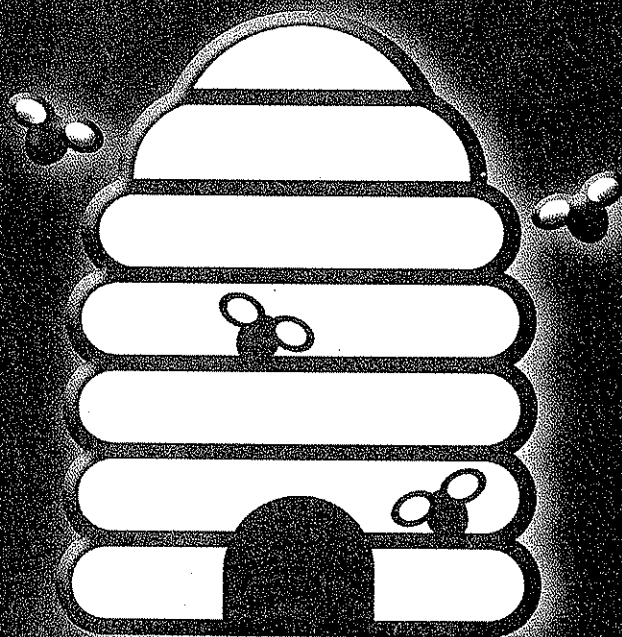


# Humans Are Hive Creatures

Jonathan Haidt



In my book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, I examined ten ancient psychological claims and critiqued them, using modern research to tell a story about the optimum conditions for individuals to flourish. Most of these conditions are familiar, such as love, work, and control over one's life. But what you may not know—indeed I didn't, until I was almost finished with the book—is that happiness comes “from between.”

▷ Buddhists and Stoics have long told us that happiness comes from within ourselves and that we should cultivate mental discipline instead of trying to make the world conform to our wishes. The common wisdom of the Western world tells us that happiness comes from outside ourselves—we strive to attain the things we want or need—a good lover, a good job, etc. But I have been forced to conclude that happiness does indeed come from between.

This notion kept suggesting itself through recurring images of webs and beehives. I saw hints of the idea in Durkheim's treatise on suicide, in which he found that those who were most closely connected to others were the least likely to kill themselves, while those who had the fewest ties were most at risk. I saw another hint in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of “vital engagement”—the characteristic of a person who has become engaged in a flow-giving practice and become involved with a community and a tradition related to the practice.

The idea intensified when I read the historian William McNeill's analysis of culturally and historically ubiquitous practices in which people move together in time (marching, dance, and religious ritual) and thereby unify the community in the pursuit of collective goals. The conclusion crystallized when I read David Sloane Wilson's book *Darwin's Cathedral*, which describes how multi-level group selection may have shaped the last hundred thousand years of human evolution. Wilson argues that gods (cultural products) and brains that give rise to religious experiences (biological products) co-evolved, because groups that could bind themselves together and suppress self-interest through cultural mechanisms (religions that preach cooperation and self-suppression) were more effective at competing with other groups.

It was an epiphany for me. As a social psychologist, I had spent my career studying individuals and the psychological mechanisms by which individuals think about other individuals. But suddenly, I realized that we social psychologists were like entomologists studying individual bees in a cage without knowing that the bees lived in hives. Everything fell into place, particularly the endur-

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ing appeal of religion. The human mind has been sculpted by recent evolution for life in hives—tribes held together by religious practices and sacralized traditions.

In the European Enlightenment, we busted out of our hives and invented ways of living more autonomously. This move unleashed torrents of human energy that had previously gone into hive maintenance and intergroup competition. It was now freed up for invention, creativity, and capitalism. We are all beneficiaries of this change.

But there has been a cost. While modern life presents us with endless possibilities for self-expression and self-gratification, many people find such a life ugly and pointless. Many people in Western societies hunger for meaning, community, and purpose. The hive was broken down in stages, from the Enlightenment through the anti-authoritarian 1960s, but many of our fellow citizens are now trying to put it back together. The extreme form of this urge is religious fundamentalism—the desire to structure families, schools, courts, and nations under God, using God's laws as revealed in the Bible, the Qur'an, or other writings held sacred.

Most of the readers and writers of FREE INQUIRY are atheists, and many are hostile to religion. I, too, am an atheist, but, in researching *The Happiness Hypothesis*, I lost my hostility toward religion. Yes, theistic religions are all based on error (in my opinion). And yes, religions are obstacles to many reforms that would improve the quality of life for millions. But when we atheists try to do a cost-benefit analysis about religion, we get it wrong, because we are biased by hostility and unable to see certain benefits.

A recent analysis by the philosopher Patrick Grim put religiously inspired genocides, wars, and terrorist attacks on one side of the balance sheet and the altruism of missionary workers on the other, and then he disingenuously claimed that he was not sure whether religion came out in the red or the black. What we atheists often fail to see is that churches exert a constant pressure on their members to suppress self-interest and work for the good of others, even if those others are mostly other members of the church. When you add up these small bits of care, charity, and kindness, spread across billions of people for centuries, then Grim's uncertainty becomes quite justified. When you add in the ways that religion enriches, deepens, and sacralizes people's lives, and the fact that highly religious people are consistently found to be happier than others, I begin to suspect that the balance sheet for religion might show positive results.

I am not saying that religion is necessary for human well-being or for the creation of a moral community. Human flourishing and virtuous communities can be created without gods, but I believe that such communities will be satisfying to their members only if alternative ways can be found to give them the sense of coherence, community, and purpose that religions evolved (in tandem with our brains) to produce. Universities, for example, are great examples of such communities. They have stable departments nested within schools (or colleges) nested within the larger university (like the nested structure of the Catholic Church), and all their members pull together (at least occasionally) at the different levels of the organization. Universities have "sacred" values (truth and tolerance), shared heroes (Socrates, Newton, Shakespeare), annual rites (gradua-

tion, complete with special dress and diplomas in Latin), rivalries (with a few specific other universities), and an easy way for members to feel that they are contributing to something larger (the prestige of the university, the advancement of knowledge, the training of the next generation). I suspect that the high level of community, coherence, and purpose in academic life is one reason that atheism is so common at universities: academic communities already provide many of the benefits of religion.

Happiness comes not from within or from outside ourselves; it comes from getting the right relationships between an individual and others, between oneself and work, and something larger than oneself—some noble purpose that is pursued with a community of others. This is why religions, like universities, make hive creatures like us happy. ■■



## The Round Square By Jamey Hecht

Why is there a world at all? Guy stands up  
and says,  
God made the world, and as for who made  
God, well,  
That's just a mystery beyond us. Woman says,  
A round square is not a mystery beyond us;  
It's neither real nor imaginary, it's not a  
concept,  
Not an object, neither nothing nor an Entity.  
He says, that's what I'm saying, it's  
incomprehensible.  
No, she says, there's nothing there to  
comprehend.  
He says, of course there is, and we both  
know it.  
She says, you're bobbing for apples of  
relief, love  
And immortality and along comes a word.  
The word  
Is a noun and pretty soon you're making it  
the subject  
Of a world of verbs, and then the miracles  
begin. She says,  
God is logic's corpse, a wound in reason,  
grammar's empty skin.

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*Jamey Hecht's poetry and fiction have appeared in Black Warrior Review, the Sycamore Review, and River City. He is the author of Plato's Symposium: Eros and the Human Predicament (Macmillan, 1999) and Sophocles' Three Theban Plays, Translated with an Introduction and Notes (Wordsworth Editions, 2004). He lives in Los Angeles.*