



Critical Self-Correction

Wesley J. Wildman, Richard Sosis, Joseph Bulbulia & Michael L. Spezio

To cite this article: Wesley J. Wildman, Richard Sosis, Joseph Bulbulia & Michael L. Spezio (2016) Critical Self-Correction, Religion, Brain & Behavior, 6:2, 93-94, DOI: [10.1080/2153599X.2016.1171062](https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1171062)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1171062>



Published online: 22 Apr 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 48



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

EDITORIAL

Critical Self-Correction

Those working in the sciences prize opportunities for correcting major findings. Science is a self-correcting enterprise, in principle. In practice, however, active self-criticism and a willingness to revise cherished theories requires a culture that nurtures *fallibilism* and the *active pursuit of self-correction* as basic social virtues.

Social processes capable of cultivating those virtues are richly present in the bio-cultural study of religion. Such processes include the target articles, book symposia, and review articles featured in this journal. Issue 6.2 of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (RBB) includes several striking re-evaluations of vital threads in the tapestry of the bio-cultural study of religion.

To begin with, Yasha Hartberg, Michael Cox, and Sergio Villamayor-Tomas present a meta-analysis of studies in which religion played a role in community-based resource management. They employ the meta-analysis to revisit the classic question of cooperation-facilitating supernatural monitoring and supernatural punishment of free riders. Social mechanisms call for identifying supernatural punishments within the everyday world, which is a somewhat arbitrary process facilitated by belief in supernatural monitoring and punishment from supernatural punishers with culturally specific and local features. The findings of the meta-analysis suggest that these mechanisms probably work best in small-scale cultures, which has important implications for how to conceive the evolution of ideas of high gods. Could it be that theories of the origins and functions of high gods and post-Axial universal deities have relied more heavily on the mechanism of supernatural monitoring and punishment than empirical data can support? That's the process of critical self-correction at work in the bio-cultural study of religion.

Next, Jonathan Morgan revisits dual-process theory, another big plank in the platform of theories of the origins and functions of religion. Morgan's review article examines the received view—that religion is associated with fast and intuitive (type 1) cognition rather than deliberate and reflective (type 2) cognition—in light of empirical and theoretical developments in cognitive psychology that question a decisive separation between the two types. The new consensus within cognitive psychology is that there is a continuum between the two types and Morgan argues that religious cognition occurs at many places on the continuum. Could it be that theories of the origins and functions of religion have relied too heavily on the overly sharp distinction between modes of cognition that has failed to maintain support within cognitive psychology? Sometimes critical self-correction is stimulated by thorough engagement with sibling disciplines.

Claire White reports on a study of how people reason about reincarnation in two quite different cultural contexts. She finds that people in both settings identify a living person as the reincarnation of a deceased person based on common physiognomic features and special memories, and make the identification more confidently when the features are more sharply distinctive. It appears, therefore, that mundane person-recognition skills are deployed to create and to reason within reincarnation frameworks. This creates a cross-cultural basis for reincarnation beliefs and practices, by contrast with culture-only accounts still common in some parts of religious studies. In this case, the critical self-correction takes

place within the academic study of religion, generally, as it learns from the bio-cultural study of religion, specifically.

Rikard Roitto revisits a classic model of altruism. He enhances Hammond and Axelrod's computer simulation of cooperation by building in inter-group recruitment and possible changes in altruistic behavior. Hammond and Axelrod found that the ethnocentric strategy was superior and this makes it more difficult to explain the growth of religious traditions that self-consciously transcend ethnic identities. Roitto's modifications demonstrate that ethnicity-transcending altruism can outcompete ethnocentrism under a wide variety of circumstances. Here we see critical self-correction at work, challenging over-reliance on an influential computer simulation for interpreting the origins and growth of religious movements.

Finally, Lluís Oviedo offers a fairly comprehensive review of published research related to religious attitudes and prosocial behavior. He points out the scarcity of historical evidence bearing on the widely accepted view that religion evolved because of its ability to stimulate cooperation (in the sense of ingroup mutual help). He also evaluates the quality of the empirical studies examining associations between religion and cooperation, and causal connections from religion to cooperation. Moreover, he examines theoretical, meta-analytic, and hybrid studies of the question. Oviedo concludes that religion does not need to produce prosociality to appear, survive, and develop; but that it emerges, survives, and develops in a complex partnership with moral attitudes and behaviors. Might it be possible that leading theories of the evolutionary origins and functions of religion have underestimated the complexity of the web of relationships between religion and morality?

These five articles exemplify the rich diversity of methods and approaches active in the bio-cultural study of religion – field and laboratory experiments, cross-cultural studies, agent based modeling, meta-analyses – and beautifully illustrate the varied ways we activate critical self-correction within the bio-cultural study of religion. Through open-minded re-evaluation of key assumptions, we can advance both the bio-cultural study of religion and the academic study of religion more generally.

*Wesley J. Wildman
Richard Sosis
Joseph Bulbulia
Michael L. Spezio*