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Book Review

Not Omnipotent, but a Placebo

A review of Martin D. Jaffe, *The Primal Instinct: How Biological Security Motivates Behavior, Promotes Morality, Determines Authority, and Explains Our Search for a God*. Prometheus Books: Amherst, 2010, 120pp., US\$20.00, ISBN 978-1-61614-207-0 (paperback).

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Inspired by the events of 9/11, Dr. Martin Jaffe took a journey of self-reflection in search of what makes him tick. After many months he concluded that life's motivating factors are physical security and self-esteem. Finding it difficult to incorporate these two factors, he narrowed his focus to the concept of security, which integrates both the physical and the intellectual. Jaffe addresses topics such as attachment, morality, and authority in order to make his case that the purported effects of religion, God, and prayer are really placebo effects. In some ways, this conclusion surprises the reader. The initial chapters before he drops this bomb, seem to build a completely reasonable case of the role of self-mediations through the use of placebos and how we are designed to seek security. Neither premise is itself too controversial and as syllogistic logic demands, if you accept the premises, you must accept the conclusion. Jaffe not only concludes God does not exist, but he further explains that God is wrongly believed to exist because of a placebo effect.

Jaffe's first chapter is well thought out providing a basis for behavior, a background of biological security, and how it is the one driving force for humans and all living organisms. Through natural selection all genetic adaptations lead to an increase in security thus promoting survival. He explains that two types of security are present in humans, pre-intellectual and intellectual. The primary form of security found pre-intellectually involves physical strength and emotional feelings. With the development of higher intelligence in humans, reasoning is now used to determine security. Self-esteem helps to determine our intellectual feeling of security, but it should not be misconstrued with actual security. By taking a detailed look at humans' daily activities from working to socializing, Jaffe comes to a solid conclusion that physical and/or intellectual security is the objective of all human behavior.

Attachment is an important concept in psychology shown to be critical throughout the lifespan. Regardless of what type of relationship it is, the bond is generally described as either secure or insecure. Jaffe goes beyond the developmental model of attachment, and takes on a broader approach in which an individual can attach to anything or anyone that provides a form of security. We are attached to something or someone if it increases our security. Jaffe distinguishes nine ways (i.e., social attachment, God, evolutionary attachment, kin attachment, physical and mental actions, learning, memory, emotional identification, and intellectual identification) in which people identify and attach security. For instance, we feel secure in our social attachments, because we trust them to act on our behalf.

Chapter three cleverly begins with various definitions of morality. It really helped to drive home Jaffe's point of how these definitions describe a process of what ought to be, but are not dogmatic. So once again it comes down to security, we act morally out of our own self-interest. A moral act is performed for another's interest in order to increase their security. But what about altruism? Jaffe finds security and attachment to be the best explanations for altruism. An altruistic act is the same as a moral act but it is at the expense of the actor's security. It is easy to understand that Jaffe still sees security as the goal because the purpose of performing the act is to increase the security of the benefactor. A person needs to first be attached to another before they can empathize or sympathize with them. In the case where morality is exhibited with an unattached person there is a hope of attaching with that individual thus gaining more security for the actor. The closer the attachment the more likely the bonded individual will be treated as self. Feelings of security play a larger role than security itself in altruistic behavior. In extreme cases such as when an altruistic act leads to someone dying for a cause, it is still attributed to security. This is because they believed their own security was being sacrificed since they were so closely attached to the cause, person, country, or religion for which they died.

According to Jaffe, humans have a two-tiered mental system, emotional feeling and reasoning. Emotional feelings are the basis for religion, and reasoning is the basis for science. Even though reasoning evolved after emotional feelings, it did not replace it. The three elements of emotions (i.e., feelings, behavioral changes, and physiologic changes) are all actions taken to increase security. Emotional feelings monitor our level of security. Decision-making is a basic function of mental processes where emotional feelings are most important in the decision making process. Jaffe believes there is only need for one emotional feeling, and that is security. There are two sources of feeling secure. One is when feeling secure mimics actual security then in this case there is no difference between feeling secure and being secure.

Second, and more importantly for his argument, is when a difference does exist between feeling secure and being secure. This happens when one's feelings of security increases by imagining or creating an image of a secure event. In the form of operant conditioning, Jaffe postulates that one acts in self-interest to gain security in order to achieve pleasurable feelings. It is interesting how in both stressful situations and dealings with authority, like God, emotional feelings are used over reasoning.

This leads to Jaffe's sound conclusion that God is a placebo. People assume that when they feel more secure they are more secure. Faith is unquestionable trust brought about by emotional feelings. Scientists consider truth on the basis of reality, religious followers base truth on a sense of false security. Jaffe recognizes theists to be unyielding in

God is a placebo

their faith, because their belief in God makes them feel good, thus they will not question the concept of God fully buying into the placebo effect. Jaffe is fearful if religious individuals do not come to realize his truth then we will destroy ourselves never allowing science to fully prosper. Following in the footsteps of Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett, Jaffee hammers another nail in God's coffin.