**Idolizing the Indexical: Commentary on Van Leeuwen and van Elk**

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Van Leeuwen and van Elk (hereafter VL & vE) present an interesting new framework for explaining how evolved cognitive predispositions (in particular, agency-detection capacities) figure in the acquisition of religious beliefs. In this brief commentary we have two aims. First, we apply pressure to their crucial distinction between general religious beliefs and personal religious beliefs. Second, we consider the generality of their model; in particular, whether their account is necessarily specific to religion, or whether it is potentially applicable in other (non-religious) domains.

In distinguishing general and personal religious beliefs, VL & vE draw heavily on the notion of indexicals. According to VL & vE, general religious beliefs tend to be shared by co-religionists and do not *indexically* refer to the believers themselves. To use one of their examples, Francis’s belief that Jesus is the son of God is a general religious belief because it does not refer indexically to Francis. In contrast, Francis’s belief that God appeared to him last night is a personal religious belief, because—as represented by Francis (“God appeared to *me* last night”)—it refers directly and indexically to Francis himself.

According to VL & vE, background culture cannot provide a basis for the indexical constituents of personal beliefs. But this claim seems problematic. Consider the belief “Jesus loves me”. This belief refers directly and indexically to the believer, so is a personal religious belief on VL & vE’s definition[[1]](#footnote-1). But the background culture may well provide the basis for this belief and its indexical constituents, for example via exposure to the statement “Jesus loves you”, which appears on mugs and t-shirts, and yields over 8.6 million hits on Google. Moreover, this belief seems to be derivable by logical inference alone, from the more general belief “Jesus loves everyone”, which also appears on mugs and t-shirts (but admittedly only yields 262,000 hits on Google). VL & vE might respond that personal religious beliefs do not apply to the believer simply by inference from general beliefs; rather, they apply in a way that does not also apply to others. But their article is somewhat confusing on this point. Indeed, their example of a belief that could *not* be derived by logic alone from general beliefs (“God cured my cancer*”*) seems to us fairly easily derivable from general beliefs (e.g., the belief that “God is the ultimate cause of all things”). Elsewhere, VL & vE cite as an example of a general belief the statement “Jesus died for *my* sins” (emphasis added), which refers indexically to the believer, and therefore should—by their definition—make it a personal belief (though, of course, if Jesus died for *everybody’s* sins, it follows logically that he died for mine).

It may be that the general/personal distinction is intrinsically fuzzy, and that VL & vE just use it as a way of emphasising certain features of beliefs (presence of indexical constituents, basis in personal experience, autobiographical specificity) that make believers feel special and that boost their status when the belief is reported to others. But if VL & vE intend general and personal beliefs to be understood as encoded by different neurocognitive processes or networks (they speak repeatedly of supernatural agent concepts as “encoded in general religious beliefs”), then we think some more clarity about the distinction would be useful.

An additional point is that there seem to be some salient parallels between VL & vE’s general/personal distinction and HADD theory’s reflective/non-reflective distinction. For example, VL & vE summarize their own model with the following three propositions:

1. “Low-level experiences…mainly influence the formation of personal beliefs.”
2. “General beliefs…mostly arise from cultural learning from other people.”
3. “General beliefs…[are used by people to] interpret low-level experiences in a way that yields personal beliefs.”

Analogues of all three propositions may be found in Barrett and Lanman (2008). To the first point, Barrett and Lanman claim that HADD experiences lead people to make non-reflective inferences about the presence of intentional agents. To the second, they certainly think that reflective beliefs are the product of enculturation. Finally, Barrett and Lanman argue that explicit instruction (i.e., of reflective beliefs) and other kinds of cultural scaffolding can establish non-reflective beliefs in individuals and communities. Our claim here is not that general beliefs are like reflective beliefs and personal beliefs are like non-reflective beliefs; but that Barrett and Lanman’s proposal for how one gets from low-level experiences to religious beliefs bears a general resemblance to VL & vE’s: HADD experiences lead to non-reflective beliefs that are interpreted via culturally available concepts to produce reflective beliefs.

We turn now to briefly consider the generality of VL & vE’s model. The IREM is explicitly a model of how *religious* beliefs transmitted through culture interact with low-level experiences, including agency intuitions. VL & vE claim that culturally acquired (general) religious beliefs prompt believers to seek out relevant experiences, which they then interpret through the lens of the general beliefs, and that they do this in pursuit of personal religious beliefs.

Is this model potentially applicable to other, non-religious, domains? VL & vE say:

A HADC-based agency-intuition allows a believer to transition from merely having the general belief that God exists to having the personal belief that God visited me (and so on, mutatis mutandis, for other triads of general belief, low-level intuition, and personal belief).

Might these precepts apply for *non-religious* triads of general belief, low-level intuition, and personal belief? The domain of sexual perception is one possible candidate. Just as CSR scholars have suggested that humans have an evolved predisposition to over-infer the presence or activity of agents, other theorists – using similar evolutionary logic – have suggested that males are biologically predisposed to interpret ambiguous female behaviour as signals of sexual interest and intent (Haselton, 2003; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Murray, Murphy, von Hippel, Trivers, & Haselton, 2017; cf. McKay & Efferson, 2010; Perilloux & Kurzban, 2015, 2017). It may be that individual males use cultural information (distorted or otherwise) about the sexual receptivity of females (including utterances by prestigious individuals such as the US president: “[W]hen you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything…”) to interpret their own social experiences with females, and that they do so in the service of forming personal beliefs about their own sexual prospects and appeal. We leave it to others to further explore the utility of the IREM in this and other domains.

**References**

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1. VL & vE say a number of things about each type of religious belief but do not specify which of their statements are stipulative and which are argumentative. We have read VL & vE as *defining* personal religious beliefs in terms of the presence of indexical constituents directly referencing the agent holding the belief; and as *arguing* that personal beliefs form when general beliefs are used to interpret low-level experiences such as agency-intuitions and feelings of presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)