
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. EDITION

REVIEW --- Mind & Matter: If Big Brother Is Not Around, We Invent Him

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666 words

26 October 2013

The Wall Street Journal

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English

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It's a beautiful day out, and like every other day, rain or shine, it's filled with opportunities for random acts of crumminess. Somewhere out there, some jerk has just dinged a parked car and sped off without leaving a note. Someone else has littered, rather than walking to the wastebasket. Someone else, waiting for a connecting flight, has stiffed the waitress at the airport restaurant. All because no one else was noticing and they could get away with it.

In our sprawling, anonymous societies, we often assume that no one is keeping track of what we're doing. And despite all those surveillance cameras, iPhone video apps and drones in the sky, that's often the case (unless you work at a university, in which case you're probably always being watched by a social psychologist collecting data).

We raise our kids to be inured to such anonymity when it comes to behaving morally. We try to guide their maturation through stages: first, to doing the right thing because they might otherwise get caught and punished; next, to doing right because "what would happen if everyone acted immorally?"; and finally, to the exalted, internalized state when they think that doing anything else is simply out of the question.

All very cool and highfalutin. Still, as experiments show, most of us are more likely to wind up on the straight and narrow when we think we're being observed. In a recent study by Damien Francey and Ralph Bergmuller of the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland, scientists scattered litter around a bus stop; nearby was posted a picture of a large pair of eyes or, as a control, flowers. Under the eyes, people were more likely to clean up the litter. Similarly, a picture of eyes in a workplace coffee room run on the honor system tripled the amount of money contributed. In an online economic game, having eyes peer out from the computer screen made the players more generous.

In other words, minuscule cues of being watched elicit pro-social behavior in an anonymous setting. Which brings up the biggest pair of eyes of them all, namely religion. Humans have generated an astonishing variety of theologies, religious rituals and types of deities.

Consider the hunter-gatherer or simple horticultural groups that have peopled the Earth for most of history, a world of small bands or settlements. It turns out that the myriad religions generated by such people rarely feature a deity who keeps an eye on us or cares about human morality.

As shown by Michel Raymond of the University of Montpellier and Frans Roes, judgmental, punitive gods are only commonplace among large, complex cultures (independent of the group's economic system or whether it was missionized by a major religion). In other words, right around the time we evolved societies big enough to contain strangers whom we'd never encounter again, we invented gods who watch us.

Work by Ara Norenzayan of the University of British Columbia, analyzed in his new book, "**Big Gods**: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict," shows the power of unconsciously invoking those religious beliefs. Give volunteer test subjects the task of unscrambling a jumble of words into a coherent sequence. If you prime the subjects with religious terms embedded in the scrambled sentences -- spirit, divine, God, sacred -- they become more generous in an anonymous economic game.

One religious critique of atheism is that without a god(s), you're left adrift without a moral compass. My atheistic response is that doing the right thing is not all that impressive if it requires the specter of hellfire and damnation. But whether it takes literal or metaphorical eyes, or just that voice inside your head -- whatever gets you through the moral night -- it is a good thing if the result is people treating each other better.

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