

2008). In other works we suggest that ritual, music, and symbolic practices are fundamental to establishing the informational and motivational settings that maintaining cooperative behaviors at small and large scales (Bulbulia 2004a; Bulbulia & Mahoney 2008; Sosis 2003; 2005).

To summarize, commitment theory is important to naturalistic study of belief because it reveals that a core subset of positive illusions are better approached as social goals, masquerading as beliefs. These ideologies interact with our social and cultural circumstances to promote accuracy, not in representing the world as it is, but rather in forecasting what we will do next.

Adaptive diversity and misbelief¹

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Abstract: Although it makes some progress, McKay & Dennett's (M&D's) proposal is limited because (1) the argument for adaptive misbelief is not new, (2) arguments overextend the evidence provided, and (3) the alleged sufficient conditions are not as prohibitive as suggested. We offer alternative perspectives and evidence, including individual differences research, indicating that adaptive misbeliefs are likely much more widespread than implied.

Evolutionary perspectives on adaptive misbelief are not new (Byrne & Kurland 2001; Haselton & Buss 2000; Trivers 1985; 2000; see also, Gigerenzer & Brighton 2009; Gigerenzer et al. 1999). What is new, however, is the precise analysis of the conditions of adaptive misbelief presented in the target article. Unfortunately, the target article's impact is limited by its reliance on controversial "better than average" effects and the relatively non-restrictive nature of the proposed sufficient conditions. Here, we briefly document these concerns and discuss some relevant phenomena in individual differences research. Ultimately, we argue that adaptive misbeliefs are likely much more widespread than is implied.

McKay & Dennett (M&D) suggest that adaptive misbeliefs are reflected in better-than-average and similar overconfidence type effects. However, there are concerns about the stability, universality, and reality of such illusions (Gigerenzer et al. 2008; Larrick et al. 2007; Moore & Healy 2008; see also, Juslin & Olsson 1997; Juslin et al. 2000). To illustrate, when most people report that they are better than average drivers they are not wrong or biased. Instead, data indicate that only a very small number of people are responsible for the vast majority of motor vehicle accidents. Thus, driving ability is not normally distributed and so most people are technically correct when they believe they are better than average drivers. This kind of example is not uncommon. Better-than-average and overconfidence type effects are often complicated by statistical artifacts and non-ecological task contexts (Gigerenzer et al. 1999; Krueger & Mueller 2002).

More problematic than the quality of the proposed evidence, however, are the following set of alleged sufficient conditions offered for systematic adaptive misbelief: (a) the belief is the result of "design" (where design is appropriately defined); (b) the belief misrepresents information to the possessor of the belief; (c) the misrepresentation of information is beneficial to the possessor of the belief (sect. 2, para. 5); and (d) the

misbelief is systematic (sect. 4). If these conditions are only sufficient, then in contrast to what is implied, M&D have not captured a unique way in which misbelief can be adaptive. Rather, they have only pointed out one of many possible ways. This worry results in interpretative issues with M&D's general argument.

Assuming that many beliefs could satisfy (a), it is unclear what degree of misrepresentation or benefit is sufficient for a belief to satisfy conditions (b) and (c). According to M&D, a misbelief is one that is "false," or "to some degree departs from actuality," or "to some extent wide of the mark" (sect. 1, para. 1). These comments indicate that any belief that departs from reality in any way satisfies condition (b). The only way a belief could fail to satisfy (b) is if the content of the belief does not even in part misrepresent reality. If that is correct, then it is likely many (if not most) of our beliefs satisfy condition (b) (something M&D realize, sect. 1). It is also unclear how and in what ways the misbelief must be beneficial in order to satisfy condition (c). We can grant that positive illusions may be adaptively beneficial to the possessors of those beliefs in a number of profoundly interesting ways. But again, it is a very modest and easily satisfied condition if the misbelief only needs to provide *some* adaptive benefit to the possessor.

Condition (d) also is satisfiable in a number of ways. M&D appear to endorse a "one size fits all" model of misbelief that would be adaptive for whoever holds such misbeliefs (condition [d]). But there is more than one way that misbeliefs can be systematic. For instance, there can be misbeliefs that are systematically related to stable individual differences among groups of people. There is evidence that personality traits (e.g., the Big Five) are related to individual differences in beliefs about the nature of the world (Langston & Sykes 1997) and to fundamental philosophical beliefs regarding moral objectivism, compatibilism, and intentional action (Cokely & Feltz 2009a; 2009b; Feltz & Cokely 2008; 2009).

To take just one example, those who are neurotic are likely to think that the world is dangerous. Those who are not neurotic tend not to have this belief (particularly so for extraverts and those who are agreeable) (Langston & Sykes 1997, p. 154). On the face of it, these are contrary beliefs. So, either neurotic individuals have a misbelief or non-neurotic individuals have a misbelief – and perhaps both have misbeliefs. Evidence also indicates that some personality types are related to beneficial life outcomes and that personality traits are partially genetic in origin (Bouchard 1994). Hence, it appears that at least some systematic individual differences in beliefs are likely to be excellent candidates to satisfy (a)–(d).

Given that it is likely that quite a few of our beliefs satisfy (a)–(d), M&D underestimate the number of misbeliefs that are adaptive. Moreover, it may be that individual differences in misbeliefs are adaptive for both the specific misbelieving actor and for other non-misbelieving members of their group. That is, differences in belief might enable more effective allocation of limited resources in groups, benefiting both accurate and misbelievers alike (Wolf et al. 2007). In summary, we argue that although the proposed parameters offered by M&D do provide substantive increases to theoretical specification, they do not support bold claims such as "the exchange rate with truth is likely to be fair in most circumstances" (sect. 15, final para.). It is possible that adaptive misbeliefs are in the minority; however, this has yet to be adequately evaluated and does not follow from the evidence or argument provided. In contrast, we suspect that there are many relatively unexplored opportunities for theoretical and translational progress at these frontiers (e.g., the modeling of decisions and design of better choice environments; Johnson & Goldstein 2003; Todd & Gigerenzer 2007; Weber & Johnson 2009).

NOTE

1. Authorship of this commentary is equal.

adaptive only against a broad background of true belief. Some commentators (e.g., **Dweck, Wilson & Lynn**) suggest that we held religious beliefs to a stricter standard than positive illusions, and we accept that, pending further research, religious beliefs may represent an important cultural subspecies of evolved misbelief. But as **Ainslie** notes, we are the endlessly tinkering, self-prospecting species, and such myths as we – or natural selection – may devise for ourselves are vulnerable to our insatiable curiosity. The tragic abyss that now opens before us is familiar from hundreds of tales, from Eve’s fatal apple and Pandora’s box, through Faust’s bargain, Bluebeard’s Castle and Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: What price knowledge? Are we better off not knowing the truth? This question presupposes, implausibly, that we might have a choice, but it is probably too late in the day to opt for blissful ignorance. Science has seen to that, letting the cat out of the bag (to cite one more version of the tale). Now that skepticism is ubiquitous, “practically realistic” myths (Wilson & Lynn; see also Wilson 2002) are in danger of losing whatever effectiveness accounts for their preservation up to now. The frequency in the social world of recursive meta-examinations (such as this article, along with thousands of others) has changed the selective pressures acting on such myths, making their extinction more likely, and not at all incidentally jeopardizing whatever benefits to us, their vectors, these myths may have provided.

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[The letters “a” and “r” before author’s initials stand for target article and response references, respectively]

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