JOHN A. JOHNSON  Have you ever done something you did not really want to do because someone expected you to do it? Of course you have. Unless you are a psychopath, it is almost impossible not to care what others expect from you. There is a good reason for this. Our ancestors survived by considering what they expected from one another, enabling them to work together cooperatively. We have inherited this tendency to care about and be responsive to each other's expectations.

Psychologists have come to refer to our evolved capacity to ascertain the feelings, intentions, and expectations of other people as “Theory of Mind” (ToM). For the most part, possessing an active ToM is beneficial to us. If we correctly discern how people feel about us, what they want from us, and how they intend to act toward us, we can prepare to cooperate with them.¹ But the central thesis of Jesse Bering's *The Belief Instinct* is that the activity of our ToM is so incessant that it often overextends itself, perceiving mental qualities in places where minds do not even exist.²

Bering’s thesis is not novel. He follows a long line of evolutionary thinkers who have proposed that the propensity to mind read is so strong that we occasionally misapply it to nonhuman contexts. For example, Konrad Lorenz suggested that our predisposition to read emotional states from human facial features is often misapplied to other animals, causing us to perceive, for example, camels as haughty and disdainful (because a camel holds its nose higher than its half-closed eyes) and eagles as proud and determined (because of the prominent bony arches over its eyes and narrow, downturned mouth).² He also said that we read human qualities and intentions into inanimate things, such as “majestic” mountains, “cheerful, babbling” brooks, and “gloomy, evil” houses. Were he alive today, Lorenz would no doubt describe our tendency to ascribe personality traits to vending machines, computers, and cars.³

Similarly, Bering proposes that our evolved propensity to mind read is often mistakenly displaced on the cosmos as a whole. The misapplication of this otherwise adaptive tendency results in a number of interesting
consequences, not the least of which is the belief that God or some kind of Higher Intelligence has intentions toward us and expects things from us. Bering calls this belief an *instinct* because it is an automatic application of our inborn tendency to mind read. Believing that God has expectations for us, a purpose for us, has an immediate, compelling quality—just like perceiving bold determination in the face of an eagle. This is true even for those of us (including Bering and myself) who should know better. In this regard, we are all chumps for believing in the illusion of purpose. We want to believe.

Unlike the strident tone of recent books by the new atheists, *The Belief Instinct* possesses a gentle, humorous, and playful tenor. Bering is the first to admit that he himself is subject to the very same illusion he attempts to dispel: “I, for one, don’t handle suffering very well; having a low-grade fever and a sore throat is enough to have me privately asking God why He’s being so unspeakably cruel to me” (200). More than once, Bering shares examples of his own overactive ToM. After his mother died, he caught himself interpreting the jingling of wind chimes as a reassuring communication from her. A dead raven on the living room floor of his newly purchased house felt like an omen that gave him second thoughts about the purchase. Bering muses, “I’ve never understood why so many skeptics are intent on demonstrating their immunity to irrational or quasi-religious thought” (*Belief Instinct*, 199).

I found Bering’s description of the naturalness of overextending ToM to the universe and his willingness to share his own tendencies in that direction to be reassuring and endearing, because for most of my life I have been an atheist who freely admits to occasional irrational and quasi-religious thinking. Coincidentally (or not coincidentally?), I received the invitation to review *The Belief Instinct* just after I had begun to read Wayne Dyer’s book, *The Power of Intention*. Dyer, following the shamanic anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, contends that there is an intelligent, creative, omnipresent force in the universe, which many call God but he calls Source or Intent. Dyer writes that Intent is what actually brings everything into existence, so we need to pay attention to our connection to Intent. Only when we align our personal will with this larger force, Intent, according to Dyer, will we experience a fulfilling life.

Alternating between reading *The Belief Instinct* and *The Power of Intention* felt like being the rope in a tug-of-war. Jesse Bering was laying out arguments for, describing research studies about, and providing examples of the illusory nature of perceiving intent emanating from a Higher Intelligence. And Wayne Dyer was doing the same thing to support the existence of Intent, although, admittedly, the research he referenced was sparser and less rigorous than the studies described by Bering. If I had to choose between them, based on evidence, I would go with Bering, hands down. But a part of me wants to hold out for the possibility that there is something like the mysterious, magical Intent described by Wayne Dyer. I imagine that if I spoke with Jesse Bering about this, he would pat me on the back and say, “That’s, okay—you are perfectly normal. The best minds of all time have overextended their ToM. I do it myself. Don’t be too hard on yourself.” And then he might gently remind me of the extensive evidence in his book demonstrating that belief in purpose emanating from a Higher Intelligence is probably just a cognitive bias.

First, Bering provides many examples of how humans easily overextend ToM to places where everyone would agree that it does not belong. The anthropomorphic and physiognomic attribution of human qualities to nonhuman animals and inanimate things comes to us spontaneously...
and effortlessly. Konrad Lorenz' observations fall into this category. Another example described in Bering's first chapter is the famous experimental study conducted by Heider and Simmel. Without prompting, people in this study described the animated motion of geometric figures in terms of human intentions.

Next, Bering documents the widespread tendency to believe that all order in nature is the result of intelligent design. According to Bering, we are natural creationists. Even Bering's favorite philosopher, the staunch atheist Sartre, wrote, "I don't see myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world, but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth. In short, as a being that could, it seems, come only from a creator" (Belief Instinct, 47). Even Charles Darwin wrote, "I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of men; and I deserve to be called a Theist" (Belief Instinct, 39). Bering furthermore argues that theistic thinking in atheists is a natural tendency and not just a result of influence from a theistic culture. He cites as support a case study by William James of a deaf-mute who was never indoctrinated into a religious worldview but who, as an adult, was able to communicate memories of creationist thinking when he was a child. Bering also cites the classic research of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, who demonstrated that young children spontaneously assume that every natural object on the planet was created for human use. Modern developmental researcher Deborah Kelemen confirmed Piaget's suggestion that belief in purpose is an instinct: She found that children—regardless of the religiosity of their parents—assume that every natural object has a purpose.

Bering also explores what he sees as a logical consequence of believing that we were designed for a purpose, namely, that we will spontaneously interpret purely natural events as signs and communications about our purpose. We are particularly likely to personalize unexpected and unusual events as signs of the purpose intended for us. Bering insightfully observes that we see no need to explain people's normal, expected behavior, but that unusual behavior sets off a "frenzied search for the [person's] intentions" (Belief Instinct, 80). The same seems true for natural events. We don't ask about reasons for normal events in nature, but assume that natural catastrophes and surprising coincidences represent messages intended to instruct and guide us about our purpose. Carl Jung coined the term synchronicity to describe coincidental events that are not causally connected but are perceived to be personally meaningful.

I must confess a lifelong attraction to synchronicities. My scientific training tells me that synchronicities are just statistical accidents, but, like Fox Mulder, I want to believe. Ascribing personal meaning to natural events is not a matter of being stupid. In 2007, the John Templeton Foundation awarded £1.87 million to the University of Oxford to sponsor a Cognition, Religion, and Theology Project (CRT Project), which included an international meeting of highly intelligent scholars who gathered "to review every aspect of the question of whether the divine can be known through nature" (Belief Instinct, 107). Reading intent into nature is almost irresistible, regardless of intelligence and education. Interestingly, the only people who seem completely immune to this tendency are autistic individuals. Because they lack ToM, even religious autistics see God as only an impersonal, "faceless force in the universe that is directly responsible for the organization of cosmic structure" (Belief Instinct, 85). And those with Asperger's syndrome cannot comprehend the concept of a "meaningful coincidence."
Another belief that Bering claims can be explained by our overactive ToM is the conviction that we continue to exist after we die. He explains: “Because we have never consciously experienced a lack of consciousness, we cannot imagine what it will feel like to be dead” (*Belief Instinct*, 113). This lack of experience with nonexistence leads us to conclude that our mind must be immortal, continuing to exist after we die. Bering does not see belief in an afterlife as wishful thinking in the face of anxiety, as suggested by Terror Management Theory, because belief in immortality does not correlate with death anxiety. Again, he presents an array of evidence in support of his position, from the rare disorder Cotard’s syndrome, in which people believe they are already dead but are psychologically immortal, to a study in which a third of responses from people who professed disbelief in existence after death indicated that the thoughts and feelings of a dead person could continue.

One of the most difficult challenges to those who believe in a kind, benevolent God is the question of why bad things happen to good, innocent people. Chapter 5, titled “When God Throws People Off Bridges,” brilliantly points out that the question of why bad things happen to good people could never arise unless we presuppose a fair universe constructed by a kindly, intelligent Mind. The chapter opens with the recounting of a tragedy that occurred in 1845, when a crowd of people gathered on a bridge to watch the antics of Nelson the Clown floating down the River Bure in a bathtub. The bridge collapsed under the weight of the crowd, and around one hundred people, including sixty children, met a watery death. When a tragedy such as the Bure bridge collapse occurs, people understand how the event happens, that is, what causes the event. The Bure bridge was simply not strong enough to hold so many people. But knowing how something bad happens is not enough for many people—they also want to know why bad things happen as well. Why did my child have to join the crowd on the bridge at that particular time, while my neighbor’s child did not? From a purely naturalistic point of view, such a why question is meaningless, pointless. But our ToM assumes an intention behind every event and cannot stand to think that tragic events happen without good reason. When asked to reflect on major turning points in their lives, two-thirds of the atheists in the study provided at least one answer of the sort “everything happens for a reason.”

If an overactive ToM results in so many errors of thinking (attributing mental qualities to inanimate things, believing we are created for a purpose, perceiving cryptic communications of our purpose in natural events, assuming that our minds survive death, and thinking there is a reason why bad things happen to good people), we might legitimately ask how such an error-prone mental mechanism could have possibly evolved. Bering explains the persistence of delusional thinking in terms of a familiar adage from evolutionary psychology: It does not matter that our overextended ToM leads us to believe things that are untrue, illogical, or unrealistic, as long as the hyperactive ToM helped our ancestors to pass on their genes. Bering proposes a hypothesis about how even an overextended ToM might have benefited our ancestors (and might still benefit some of us today). Recall that in everyday social life, ToM allows us to consider what others expect from us. Because other people are vital to our survival and well-being, we take their expectations into account, regulating our behavior in order to get along with them. Bering suggests that having the sense that a “God [or a ghost or spirit] is always watching [and has a] deep knowing of [our] hearts and souls” (*Belief Instinct*, 194) provides additional help in regulating our impulses, especially when no one is watching us.
This leads Bering to conclude that God is "an adaptive illusion" (Belief Instinct, 201). But is the notion of preexisting, divine purpose in fact an illusion? Wayne Dyer has written thirty books since his first best seller, Your Erroneous Zones, which sold an estimated thirty-five million copies. Dr. Dyer's publisher describes The Power of Intention as "his all-time best-selling book" (Hay House). He has appeared many times on PBS, presenting his message about Intention to an audience that seemed eager to receive it. Could so many people be so wrong?

Of course, sheer numbers of believers do not make a belief correct. Google the phrase "billion flies" for a further explanation. It seems that referring to flies is a common response to questions about God's purpose. When we would like to think that we were created for a unique purpose, Bering slyly asks if the same might be true for, say, a horsefly. Wittingly or not, his observations about horseflies extends Mark Twain's short treatise on the purpose of flies.5 Whereas Twain wonders what the collective purpose of flies as a species might be, given the problems they cause for us, Bering takes the question one step further, asking why any living individual might have a unique destiny:

To see how fantastically odd this highly focused degree of teleo-functional reasoning actually is, imagine yourself on a nice sunny farm. Now have a glance around at the landscape. See that horsefly over there, the one hovering about the rump of that Arabian mare? Good. Now compare its unique purpose in life to, say, that other horsefly over there, the one behind the barn, waltzing around the pond algae. And don't forget about the hundreds of larvae pupating under that damp log—each of which also needs you to assign it a special, unique purpose in life. It's hard enough to come up with a teleo-functional purpose for horseflies as a whole, such as saying that horseflies exist to annoy equestrians or to make the rear ends of equines shiver in anticipation of being stung. Just as American poet Ogden Nash famously penned, "God in His wisdom made the fly / And then forgot to tell us why." But to suggest that each individual horsefly is here for a special, unique reason—one different from that of every other horsefly that has ever lived or will live—by using our theory of mind to reflect on God's intentions in crafting each its own destiny, may get us institutionalized. (Belief Instinct, 61)

And so, with gentle humor, Bering helps us to see that believing that each of us was created for a special purpose is just as ridiculous as believing that each horsefly was created for a special purpose. But why not allow us this illusion, if it makes us feel good? Bering ends his book by explaining why this illusion might be worth giving up. Even though thinking that you have a special purpose might make you feel good, there is also a downside of believing that God is always thinking about you and waiting for you at the end of your life. According to Bering, we already have enough hell in our life from the normal use of Theory of Mind, the hell of worrying about what other people think of us. Shame and embarrassment are ever-present possibilities. Why do we need an imaginary God judging us every moment as well, threatening to dispense infinitely more painful punishment than the distress that other human beings already cause us? Ceasing to believe in such an omniscient, omnipotent judge
would eliminate unnecessary fear and free up the significant time that we currently waste trying to please a nonexistent entity. Would it not be better to use this precious time to simply enjoy, as best we can, the moments that we can share with other people?

Bering recognizes that fear of an omniscient judge who might condemn us to an eternity in hell might have served a useful regulatory function in the past. But today, he argues, an omniscient observer is no longer necessary, given social-tracking technologies such as “Social Security numbers, the Internet, hidden cameras, caller ID, fingerprints, voice recognition software, ‘lie detectors,’ facial expression, DNA, and handwriting analysis” (Belief Instinct, 202). So perhaps the suffering that is generated by fear of God’s judgment is unnecessary. And Bering barely mentions the much more serious kinds of suffering caused by people who believe they are fulfilling the will of God: child abuse, witch burnings, inquisitions, terrorism, and wars.
These may be good arguments for resisting our natural tendency to believe in God-given purpose. Yet religious people are usually quick to point out that such beliefs do not necessarily lead to fear, hatred, and strife, and that human beings can be fearful, angry, and cruel with or without God beliefs. They point to the positive consequences of believing that everything happens for a purpose, from overcoming addictions in twelve-step programs to weathering tragedies. Bering himself notes how the illusion of purpose can be comforting. The problem, Bering seems to be claiming, is that the negative fallout from belief in purpose outweighs the social benefits of moral regulation and the psychological comfort gained from feeling that our lives are meaningful. But he offers this claim only as a suggestion, perhaps wisely so. Trying to quantify the harm and benefits from belief in purpose to see which outweighs the other is probably an impossible task.

Bering not only falls short on demonstrating that belief in purpose has more negative than positive consequences; he also doesn’t give us concrete suggestions on how to transcend our instinctive belief in purpose. In fact, he says that it is “more than a little foolhardy to think that human nature can ever be ‘cured’ of God by scientific reason . . . permanently removing Him from our heads—would require a neurosurgeon, not a science teacher” (Belief Instinct, 200). The best we can do is “distance ourselves from an adaptive system that was designed, ultimately, to keep us hobbled in fear” (Belief Instinct, 201). Because Bering gives us no specific technique for distancing ourselves from our overactive ToM, I wonder: Might there not be a third way, neither allowing our ToM to run rampant, nor fighting against it at every point? Can we perhaps allow ourselves the illusion of purpose, but in ways that bring satisfaction without fear and strife? True, we would be harboring an illusion, and that might not sit well with scientists who value truth. Yet, even though I am a scientist, I willingly suspend disbelief when it suits me, for example, when I absorb myself in a novel or movie or when I join my pagan friends in an Imbolc ritual. Perhaps the question is not how to distance ourselves from the illusion of purpose, but how to suspend disbelief and embrace the illusion of purpose in ways that are more beneficial than harmful.

NOTES

1. ToM also allows us to evade, manipulate, placate, or otherwise not cooperate, if noncooperation better advances our interests. Whether we cooperate or not, successfully advancing our interests requires an accurate ToM. If too many members of a group fail to cooperate too often, however, the group will break down, hurting all members of the group who are depending on one another. That is why people are more than likely to take others’ expectations seriously.
2. Lorenz, Studies, 155–58.
3. Windhager et al., “Face to Face.”
4. I found Bering’s quick dismissal of Terror Management Theory (TMT) puzzling for four reasons. First, when I read his (undocumented) claim that death anxiety and belief in an afterlife are uncorrelated, I did a quick Google search on those keywords, and the first article I found reported a small but statistically significant correlation (.24) between death anxiety and afterlife beliefs (Berman and Hays, “Death Anxiety, Belief in Afterlife”). Additional studies I located with Google showed mixed results: some found a correlation, some did not. Second, it occurred to me that the ability of belief in an afterlife to reduce death anxiety may well differ across believers. As a result, a sample of believers would show a range of degrees of death anxiety. The
distribution of death anxiety among believers may not always differ significantly from the distribution for non-believers, resulting in no correlation between belief and death anxiety. A third reason why TMT should not be so quickly dismissed is that the TMT research program has produced an extensive literature (198 articles—see Burke, Martens, and Faucher, “Two Decades of Terror Management Theory”) describing studies that support the mortality salience hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that reminders of our own mortality trigger anxiety about our personal annihilation, and this anxiety encourages a range of coping mechanisms, including belief in an afterlife. Finally, TMT and ToM need not be seen as competing explanations for belief in an afterlife (see Landau et al., “Compatibility of Terror Management Theory”). An overactive ToM may initially incline people toward afterlife beliefs, but the emotional reassurance people get from these beliefs may contribute to their formation and maintenance. Bering himself devotes much of his book to describing the ways that ToM illusions make us feel better.

5. Twain, “Thoughts of God,” 19.

6. While I reject the strong, social constructivist claim that scientific theories reflect reality no better than any other worldview, I think that scientists should keep in mind that all human thought systems—including scientific models—are symbolic, incomplete representations of reality rather than complete mappings of reality itself. As such, all human thought systems can be regarded as imaginative works of art, none of them literally true (see Ruiz, Ruiz, and Mills, Fifth Agreement).

BIBLIOGRAPHY