COMMENTARIES

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who’s the Most Theistic of Them All?

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Before commenting on the question of theistic percepts in other species, it is important to provide some background information. In an attempt to generate an evolutionary account of theism, which then led incidentally to speculation about the possibility of theistic thinking in other species, we (Maser & Gallup 1990) used a model one of us developed earlier (Gallup 1982). The central feature of that model is that the ability to make inferences and attributions about mental states in others is a consequence of self-awareness. To be self-aware means that you can become the object of your own attention, and as such organisms that can recognize themselves in mirrors are taken to be self-aware. To be self-aware, in the sense of being aware of being aware, means that you are in the unique position of being able to use your experience to model ostensible states of experience in others. As members of the same species, we share highly similar receptors and underlying neurological mechanisms, and as a consequence there is bound to be considerable overlap between your experience and mine. Therefore, if I see you in a situation that I have encountered previously, it is reasonable to assume that your experience will be similar to mine. Moreover, given knowledge about my own mental states and their relationship to various external events, I now have a means of modeling yours. Self-awareness paves the way for an inferential knowledge of mental states in others. Stated differently, inferences we make about what other people may or may not know, want, or intend to do presupposes a knowledge of comparable mental states in ourselves. This ability to

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engage in mental state attribution is also referred to as theory of mind, or social intelligence. Thus, you can use what you know about yourself to more effectively relate to others and compete with others for scarce resources by deploying a variety of introspectively based social strategies such as gratitude, grudging, sympathy, empathy, sorrow, deception, role playing, and even humor.

The central tenet of this model maps surprisingly well on to results derived from different species, children, and mental patients. For instance, species which fail to recognize themselves in mirrors also fail to show evidence that they can infer mental states in one another. Among humans, the ability to make attributions about mental states in others begins to emerge during childhood at the same point in time as mirror self-recognition. Likewise, there is growing evidence that mental patients, such as schizophrenics or autistic children, whose ability to recognize themselves in mirrors is impaired also show evidence of impaired mental state attribution (for a review of this literature see Gallup, Anderson & Platek, in press).

We have argued that theism is a natural extension of this ability to engage in mental state attribution (Maser & Gallup 1990). Because theism invariably entails attributions about the theistic being’s intentions, desires, and expectations, we suggested that theism represents the ultimate attribution. Bering does not take issue with our model, but rather its applicability to other species. In attempting to discount the possibility of mental state attribution in other species, Bering appears to be resurrecting a Cartesian dualism, not unlike Descartes’ position on animals as mindless automatons. Right or wrong, however, his critique makes it clear that the evidence concerning theism in other species is at best incomplete and therefore inconclusive.

Bering adopts an ontological point of view, which holds that humans are born with a knowledge of god; chimpanzees are not. For Bering there exists “intuitive ontological units” that generate natural theistic concepts, and “humans (at least) to an extent come into the world with gods already on the brain”. The ontological perspective has a long history in religious thinking, but from a scientific perspective it is similar to instinct theory and has many of the same drawbacks.