Blaming God for Our Pain: Human Suffering and the Divine Mind

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Abstract

Believing in God requires not only a leap of faith but also an extension of people's normal capacity to perceive the minds of others. Usually, people perceive minds of all kinds by trying to understand their conscious experience (what it is like to be them) and their agency (what they can do). Although humans are perceived to have both agency and experience, humans appear to see God as possessing agency, but not experience. God's unique mind is due, the authors suggest, to the uniquely moral role He occupies. In this article, the authors propose that God is seen as the ultimate moral agent, the entity people blame and praise when they receive anomalous harm and help. Support for this proposition comes from research on mind perception, morality, and moral typecasting. Interestingly, although people perceive God as the author of salvation, suffering seems to evoke even more attributions to the divine.

Suffering, it has been said, poses a theological problem. If the Almighty is fair and just, then how can He allow people to be harmed? What may be an issue for theologians, however, does not seem to pose a problem to believers—the more people suffer, the more they appear to believe in God. In the most canonical of examples, the Bible's Job is harmed in every conceivable way: His possessions are destroyed, his family is killed, his body riddled with disease, but the worse it gets, the more he believes. What about suffering makes people believe?

We suggest that people see God when they are harmed— or helped—but can find no human agent to account for their suffering or salvation. In other words, although God may be the ultimate agent, it may be that He is specifically the ultimate *moral* agent, the entity who accepts blame and praise for moral outcomes, whether bad or good. In this article, we not only explore the cognitive and motivational factors that underlie belief in God but also suggest that religiosity stems from the dyadic nature of both morality and mind perception. The impetus for a moral theory of religion, however, begins not from an act of good or evil but from a surprising empirical discovery.

A Surprising Discovery

What could God be thinking? Even people who hold no belief in the supernatural can sometimes puzzle over this question, wondering what could be going on in the mind of God. The tendency to anthropomorphize God leads many to

surmise that if a God exists He or She must have a mind somewhat like ours. Yet in an online study asking a large sample of respondents to compare the mind of God to other minds, the Supreme Being surfaced as a surprisingly distant outlier (H. M. Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). The study found that minds are perceived mainly in terms of *Experience* (the ability to feel and be conscious) and *Agency* (the ability to do things), with normal adult humans possessing the capacity for both. There were many entities who were seen to have Experience but not Agency (e.g., babies, dogs, and children), but only God was seen to have Agency without the capacity for Experience. People judging the mind of God seem to perceive him as relatively incapable of experience.

This finding deserves interpretation and study, as it seems counterintuitive and even unsettling. The Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, and Eternal Lord of the Universe is perceived by a large, international sample of educated Internet respondents to have an impoverished mental life? It turns out, however, that there is a theoretical context in which this observation makes sense, *moral typecasting* theory (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009). This theory links mind perception to morality and accounts for how people perceive the minds of a range of moral players—villains, victims, martyrs, self-harmers,

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despots, benefactors, demons, saviors, beneficiaries, heroes, and, yes, even God almighty—in terms of the general distinction between moral agents and moral patients.

Human cognition frequently divides the world into dichotomies (Fillmore, 1968), such as Black and White (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008) and right and wrong (Haidt & Algoe, 2004), and moral situations are no different. As described by Aristotle (Freeland, 1985), moral situations are divided into the two roles of moral agents and moral patients. Moral agents are those who do good or bad, whereas moral patients are those who are the recipients of good or bad. Moral typecasting theory holds that once an entity does or receives a moral action, that entity is "typecast" as a moral agent or a moral patient, respectively. Like a typecast actor, future perceptions of any moral actor will be consistent with that initial perception, making moral agents seem perpetually good or bad, and moral patients seem perpetually helped or harmed. Because the types of moral agents and patients are mutually exclusive, this leads people to see others as *either* those who are generally moral agents (heroes and villains) *or* those generally moral patients (victims and beneficiaries).

The link to mind perception comes in because moral agents and patients are each characterized by one (and only one) of the two mental capacities of Experience and Agency. Moral patients, those recipients of good and evil, are seen to capable of experience but relatively incapable of agency (e.g., blameless victims). Conversely, moral agents, those doers of good and evil, are seen to be capable of Agency but relatively incapable of Experience (e.g., unfeeling villains and impervious heroes). That God is perceived to possess much Agency but little Experience suggests that He is not only a moral agent but also perhaps the ultimate moral agent.

If God is indeed perceived as the ultimate moral agent, it suggests that belief in the Almighty is intimately tied to morality. In the rest of this article, we explore how the structure of morality and the theory of moral typecasting can help explain belief in God. The basic idea is that people believe in God because morality has a dyadic structure, such that any instance of good or evil needs both a moral agent (to do the good/evil) and a moral patient (to receive the good/evil). We suggest that the dyadic structure of morality compels the human mind to infer the presence of an agent when confronted with an isolated patient (i.e., someone who seems beset by good or evil). When people experience unjust suffering and undeserved salvation, they search for someone to blame or praise, but when no person can be held responsible, they look to the supernatural for an agent, finding God. In such a view, the central features of beliefs about God and religion spring not from our naïve wonder at thunderstorms or the sunrise but from our use of religious ideas to understand the moral world. Explaining religion in terms of agents and patients opens the possibility that morality may be not only a consequence of religion (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008) but also a fundamental cause. Applying the idea of moral typecasting to religion suggests that humans invent God and
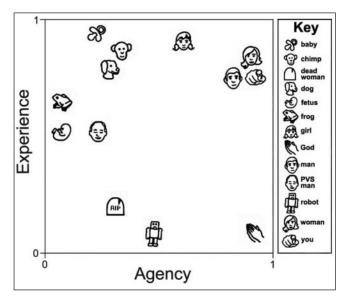

Figure 1. Dimensions of mind perception. From Gray, Gray & Wegner (2007). Reprinted with permission from AAAS.
Note: Note God in the lower-right-hand corner.

Satan as moral agents to be responsible for the good and bad in our lives and in turn understand ourselves as moral patients who receive the good and bad that supernatural agents send our way.

The notion that the moral dyad—agent and patient—forms the template for both morality and religion explains some curious and unexpected phenomena. It accounts for why people will hold animals criminally responsible, for example, why people are willing to inflict pain on the saints, and why belief in God may frequently thrive on suffering. In the sections that follow, we explore not only the moral nature of God but also people's general tendency to detect agents, perceive meaning, and believe in a just world. But first, let us begin with the basic dimensions of mind perception and examine the mind of the Almighty.

Perceiving Minds

To investigate how people perceive the mind of God as well as the minds of humans and a variety of other targets, H. M. Gray et al. (2007) conducted a Web survey that asked participants to evaluate 13 characters (see the key in Figure 1) on a variety of mental capacities including the ability for planning, hunger, self-control, pleasure, communication, morality, pain, thought, joy, memory, embarrassment, and consciousness. In the survey, participants were presented with pairs of characters and compared the members of each pair on their relative ability for a given mental capacities. For example, participants might evaluate whether God is more or less able to experience "rage" than a child.

Submitting the rating data from the 2,399 respondents to factor analysis revealed that the mental capacities could be grouped into one of two independent overarching factors.

The first factor, labeled Experience, is the ability for sensation and feeling and contains capacities such as pleasure, pain, hunger, joy, and consciousness. The second factor, labeled Agency, is the ability for doing and responsibility and contains the capacity to plan, exert self-control, communicate, and be morally responsible. These dimensions of mind perception, we suggest, form the basis by which people perceive the minds of all entities. Of course, factor structures often hinge on the unique characteristics of a given sample, but additional replications, with both relative comparisons and absolute ratings of mental capacities, yield the same results (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2008).

When the dimensions of mind perception are translated into graph axes, the characters rated by the respondents can be plotted according to their perceived Agency and Experience. As Figure 1 shows, although adult humans are perceived to have high levels of both Agency and Experience, God is perceived to have much Agency but little Experience. In other words, people perceive that God can do things but that He is relatively devoid of feeling. Although it may not be surprising that He lacks physical states requiring a physical body (Knobe, 2008) or physical life (Bering, 2002b), the fact that God is perceived to have less capacity for experience than people is newsworthy. Of course, these data are not the final say on God's mind: Scripture, careful reflection, and some research (e.g., Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008) suggest that God is capable of Experience, of anger, jealousy, and pleasure. What these data *do* suggest, however, is that people may intuitively perceive God to be an entity with Agency but not Experience. Although such a view may be at odds with scripture, research suggests that people will frequently ignore theology in their perceptions of God (Barrett & Keil, 1996; Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008).

Further evidence assembled by H. M. Gray et al. (2007) suggests that God's one-dimensional mind has implications for His moral status. Analyzing the moral qualities of each mind in the survey found that whether an entity was seen to deserve punishment for wrongdoing correlated much more with Agency than with Experience. In contrast, the desire to avoid harming an entity ("If you were forced to harm one of these characters, which one would it be more painful for you to harm?") correlated far more with Experience than with Agency. In the language of moral types, Agency is necessary to be a moral agent (something that can do good and evil) whereas Experience is necessary to be a moral patient (something that can receive good or evil). Only something with the ability to plan, act, and exert self-control can be held accountable for its misdeeds, which is why society imprisons adults and not babies; and only something with experience can be the victim of evil or the recipient of good, which is why society protects puppies, but not pianos, from cruelty. God's capacity for Agency but not Experience, then, suggests that He is a moral agent but not a moral patient, deserving of our curses and praises but not of our sympathies. Unlike every other entity in the survey, God seems to stand alone as solely a moral agent.[1]

Looking at God's mind, it may seem like His glass (or mind) is half empty, as He is generally perceived to lack the capacity for Experience and its corresponding moral qualities, but in truth God's glass is really half full. It is remarkable that something people never directly meet, see, or hear is perceived to possess any mental capacities at all and raises the question of how God is even seen to possess Agency. The answer suggested by a number of other researchers is that humans promiscuously attribute agency to many things and that the belief in God is simply an outgrowth of a general tendency to perceive agents in the world around us (Barrett, 2004; Boyer, 2001).

Finding Agents

Agents—things that act—are a class of entities on which the survival of our ancestors depended. Detecting and understanding the behaviors of agents such as animals can mean the difference between eating and becoming dinner, so it makes sense to be on the lookout out for them, even if it means mistakenly identify nonagents as agents (Guthrie, 1993). The embarrassment you feel hopping out of the water after mistaking a wave for a shark is nothing compared to the pain of having your leg eaten after mistaking a shark for a wave. The high cost of failing to detect agents and the low cost of wrongly detecting them has led researchers to suggest that people possess a Hyperactive Agent Detection Device, a cognitive module that readily ascribes events in the environment to the behavior of agents (Atran, 2002; Barrett, 2000). This inclination toward agent detection is likely one foundation for human belief in God (Barrett, 2004). If people hold agents responsible for anomalous events, then events for which an earthly agent cannot be found may be attributed instead to supernatural one.

The simple overattribution of agency cannot entirely account for the belief in God, however. God and gods are not just any agents but are supernatural beings perceived to have minds, complete with thoughts, beliefs, and intentions (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Giving God a mind goes beyond agency detection and takes another cognitive module—theory of mind. Theory of mind is the capacity for people to represent the intentional states of other entities (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Leslie, 1987), an ability thought to have developed to enable both deception and the detection of deception (Dunbar, 1998). By understanding the intentions of other people, theory of mind turns physical movements from coincidences into instances of meaningful action (Clark, 1996; K. Gray & Wegner, 2008).

Like agency detection, theory of mind is also promiscuous, readily prompting inferences of intention and thought behind ambiguous events (Rosset, 2008). This means that

anomalous events are perceived to result not only from an agent but also specifically from an agent who intended that event. Thus, random occurrences are not experienced as such but as instances of meaningful communication from a human mind (Bering, 2003; Clark, 1996; Epley & Watyz, in press). This tendency to see events as meaningful through the attribution of intention is robust enough that Bering (2002a, 2003) has suggested that people have a special type of theory of mind dedicated to deciphering the intended meaning behind events. This so-called existential theory of mind leads adults to find divine signs in world events and for children to interpret surprising events as advice from invisible agents (Bering & Parker, 2006).

Together, the capacities for agency detection, theory of mind, and existential theory of mind give us the basic cognitive capacity to conceive of God (Tremlin, 2006; Wenegrat, 1990): People automatically see agents behind events (Barrett, 2004), to whom they attribute intentional states (Atran, 2002) to turn random events into meaningful instances of communication from that agent (Bering, 2002a). Often times, there *is* a legitimate agent with the power of intention behind events— another person—and when this is the case, these cognitive modules can stop their search (Barrett & Johnson, 2003). When events cannot be attributed to another person, however, the intuitive pull of agent perception and intentional explanations can lead us to seek understanding through the mind of God, the Devil, or evil spirits (Boyer, 2003; Kelemen, 1999).

Perceiving a mind behind events can have distinct advantages. It explains events in the more intuitive terms of mental, as opposed to physical, causation (Hofstadter, 2007; Tremlin, 2006). It allows people to construct meaning from events, which fulfills a basic psychological need (Frankl, 1963) and thereby yields a host of beneficial psychological and physical effects (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). It also allows people to feel that they control events (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008) because not only do the intentions of a deity imbue events with meaning (Bering, 2002a; Clark, 1996) but also such deities can be appeased to make good things happen.

Although the work on agency detection makes it clear that it often helps to see the mind of God behind events, not even the most animistic cultures perceive mind behind everything (Boyer, 2001; Lewis, 1995). What the research on promiscuous mind perception leaves unclear is exactly *which* events people perceive Him to control. Did God stop me from boarding a doomed aircraft? Perhaps. Did God burn my toast this morning? Doubtful. That God cares less about toast than tragedy suggests that people may not be as promiscuous with mind perception as might be the case. Even swingers have standards, and there may be only a certain limited class of events that people are willing to assign to the Almighty. We suggest that *moral* events—those involving help and harm—uniquely compel people to locate an agent.

Searching for Moral Agents

In 1457, the inhabitants of a small French town witnessed a gruesome murder of a little boy (Humphrey, 2003; Oldridge, 2004). The perpetrator, a female, stole into the house while the child's mother was out and mutilated the little boy while he lay in bed. The townsfolk found the perpetrator covered in blood and immediately placed her on trial. The prosecutor convinced the jury of the defendant's evil intentions and moral turpitude, and the town soon sent for an executioner to hang the killer.

This story may not seem surprising—a murder followed by trial and punishment—but what distinguishes it is that the perpetrator was not a human but a pig who ate the young boy when his mother stepped out. That the townsfolk tried the sow instead of simply making bacon implies that they held the porcine perpetrator to be morally responsible, possessing as much ability to plan, intend, and act as any reasonable person. This story, though outlandish, is not an isolated event. Around the same time, peasants put a plague of locusts on trial for destroying a harvest and hung a horse for maliciously kicking a person (Humphrey, 2003). Before jumping to unkind conclusions of French peasantry, take note that they did not normally ascribe intention to livestock; they did so only for these kinds of events. What makes these events special?

One thing they all share is the lack of another agent to account for them. Without another person to blame, people need to find another intentional agent to imbue the event with meaning and allow some sense of control. Most strikingly, however, each of these events involves harm. Harms may be especially likely to need an agent because they are exceptionally important to organisms and therefore essential to control (Bering, 2002a; Seligman, 1975). These events also evoke strong negative emotions, and such feelings are likely to make people analyze situations to try to make sense of them (Bless et al., 1996; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Importantly, harms are *moral* events, as evidenced by these criminal trials, and we suggest that there is something special about moral events that leads us to search for agents. In the spirit of Barrett's (2004) notion of the hyperactive agent detector, it may be that people have a hyperactive *moral* agent detection device, triggered by instances of help and harm, that causes people to look for mind to hold *morally* responsible. So although it might be handy to find an agent behind a moving bush, it is only when that moving bush invokes our moral judgments by hurting or helping that people are compelled to locate an agent.

What makes moral events unique? Moral events are essentially dyadic and, whether good or evil, require at least two people. A theft needs both a thief and a victim, whereas donating needs both a donor and a beneficiary. In other words, moral events need both a moral agent (someone to do the action) and a moral patient (someone to receive the

action). Without both these roles, actions cease to become moral—a theft without a thief is simply losing your wallet, whereas a victimless theft is simply finding money. A moral dyad needs both a doer and a feeler. The dyadic structure of morality means that an isolated agent or patient should compel people to complete the moral dyad by inferring the presence of the complementary type. When people's moral intuitions tell them that either they or someone else has been the victim of an injustice (even when that injustice is simply random misfortune), our dyadic schema of morality tries to make a complete dyad. A person turned into an isolated patient by receiving harm should then automatically search for the responsible agent.

Anecdotally at least, people find moral agents for harm by suing others for random misfortune, hoping to blame someone for their experience of victimization. The need for moral agents can also be seen in therapists who blame parents and childhood acquaintances for the mental anguish of their clients (Dawes, 1994). At a perceptual level, the quest to find agents to complement isolated patients makes neutral targets appear more agentic when simply pictured next to moral patients (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009). Though people can make others (and even animals) responsible for moral outcomes, there are times when the magnitude of the deed exceeds human capacity. No single human seems able to cause famine or spare a city from a hurricane, and so such events are likely to lead people to infer the presence of a more powerful moral agent. This agent, of course, is God, and evidence suggests that He is invoked specifically for instances of help and harm that lack another mind to hold responsible.

In the realm of help, people seem to perceive the hand of God when salvation comes without a source of human agency—for example, being suddenly cured of a disease or miraculously escaping harm are events frequently attributed to heavenly influence (Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997; Spilka & Schmidt, 1983). Other studies also suggest that God is invoked more often to explain positive rather than negative outcomes (Lupfer, Tolliver, & Jackson, 1996; Pargament & Hahn, 1986), but we might also expect the opposite pattern. For one thing, negative events are more psychologically powerful than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Relative to positive events, negative events cause more motivated forgetting (Sedikides & Green, in press), evoke a stronger psychological and biological response (Taylor, 1991), and induce a greater need for sense making (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Research also finds that, relative to positive events, negative events are more likely to trigger intentional explanations (Knobe, 2005) and anthropomorphism (Morewedge, in press). Though moral typecasting might initially predict that people perceive God equally between help and harm, a cursory look at news headlines suggests that destruction and debilitation induce more attributions to the divine. Many saw God behind the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the tsunami that hit Asia in 2004 (deBorchgrave, 2005; Martel, 2006; Watanabe & Stammer, 2005), and historically religiosity boomed after Europe's black death in the 1400s (Ziegler, 1971). Although this evidence is informal, the next section explores empirical work suggesting that God completes the moral dyad best when people become moral patients through harm.

God's Agency and Our Suffering

The power of negative events to make us see God is suggested by a number of studies. One researcher who investigated prostate cancer survivors found that those with worse health gave a greater causal role to God for their disease (Gall, 2004), and others researchers have found that parents of children become more religious when their child was diagnosed with cancer (Spilka, Zwartjes, & Zwartjes, 1991). In a study examining paraplegics, Bulman and Wortman (1977) discovered that God was often held accountable for their accidents, whereas Pargament and colleagues (1990) found that Christians ascribed responsibility to God for a range of negative life events. As attributions to God seem to stem from specific instances of misfortune, we might expect that the more a population suffers in general, the more religious it should be. If bad is indeed stronger than good, then God should not thrive in times of plenty but in times of pain, with disease and trauma fueling His perception. Anthropological evidence provides support for this idea, as various societies invoke supernatural agents ("witchcraft") for instances of death, injury, and even the theft of one's genitals (Boyer, 2001; Lewis, 1995).

To discover if increased misery was linked to increased religiosity in the United States, we sought out measures of both religiosity and suffering for each of the 50 states. We obtained a nationally representative sample of religiosity labeled by state from the Pew Foundation (2008) and computed an index of misery from the United Health Foundation (2008), which calculates a comprehensive "health index" for each state that includes rates of infant mortality, cancer deaths, and infectious disease and also the incidence of violent crime and environmental pathogens. Reverse coding their index, then, provides quite a good "suffering index," and correlating it with the percentage of people who "strongly believe in God" provides clear support for the link between suffering and belief in God (Figure 2). Suffering and belief are significantly correlated across states, $r(48) = .69$, $p < .001$, and remain so even after controlling for both median income and education (percentage bachelor's degrees) in a regression ($\beta = .37$, $p < .01$).

Although it seems likely that suffering leads to a belief in God, these results are of course correlational, and so it could be that religiosity makes people more likely to be victimized or fall prey to disease. This seems unlikely, as studies have
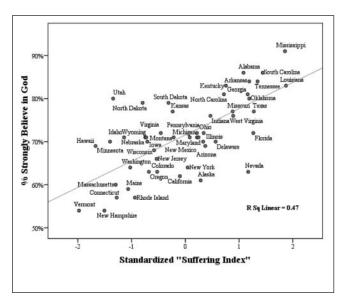
Figure 2. Scatterplot of U.S. states: Mean belief in God by suffering index
Note: The reverse of the United Health Foundation "health index."

Figure 3. Attributions of agency to God for one of four events

shown that religiosity increases longevity (Matthews et al., 1999; McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). There is also, of course, the issue of a third variable accounting for this link. Though income and education were controlled for, correlational studies can never entirely rule alternative explanations, and so experimental studies are needed. As a preliminary investigation of the power of suffering to invoke God, we developed a brief experiment that varied perceptions of the extent to which an incident caused suffering and also whether it could be attributed to another person. If belief in God is because of moral agency detection, God should be seen behind the incident only when both it was harmful and there was no other mind to account for it.

Participants were presented with a brief scenario, in one of four conditions given by a 2 × 2 matrix. The scenario concerned the Millers, a family picnicking in a remote valley when suddenly the water level rises. Participants were told either that the cause of the water was unknown or that it was caused by a malevolent dam worker upstream. They were also told that the water either drowns the whole family (including the family dog) or simply ruins their lunch. The prediction was that God would be attributed agency for the event only when the Millers die with no other mind behind the flood. Participants (N = 139) who indicated a belief in some higher power completed the survey by reading the vignette and answering how much the outcome of the story was part of God's plan (on a 5-point scale). A 2 (outcome: harm–no harm) × 2 (human agency: yes–no) analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 136) = 6.94$, $p < .05$, and simple effects tests found that God was assigned significantly more agency when the Millers died with no mention of other human agency relative to the other
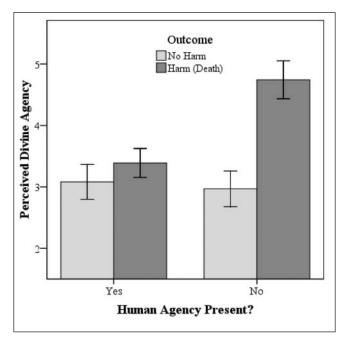
conditions, which did not differ from each other (see Figure 3). These results are consistent with past evidence in suggesting that God is invoked specifically for otherwise agent-less moral deeds.

There is another complementary explanation for why people think of God when misfortune comes knocking— relief. God may serve as the emissary of suffering, but He can also be an emotional crutch (Pargament et al., 1990). This would help to explain why suffering is correlated with religiosity, though it would not necessarily predict the results of our experimental study above. That God may be both the cause and the cure of hardship suggests another reason why harm leads us to God more strongly than help—with help people may thank Him, but with harm people both curse and embrace Him.

Moral Typecasting

Although God appears to fill the role of ultimate moral agent, taking responsibility for otherwise unintended moral acts, we are still left with the puzzle of His mind. Earlier on, we saw that God is perceived to possess Agency, a necessary quality for a moral agent, but that He lacks the capacity for Experience. It seems strange that God can be the ultimate moral agent and yet possess a reduced capacity for Experience, but we suggest that God lacks Experience not in spite of His role as moral agent but *because* of it.

Recall that morality is dyadic and that moral acts need two people, an agent and a patient. Within any single moral situation, a person can be only one of the agent or patient— either the thief or the victim, for example. The mutual

exclusivity of the two moral types within a dyad may seem obvious when dealing with any one moral situation, but research suggests that people extend this either–or relation beyond single moral situations to person perception more broadly and perceive people generally as *either* moral agents *or* moral patients (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009). As mentioned in the introduction, this phenomenon is called *moral type-casting* because people become "typecast" into only one moral role. Someone made into an agent remains an agent and cannot be seen as receiving good or evil; it is difficult to imagine Hitler or Gandhi being helped or victimized. Conversely, a moral patient remains a patient and cannot be seen as doing good or evil; it is hard to imagine a victim of attempted murder doing something wrong.

Research suggests that moral typecasting extends beyond the specific moral role to mind perception more generally, making it hard to see each moral type as having the mental capacities of the complementary type. As moral patients are characterized by Experience, it is hard to see those who do moral deeds as possessing this capacity. So, for example, virtuous moral agents (e.g., Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama) will tend to be seen as insensitive to pain or to pleasure. Indeed, in one study (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009, Study 7), participants judging how much pain should be given to various people if it *had* to be delivered were more likely to allocate pain to Mother Theresa than to an average person because she is seen as relatively less sensitive. Moral typecasting provides an easy route from hero to martyr—the saintly do not feel pain, so people do not mind their suffering.

Returning to God, the research reviewed thus far suggests why He is perceived to lack experience. Because people see God as exclusively responsible for moral deeds, it leads to Him being morally typecast as exclusively an agent. The more help and harm He metes out, the less He seems capable of Experience, until eventually He is characterized as generally lacking in emotion and sensation, the ultimate moral agent. We might also expect other supernatural agents presumed to be capable of moral outcomes (e.g., the Devil) to have a similar perceived mental composition.

Finding Moral Patients

Throughout this article, we have reviewed evidence suggesting that people believe in God (and perhaps other supernatural agents) because they need to find a moral agent to account for their suffering. Although the dyadic structure of morality leads people to infer the presence of an agent when presented with an isolated patient, the reverse should also be true. An isolated moral agent should prompt people to search for a patient, so that when someone appears to be doing something moral or immoral, people should infer the presence of someone being helped or harmed. Thus, the presence of a villain should lead to the perception of a victim and the presence of a hero should lead to the perception of someone who benefits. This idea suggests that people may have not only an automatic moral agent

detector but also an automatic moral *patient* detector. Harms and helps may need someone to intend them, but good and evil also need someone to be hurt or helped.

People appear to promiscuously perceive moral patients when they see someone who intuitively seems evil, whether it be a greedy government official, a negligent engineer, or a politician on the take, by simply assuming that such people must be harming others with their moral turpitude. Research also supports the idea of patient detection, as one study found that a neutral target who appears next to a moral agent is perceived as more patient like (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009, Study 6). Some of the best examples of inferring the presence of patients come from the domain of consensual crimes, such as marijuana use, where the presence of victims is unclear. A dyadic conception of morality suggests that if something seems wrong, it must hurt someone, but if it does not seem wrong, then it need not hurt anyone. That is why those who think marijuana smoking is immoral see it harming society, family, and youth, whereas those who see it as a morally irrelevant personal choice are much less likely to view it as harmful (McWilliams, 1993). Another example is that of homosexuality, as those who morally oppose this sexual orientation perceive it to pervert our children, whereas those who accept it are hard pressed to find any instances of harm (Bryant, 1977).

The sensitivity to moral patiency often focuses on the self. As people have both a strong sense of justice and a positive self-image, they feel that only good things should come their way in life (Lerner, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). When bad things eventually do befall them, they do not impassively evaluate such misfortune as bad luck but see it as a moral affront, feeling like they are victims of a moral injustice. Turning the events of life into moral injustices makes people see themselves as patients, which then necessitates the presence of a moral agent, whether it be another person or God (Cavendish, 1967; Goodman, 1988; Rosengren, Johnson, & Harris, 2000). In this way, automatically detecting patients leads to more agent detection: Harm violates people's implicit sense of justice, making them feel wronged, which then leads to the perception of a moral agent. This feedback loop can then continue, as future harm can then be seen as intended from an agent, which makes people feel like even more of a victim, necessitating an even more powerful moral agent, and so on. Such a feedback loop suggests that religion may be self-sustaining process, an endless cycle of harm, perceived injustice, and inferred moral agency that ties the events of life to the minds of supernatural agents.

Conclusion

One argument sometimes advanced for the existence of God is the "God of the Gaps," where He explains any phenomenon that science cannot explain. The research reviewed in this article suggests that God may be more accurately characterized as "God of the Moral Gaps," a supernatural mind

introduced into our perception of the world because of the underlying dyadic structure of morality. Seen in this light, God stems not only from agent detection but from patient detection as well, both of which arise from a persistent need to maintain the moral order of a universe consisting of moral agents and patients. Such a view of God can explain why He thrives on human suffering and why His mind is perceived as curiously one sided. The strange fact that motivated this article—that God is widely seen as incapable of feeling pain, pleasure, or other inner experience—makes sense when we recognize that He is perceived as the ultimate moral agent in a moral dyad that pairs God and self.

Perhaps the most interesting implication of having a God of the moral gaps is that His continued perception depends on the continued experience of suffering in need of an agent. From a memetic point of view (Blakemore, 1999), in which religion is seen as like any other idea competing for mental real estate, it makes sense for religion to encourage its adherents both to come to harm and to encourage moral interpretations of such harm. For example, faiths that send missionaries to dangerous locations can capitalize on the fact that people who live in harm's way should already be predisposed to believing in God. Seen in this light, it is understandable why some religions discourage their members from seeking orthodox medical treatment—the more harm that comes to them and their family, the more they believe. It also makes sense of why religions might encourage moralistic explanations for disasters, windfalls, and even the creation of the world. The mind of God would seem to thrive under such circumstances.

As we arrive at the end of the article, it may seem that despite the theories proposed and the evidence examined the mind of God remains unknown. After all, no one person would seem to have direct access to the thoughts of the divine, and those who claim to do so are often greeted with substantial skepticism. It may be that the mind of God is ultimately unknowable. Nevertheless, a large-scale international survey suggests that many people do claim to know the mind of God, and they perceive it to have only half the mental capacities of their own mind (H. M. Gray et al., 2007). Although such results might not be compelling in theological circles, they are in line with a host of psychological theories from the domains of morality, mind perception, and justice. It may be that the only way to truly know the mind of God is through prayer or revelation, but as psychologists we suspect that the best way to know the Almighty is by understanding the minds and lives of those who perceive Him.

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Note

1. A replication of the survey found again that God was located in the lower-right-hand corner of the mind perception graph, though this time He was not alone—Google was also seen to be solely a moral agent (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2008).

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