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Culture and development matter to understanding souls, no matter what our evolutionary design

Michel Ferrari

Human Development and Applied Psychology, OISE/University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada.

meferrari@oise.utoronto.ca

Abstract: For Bering, appreciating that people are objects is a developmental accomplishment. Baldwin and Piaget agree. However, for Piaget, an immanent conception of the divine is more developed than a separate transcendent God. Culture also matters. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates' belief in immortality was a reasoned conclusion – not “built in” – for reasons similar to those still held by modern scientists.

Almost a century ago, J. R. Angell (1911) wrote, “The term soul has generally been applied to the supposed spiritual essence of human personality which persists after death. As such, it is connected with problems not soluble by empirical methods. Psychology as an empirical natural science has consequently ceased to use it as a familiar part of its terminology” (p. 46). He goes on to say, “the term consciousness itself is likewise in danger of extinction or at least essential modification” (p. 47). Prophetic words. But with the return of an “essentially modified” science of consciousness, the soul is again a candidate for rehabilitation – as long as it remains subject to Neo-Darwinian natural selection within a distinctively human social environment, and as long as it is “illusory” (or at least that its immortality and purpose are illusory).

For Bering, asking “Why am I here?” suggests a social relationship between the self and a presumed supernatural creator – a “cognitive illusion” that can help produce “genetic fitness-enhancing” behavior by promoting normative prosocial behavior that that creator has mandated. Bering also suggests that because human social interaction relies on believing that absent agents continue to exist, we have a hard time imagining anyone to be dead; that our minds/brains are not well equipped to update complex social rosters. But why go so far? Without invoking anything supernatural, Parker's (1998) proposal that self-conscious emotions, like shame, may have evolved to allow parents to govern their children when not physically present to enforce social norms – an influence that might persist beyond death. If so, then the idea of a universal care-giver, God, is a natural (but culturally bound) extension of this direct social experience.

Piaget devoted his first lab at the Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute to the study of religious experience, and lectured on his results and their implications at Sainte Croix (1923; 1928; 1930). Vidal (1994a; 1994b) claims that Piaget's early empirical work on religious experience aimed to provide empirical evidence for his own metaphysical framework, centered around the idea of the “immanence” of the divine in human experience. Indeed, these early studies by Piaget showed that unconscious and affective attachment to different kinds of religious experiences of God (transcendent or immanent) depends on the type of parenting one receives and the general socio-political cultural environment of one's upbringing (see also Bemmer 2002). Piaget's (1932/1978) studies of morality grew directly out of his work on religious belief.

God thus becomes a “super-parent” – an idea also advocated by James Mark Baldwin at the turn of the last century. Bering's very interesting point that it is structurally simpler and

so developmentally easier to imagine an omniscient other, God, than to imagine someone who holds false beliefs is directly in line with these older theories of development. Likewise, Bering's claim that appreciating people to be “just objects” is a developmental accomplishment is exactly Baldwin's thesis – an idea he leverages for a very creative resolution of the mind–body problem (Baldwin 1903; see also Ferrari 2003). Similarly, Piaget's (1928; 1930) mature thoughts on religious experience led him to believe that the tension between transcendent and immanent conceptions of God could be resolved developmentally – that an *immanent* conception of the divine (i.e., God as intrinsic to our lived experience) was a more developed stage of religious experience than experience of a separate, transcendent God. Writing in a very different Zen tradition, Suzuki (1962/1972) captures this view well when he writes that, the “ultimate Self is above all forms of dichotomy, it is neither inner nor outer, neither metaphysical nor psychological, neither objective nor subjective. If the term ‘Self’ is misleading, we may designate it as ‘God’ or ‘Being’ or ‘the Soul,’ ‘Nothing’ or ‘anything’” (p. 3).

Are these claims unscientific? I agree with James (1902/1961), that a “rigorously impersonal view of science might one day appear as having been a temporarily useful eccentricity rather than the definitively triumphant position which the sectarian scientist at present so confidently announces it to be (p. 395, footnote 8).” Certainly, empirical studies support the claim that immanent experience of the divine is indeed much rarer and develops later than transcendent experiences, documented in children as young as age six (Argyle 2000). Thus, Bering's suggestion that children understand God to be a separate and higher being is only half of a more sophisticated developmental argument proposed by developmental psychologists of the last century.

In another line of reasoning, Bering also proposes that because we find it impossible to imagine what it is like for ourselves to be dead (what he calls a “simulation constraint”) people – especially children – naturally tend to think that psychological agents survive death. The “simulation constraint” on imagining death is very plausible. However, although it may be impossible to imagine our own nonexistence psychologically, we need not reason about the afterlife by analogy to our own spiritual life. As Bering himself says, we know and understand forms of human existence in which we are unaware – a dreamless sleep, for example – and can imagine not returning from that state. Or, to take a classic example, in Plato's *Phaedo* (c. 350 bce/1977, subtitled, *On the soul*), Socrates believes he will survive death but wants to debate this so as not to die holding a false belief. One objection, made by Cebes, is that most “men find it very hard to believe what you said about the soul [i.e., that it survives death]. They think that after it has left the body it no longer exists anywhere, but that it is destroyed and dissolved on the day the man dies, as soon as it leaves the body; [...] dispersed like breath or smoke, has flown away and gone and is no longer anything anywhere” (*Phaedo*, 70a). A little later (85e–86d), Simmias proposes this analogy: the soul is a kind of harmony produced by the body, like the music of a lyre; smash the instrument and the harmony is lost. This analogy is essentially the Darwinian analogy for mind, something generated by the body through the course of human evolution to help it survive. Socrates has an answer to these objections, although one that may not convince a modern audience – perhaps not even Aristotle, writing a few decades later (see Wilkes 1992) – but this shows that the idea of immortality was a reasoned conclusion. It was not “built in,” at least not for most adults of that time, for reasons that resemble those still held by modern scientists; that is, that the soul is nothing other than an expression of the operation of the body, which itself is just a biological material thing, having nothing immaterial about it that can survive death.