, and if they can go deep enough, their awareness will to an ever-greater extent be characterized by the four points in List 1. Rather than speaking of concentration, I will in such cases use the term mental absorption, or just absorption (This is a mental state that must be distinguished from the mental trait that confusingly is also called absorption; cf. [13]. Unfortunately, objective measurements of the depth of absorption are hard to obtain, even in controlled situations; see [14]). Fundamentally, absorption is not different from concentration. It is, however, useful to have a term for forms of concentration that are deeper than those we are familiar with in everyday life (The search for a brain signature of state absorption has not yet led to usable results; see [14]).

What I am proposing is that certain people, or all people in exceptional circumstances (More on this below. Note that "[t]he capacity to enter into trance states ... seems to be extremely widespread across human cultures. One survey of 488 ethnographic societies drawn from all continents concluded that no less than 90 per cent incorporated altered states of consciousness into their belief systems." ([2], pp. 32–33, with a reference to [15])), can reach depths of concentration, of absorption, that suppress many, if not all, of the mental associations that contribute to shaping our awareness. These people will then undergo the experiences enumerated in List 1, namely:

i. An unrecognizable reality, different from "ordinary" reality;
ii. A different sense of time, perhaps culminating in a sense of timelessness;
iii. A different sense of self, different from the self that is involved in one's everyday activities;
iv. Ineffability.

At this point, I will say no more about mystical experiences but rather turn to a different observation: many people who are in search of spiritual experiences practice forms of absorption (Cp. [16]). This is true in various cultures, perhaps in all cultures. Indian traditions are very explicit about this. Buddhist texts and classical texts about Yoga frequently use the term *samādhi*, which means absorption (Not "the stilling of the mind"; pace [2], p. 26); absorption plays a role in all the spiritual techniques advocated for by these movements. In Christian traditions, prayer is a method used by mystics but also by less ambitious believers. Recent research in various communities (by Tanya Luhrmann [e.g., [17]] and her associates) emphasizes the role of mental absorption as an inseparable part of prayer. Certain Hindu traditions use devotion (*bhakti*) to reach states of absorption. There can be no doubt that spiritual experiences and mental absorption go hand in hand, presumably wherever they occur (This does not mean that there always was a word to designate these states: "the Oxford English Dictionary indicates that written English usage of the term ['absorption'] to signify engrossment only became commonplace in the mid seventeenth century (along with the term 'immersion')" [18]).

Mental absorption is not only important in the contemplative search for spiritual experiences. Ritualized acts are perhaps part of all existing religions (without being necessarily confined to them). A frequently cited study of ritual says the following about these:

> . . . ritualized acts are very different from other routines. However often an individual may perform a ritualized action, it does not seem to become automatic. On the contrary, it remains constrained by high-level cognitive control. Ritualized actions . . . require high cognitive control because the rules often apply to familiar actions (e.g., walking, talking, preparing food) and turn them into more difficult tasks (e.g., walking without treading on the line). This clashes with a commonsense notion that rituals only include actions that one performs "routinely" or "without thinking". Indeed, ... the components of rituals that we called Ritualized Behavior *cannot be automatic*. ([19], p. 606; my emphasis, J.B.)

We may conclude that mental absorption, consciously cultivated or not, plays a central role in many activities, many of which are commonly considered religious.

5. Religious Beliefs

Beside the practices so far considered, there are certain forms of belief that display the same characteristics. They are often considered religious beliefs, but this is, for our present purposes, relatively unimportant. A rather widespread idea is that ordinary reality is not all there is. A higher reality is believed to exist, which is often, but not necessarily always, inhabited by God or other supernatural beings. Frequent is also the belief that God, or the higher reality, is beyond time and beyond words. Finally, God or the highest reality can be reached through oneself: some religions add that one's real self is close to or even identical with God. Another frequently held belief is that one's real self (or at least one of the selves in the case of people who believe that we have several of them) is not involved in one's actions (On different notions of the self and their consequences, see [20]). We recognize, once again, the four points in List 1.

How do we explain that so many beliefs (many commonly looked upon as religious) share the four points that also characterize the experiences of so-called mystics? Closer reflection suggests that this might be formulating the question the wrong way round. We should rather ask the following: How is it that certain features that characterize standard awareness (enumerated in List 2) are missing in so many "religious" beliefs, including so-called mystical experiences? Recall that standard awareness presents us with a recognizable reality (I); a sense of temporal duration (II); a sense of self (III); an experience of the world that is deeply affected by our acquaintance with (a) language (IV).

The observation that these four features are missing both in so many "religious" beliefs and in the experiences of mystics demands an explanation. Does it mean that many, if not most, of these beliefs are ultimately based on the experiences of mystics? Some scholars think so. This conclusion is not, however, called for. There is no evidence that all ordinary people are influenced in their beliefs by the teachings of mystics. And even if there were such evidence, this would not explain why they would follow just those teachings and not others.

Why, then, are the four points (i) to (iv) in List 1 so widely present in what are commonly thought of as religious beliefs? After what has been said so far, the answer stares us in the face. We have all had such awareness in early childhood. The thesis here presented is that we remember these states of awareness (Li, Callaghan, and Richardson [21] present evidence that memory traces remain from early childhood. Moskowitz and Montirosso ([22], pp. 122–124) present further evidence for the memory of young children. It is undoubtedly no coincidence that remembering high-arousal religious rituals—which, as we saw, evoke mental states not dissimilar to early childhood—"become an important part of the participants' life narratives" [23,24]).

We have to tread carefully. This memory is not the memory of specific events. This should not surprise us. Recent research has shown that "[t]he ability to form precise, episodic memories develops with age, with young children only able to form gist-like

memories that lack precision" [25]. These gist-like memories, we must assume, include the memory of a state of awareness (Some may prefer the expression "global state of consciousness"; see [26,27]), and of a very special state of awareness at that. Strictly speaking, this is the memory of a state of awareness in which the features that characterize standard consciousness are yet absent (Already, Endel Tulving—followed by others after him—accepted that there can be memory of mental states; see [13], p. 10). It is open to debate whether we can call this autobiographical memory; after all, it goes back to a time before any sense of self has developed, so that it is not our own memory in any ordinary sense. It does not come to us as something "remembered" the way we remember other memories. No events figure in it, nor is it connected with us. For these reasons, it seems more than likely that the memory here talked about is vague, imprecise, and unspecifiable.

6. Memory

This, then, is the thesis here proposed. All humans have a predisposition to certain practices and beliefs because they "remember" (in the manner just explained) a state of awareness different from our normal, everyday awareness. The four points enumerated in List 1 come close to characterizing this state of awareness, if only partially. Practices and behaviors that involve mental absorption get us closer, if ever so little, to this different state of awareness: these include ritualized practices, prayer, and devotion, practices and behaviors that figure prominently in many religions.

It appears therefore that humans preserve the memory of a state of awareness they no longer possess. Furthermore, they attempt to regain access to that lost state of awareness. It is not immediately clear why they do so, but it seems clear that they do.

7. Conclusions

The theory here presented may raise the hackles of some readers. All the arguments in its favor have not been presented in the preceding pages; some further arguments have been presented elsewhere [13]. Here, it must suffice to conclude that memory of the mental state of childhood is plausible and the experiences of those who have entered deep absorption can be argued to resemble it. Moreover, the almost universal human tendency to try entering mental absorption by various means (including prayer, ritual, meditation) can be interpreted as an attempt to regain this mental state through the recovery of its memory.

Seen this way, many of the practices and beliefs that we often (though not always) collectively refer to as "religious" are ultimately inspired by a memory we all share: the memory of the state of consciousness we had in early childhood. Childhood consciousness is still free from the features that subsequently contribute to the making of standard (i.e., adult) consciousness. Only some of these features have been considered in this paper; there must be many more. What counts at present is not so much exactly which or how many features are involved in the creation of standard consciousness but rather that memory traces remain in individual minds from the time before they had any. These traces inspire people to engage in some of the most obscure practices and beliefs of homo sapiens: religion.

One question remains. Why do other animals not engage in religious practices? (This may not be altogether true if Jane Goodall is to be believed: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjQCZClpaaY; accessed on 10 January 2023) The theory here presented does not fully exclude them. We may assume that many of those animals start life with the kind of consciousness that we attribute to human infants. They, too, will presumably attain an awareness with which they can recognize objects and, perhaps, experience the duration of time (See [28]). Many of them certainly think, though not in words (See [29,30]).

Language appears to be the feature that largely accounts for human susceptibility to religious practices and beliefs. The survival value of language for our species does not need proof. It is the acquisition of language that is mainly responsible for the creation of the extensive web of associations that distinguishes human adult consciousness from

the consciousness of other animals (On this, see especially [31], §3). It may be but slightly exaggerated to state that, in human evolution, religion was the price to pay for the invention of language (Cp. [2], p. 14: "Religion is simply the cost that had to be paid in order to maximize evolutionary fitness. Alternatively, it might be an example of cultural evolution exploiting the way the human mind is designed so as to maximize cultural fitness despite the negative effect this might have on the fitness of the individuals whose minds are being parasitized." On the invention and development of language as a cultural phenomenon, see [32,33]).

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