

Ideas

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Inside the baby mind

It's unfocused, random, and extremely good at what it does. How we can learn from a baby's brain. | BY JONAH LEHRER

WHAT IS IT like to be a baby? For centuries, this question would have seemed absurd: behind that adorable facade was a mostly empty head. A baby, after all, is missing most of the capabilities that define the human mind, such as language and the ability to reason. Rene Descartes argued that the young child was entirely bound by sensation, hopelessly trapped in the confusing rush of the here and now. A newborn, in this sense, is just a lump of need, a bundle of reflexes that can only eat and cry. To think like a baby is to not think at all.

Modern science has largely agreed, spending decades outlining all the

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things that babies couldn't do because their brains had yet to develop. They were unable to focus, delay gratification, or even express their desires. The Princeton philosopher Peter Singer famously suggested that "killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all."

Now, however, scientists have begun to dramatically revise their concept of a baby's mind. By using new research techniques and tools, they've revealed that the baby brain is abuzz with activity, capable of learning astonishing amounts of information in a relatively short time. Unlike the adult mind, which restricts itself to a narrow slice of reality, babies can take in a much wider spectrum of sensation — they are, in an important sense, more aware of the world than we are.

This hyperawareness comes with several benefits. For starters, **BABIES, Page C2**

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Beyond belief

Research on religion goes after a new target: the secular | BY NATHAN SCHNEIDER

RELIGION CAN BE good for more than the soul, a growing number of studies seem to say. Over the past decade, academic research on religiosity has exploded, and with it has come a raft of publications suggesting that spiritual beliefs and practices can add years to life, lower blood pressure, or keep at-risk kids on the straight and

narrow.

As sociologists, psychologists, and physicians turn their attention to measuring the effects of religion, often fueled by grant money from private foundations, the results have percolated swiftly through weekend sermons and the popular media. Being nonreligious, one might

conclude, looks more and more like a danger to your health.

But as the academic interest in religion has mounted, some scholars have begun to call this picture into question. What's missing, they believe, is a comparable examination into the lives of nonreligious people and **RELIGION, Page C4**

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even the potential benefits of nonbelief. Galvanized by a desire to even the scales, these researchers have been organizing academic centers to study the irreligious, conducting major surveys, and comparing their findings. They've already found that convinced atheists appear just as well equipped to cope with hardship as convinced believers, and that some of the world's healthiest societies have the lowest levels of piety.

"There now seems to be a critical mass of people studying secularism," says Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist at Pitzer College, "and I think that is a big new development."

Philosophical reflection about nonbelief has been common since Nietzsche declared the death of God more than a century ago, but scientific research on it has been rare. Though still preliminary, the new work has already begun shining new light on the lives of the nonreligious. They are a difficult-to-define minority in the United States, where the vast majority identify themselves as religious in some sense. But this research is leading to a more sophisticated understanding of how people believe — and of how the lines between religion and irreligion are less certain than we realize.

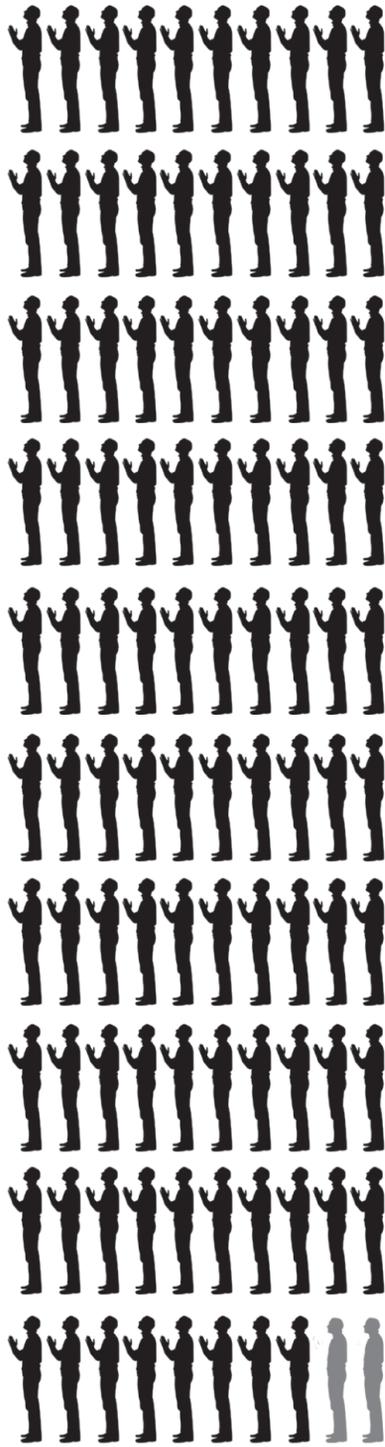
IT WASN'T UNTIL the late 1980s that social scientists and medical researchers began to study religious belief and its effects quantitatively. For a long time, the spiritual had generally been assumed to be an inappropriate subject for empirical investigation. But a surge of academic interest in religion, together with an influx of money, changed that.

The Pennsylvania-based John Templeton Foundation, whose eponymous founder longed to see science and spirituality brought closer together, helped turn the field into an academic growth industry, sprouting research centers and conferences around the world. Last year alone, it gave away more than \$70 million.

In the social sciences, Templeton joined older foundations with an interest in religion, such as the Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Today, these foundations each fund ambitious sociological surveys devoted to better understanding the religious makeup of the United States. The study of religion now sits comfortably in some surprising corners of the academic and scientific establishment: While in 1992 only five American medical schools offered courses related to religion, 101 did by 2005.

But in all this enthusiasm, one group has been largely ignored. "People who truly have no religion are not very well understood," says David Yamane of Wake Forest University, editor of the journal *Sociology of Religion*.

The few studies that did treat nonbelief seriously offered tantalizing hints that to look only at religiosity was to miss an important part of the spectrum of human belief. One study conducted in 1985 by German psychologist Franz Bugge and his colleagues suggests that neither religion nor irreligion has a monopoly on improving people's mental health. Among 174 people surveyed, it found that two groups enjoyed the lowest scores on a scale of depression: the most pious Christians and the convinced atheists. Those in the middle, the lukewarm believers, were most likely to be depressed. In 2005,



It's hard to tell how many Americans are unbelievers: While less than 2 percent in one survey declared themselves overtly agnostic or atheist, fully 27 percent didn't expect to have a religious funeral.

a team at Newcastle University in Britain reported a similar result.

More recently, Karen Hwang, a professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, decided to examine atheists at risk for depression more closely. Hwang's interviews with atheists suffering from spinal cord injuries revealed how becoming debilitated strengthened their convictions, and their convictions strengthened them. "It doesn't matter so much what a person believes in," she says, "but how consistent and cohesive their worldview is."

Irreligion is an increasingly important part of the religious landscape in the United States. The American Religious Identification Survey made headlines in 2001 when it reported that the number of people with no religious affiliation had increased sharply since 1990, from 8.2 to 14.1 percent. The latest report, released last month, put the number at 15 percent. It also underscored why identifying these so-called "nones" isn't easy. While only 1.6 percent of respondents declared themselves agnostic or atheist outright, more than 12 percent said they don't believe in God or aren't sure. Further, fully 27 percent don't expect to have a religious funeral.

The growth documented by the survey has generated fresh interest in nonbelief. In 2005, the survey's directors, sociologists Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, founded an Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Connecticut, the first of its kind in this country. The institute sponsors original research and public events, and provides curriculum materials for college courses about the history and development of secularism.

In the last month, two new organizations have appeared online, Joseph Hammer's Center for Atheist Research and Lois Lee's Non-religion and Secularity Research Network. Hammer, a psychology graduate student at the University of Missouri, and Lee, a sociology graduate student at Cambridge University, have eagerly reached out to others who share their interests. "We're all looking to support each other in this," says Hammer. Their websites will include bibliographies, discussion forums for scholars in the field, and surveys in which visitors can take part.

One of the banner carriers for the new research is Zuckerman, the Pitzer College sociologist. His new book, "Society without God," offers a revealing portrait of irreligion in Denmark and Sweden, countries where paltry levels of church attendance coincide with economic prosperity, low crime, and abounding quality of life. These nations challenge the claim that piety is a prerequisite for a healthy society, but Zuckerman also takes care not to go too far in the other direction. "People think I'm arguing that secularity causes good social outcomes, and that's not necessarily the case," he says.

Careful study of secular life, he adds, "should be done because people are still calling it unnatural, odd. No — it's part of the human condition, always has been, and always will be."

UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES | BY KEVIN LEWIS



WESLEY BEDROSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Very soft dominoes

EVER SINCE PRESIDENT EISENHOWER embraced it in a 1954 press conference, the "domino" theory of international relations has animated much of our foreign policy, from Vietnam to Iraq. In essence, the theory proposes that a change of regime in one country causes neighboring regimes to fall like dominoes in the same political direction. However, a new statistical analysis of the spread of democracy among 130 countries over 150 years suggests a more nuanced view. While the data do support a democratic domino effect, it's quite weak. Consider that most countries have multiple neighbors and competing influences on their politics. For example, Iraq may be a new beacon of democracy in the Middle East, but there have been other beacons for a while (e.g., Israel, Turkey).

Leeson, P. & Dean, A., "The Democratic Domino Theory: An Empirical Investigation," *American Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

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The power of a role model

AS BARACK OBAMA has risen to national prominence, pundits have debated whether his success changes the nature of race relations in America. A new study offers a scientific test of this proposition. Researchers administered tests of verbal ability to a nationwide sample of blacks and whites at four time points — twice in the middle of the campaign, and twice right after Obama's nomination and election. In general, controlling for age, English proficiency, and education level, whites scored significantly higher than blacks. However, this difference shrank to insignificance right after Obama's nomination (for those who watched his speech) and right after the election. This suggests that a role model like Obama can have a powerful effect on performance.

Marx, D. et al., "The 'Obama Effect': How a Salient Role Model Reduces Race-Based Performance Differences," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (forthcoming).

Don't underestimate yourself

ARE YOU ONE of those people who prepares for the possibility of bad news by assuming the worst? New research suggests this is not a good way to live. In one experiment, students took a computerized personality test and then had to wait around for the "official" results. While waiting, the computer randomly offered them a good or bad unofficial prediction of the outcome. After receiving the "official" results, students felt the same regardless of which expectation they had been given — students with bad results felt equally bad, and students with good results felt equally good. In other words, having low expectations didn't give people an extra psychological boost after beating expecta-

tions. Likewise, students who had low expectations of their performance on midterm exams did not feel better than students with high expectations after getting their exams back. The authors speculate that people cling to the low-expectations strategy because they falsely assume that the initial emotional impact from learning the actual outcome will last for a long time.

Golub, S. et al., "Anticipating One's Troubles: The Costs and Benefits of Negative Expectations," *Emotion* (April 2009).

Border danger, by the numbers

ONE OF THE central issues in the immigration debate is border security. Now, a team of researchers has created what may be the first comprehensive mathematical model of the US-Mexico border, and the results aren't encouraging. Even with a recently expedited deportation process, the probability of a terrorist successfully crossing the border is estimated at 93 percent. The analysis also suggests that the main bottleneck is the number of beds in immigration detention facilities; if there are no free beds, individuals are released into the United States with only a court notice. The authors note that even the comprehensive legislation put forth in 2007 would have come up short by more than 10,000 beds. Worse, even with a much bigger government budget, a terrorist would still have a pretty good chance of getting in. Granted, the mathematical model is not a perfect representation of what is ultimately a complex reality, but then that raises the question of how well anyone really understands the border.

Wein, L. et al., "Analyzing the Homeland Security of the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Risk Analysis* (May 2009).

The trouble you aren't noticing

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS OFTEN cite the boiling frog metaphor to explain the danger of climate change: If you put a frog in boiling water, he will jump out; if you put him in tepid water and slowly turn up the heat, he will just sit there and cook. Unfortunately, this metaphor may also reflect a more fundamental acceptance of any deteriorating state of affairs, including deviant behavior. In four experiments, researchers found that people were much more likely to tolerate deviant behavior (in this case, cheating) if it developed gradually than if it happened abruptly. The effect held even when people were paid to detect deviant behavior.

Gino, F. & Bazerman, M., "When Misconduct Goes Unnoticed: The Acceptability of Gradual Erosion in Others' Unethical Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (forthcoming).

