

Intuitive thinking may influence belief in God

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Intuition may lead people toward a belief in the divine and help explain why some people have more faith in God than others, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

In a series of studies, researchers at Harvard University found that people with a more intuitive thinking style tend to have stronger beliefs in [God](#) than those with a more reflective style. Intuitive thinking means going with one's first instinct and reaching decisions quickly based on automatic [cognitive processes](#). Reflective thinking involves the questioning of first instinct and consideration of other possibilities, thus allowing for counterintuitive decisions.

"We wanted to explain variations in belief in God in terms of more basic cognitive processes," researcher Amitai Shenhav said. "Some say we believe in God because our intuitions about how and why things happen lead us to see a divine purpose behind ordinary events that don't have obvious human causes. This led us to ask whether the strength of an individual's beliefs is influenced by how much they trust their natural intuitions versus stopping to reflect on those first instincts."

The research was published online in the [Journal of Experimental Psychology: General](#). The study from the Harvard University Psychology Department was conducted by Shenhav, a doctoral student; post-doctoral fellow David Rand, PhD; and associate professor Joshua Greene, PhD.

In the first part of the study, 882 U.S. adults, with a mean age of 33 and consisting of 64 percent women, completed online surveys about their belief in God before taking a cognitive reflection test. The test had three [math problems](#) with incorrect answers that seemed intuitive. For example, one question stated: "A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1 more than the

ball. How much does the ball cost?" The automatic or intuitive answer is 10 cents, but the correct answer is 5 cents. Participants who had more incorrect answers showed a greater reliance on intuition than reflection in their thinking style.

Participants who gave intuitive answers to all three problems were 1 ½ times as likely to report they were convinced of God's existence as those who answered all of the questions correctly. That pattern was found regardless of other demographic factors, such as the participants' political beliefs, education or income. "How people think -- or fail to think -- about the prices of bats and balls is reflected in their thinking, and ultimately their convictions, about the metaphysical order of the universe," the journal article stated.

Participants with an intuitive thinking style also were more likely to have become more confident believers in God over their lifetimes, regardless of whether they had a religious upbringing. Individuals with a reflective style tended to become less confident in their belief in God. The study also found that this pronounced link between differing thinking styles and levels of faith could not be explained by differences in the participants' thinking ability or IQ. "Basic ways of thinking about problem solving in your everyday life are predictive of how much you believe in God," Rand said. "It's not that one way is better than the other. Intuitions are important and reflection is important, and you want some balance of the two. Where you are on that spectrum affects how you come out in terms of belief in God."

In another study, with 373 participants, the researchers found they could temporarily influence levels of faith by instructing participants to write a paragraph describing a personal experience where either intuitive or reflective thinking led to a good result. One group was told to describe a time in their lives when intuition or first instinct led to a good outcome, while a second group was

instructed to write about an experience where a good outcome resulted from reflecting and carefully reasoning through a problem. When they were surveyed about their beliefs after the writing exercise, participants who wrote about a successful intuitive experience were more likely to report they were convinced of God's existence than those who wrote about a successful reflective experience.

These studies suggest a causal link between intuitive thinking and a belief in God, but the researchers acknowledged the opposite may also be true, that a belief in God may lead to intuitive thinking. Future research will help explore how cognitive styles are influenced by genes and environmental factors, such as upbringing and education, Rand said.

More information: "Divine Intuition: Cognitive Style Influences Belief in God," Amitai Shenhav; David G. Rand, PhD; and Joshua D. Greene, PhD; Harvard University; Journal of Experimental Psychology: General; online.

Provided by American Psychological Association
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