
Book Reviews

Ritual, Play, and Belief in Evolution and Early Human Societies

Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd, eds.

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Ritual, Play, and Belief in Evolution and Early Human Societies examines ritual in prehistoric human societies using information derived from cognitive and evolutionary studies. Specifically, the volume focuses on the relationships between ritual and play behaviors in animals and humans and how the similarities in both suggest the “deep-rooted biological foundations of play” (p. 1). A second and related overarching theme investigates the relationships between play, ritual, and rule-structured games in early human societies. The contributors come from a variety of disciplines including archaeology, psychology, and evolutionary biology. This diversity is reflected both in the different subjects presented in each

chapter and the lines of evidence used, including animal behavioral studies, fossil data, archaeological materials, and textual sources, among others.

The chapters in this volume are organized into three sections centered around three major themes. Chapters 1 and 2 serve as introductory chapters, with chapter 2 presenting several different definitions of the volume’s key concepts as understood within the relative disciplines of the book’s contributors. The first organized section (chapters 3 through 7) looks specifically at play behaviors in animals and humans and the evolutionary and ecological processes relating them. Arguably, through play young animals develop moral behaviors as well as a sense of fairness (chapter 3); moreover, play is a functional activity with real biological costs (chapter 4). Chapter 5 and chapter 6 use evolutionary and development perspectives to look at pretend play, which both present as a distinctive feature of play in human children. In particular, chapter 6 uses brain size and dental development to identify different life stages in fossil hominins and explores how and when play behavior evolved with respect to human

cognition. The evidence is incredibly compelling for the emergence of an early-childhood development phase in which pretend play features as a key cognitive behavior over the course of our evolution from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*.

The second section, chapters 8 through 13, examines the relationships between ritual behaviors, play, and performance in various ancient societies from ancestral Pueblo and early China to the classic Maya and the neolithic Near East. Here contributors explore how different play and ritual traditions overlap and how forms of play can become ritualized, arguing that architecture, iconography, ritual paraphernalia, and, above all, performance are critical aspects of ritual practice in the formation of large-scale communities and social identities. Some mention of animals and their link to ritual practices and beliefs occurs in chapters 8 through 11, and other chapters specifically focus on this relationship. Chapter 12 shows how early Chinese societies used animal behavior patterns as models for prescriptive and regulated human social and ritual behavior via analogy and metaphor. Animals play a much different role in human ritual practices in chapter 13; instead of modeling behaviors, animals are the focus of the rituals themselves through the direct manipulation of their remains.

The contributions in the third section, chapters 14 through 18, look particularly at rule-structured games as extensions of the play concept and their relation to ritual practices and religious beliefs, while demonstrating a significant overlap between games, sports, and ritual. Sometimes animals were explicitly part of

sporting and ritual events, such as the bull sports observed in Egyptian and Aegean societies (chapter 14) and Minoan Crete (chapter 15). In other examples, the role of animals was more symbolic. Jaguars are linked to the Mesoamerican ball game because they were symbolically associated with rain, which was also related via analogy to human blood. Both rain and blood are key themes in ball game rituals, as evidenced by the purposeful flooding of the ballcourts where these games were played (chapter 17).

Finally, concluding chapters 19 through 21 take an overarching look at the preceding discussions to see how well the case for a relationship between play and ritual has been made. Chapter 19 makes the excellent point that whatever definition of play one uses matters little to archaeology if we do not have the methodology to identify such behaviors in the record. At the same time, there are clear parallels between play and ritual, whether it be from a suspension of belief (chapter 20) or underlying cognitive abilities (chapter 21). Thus, positing a relationship between the two follows logical reasoning, and with better methods archaeologists should be able to identify the (often implicit) material remains of play and ritual activities in the past.

Overall, the volume's authors make a good case for linking play and ritual behaviors together given the emphasis placed on performance and belief as central aspects of both. Moreover, the evidence is convincing that play behaviors perform an important role in cognitive development and human evolution. Where the linkages suffer lies in connecting evolutionary processes at one end to religious beliefs at

the other. In some respects, the concepts as laid out in this volume are like ring species—one can see the links between them, but the ends do not resemble each other at all. Thankfully, those authors who specifically look at play and ritual behaviors in cognitive development do not argue that the latter are a direct outcome of evolutionary processes, but rather that these behaviors are possible because of the cognitive abilities play engenders.

Although there is strong coherence in the collective focus on ritual and play as broad concepts, how closely each author approaches these topics varies, especially with respect to animals and animal play behaviors and the links to cognitive development and evolutionary processes. Despite these issues, the evidence and subjects explored in this volume are well presented. The chapters do presume some knowledge of biological, evolutionary, and archaeological concepts and theories; thus, the book is more appropriate for readers with some background in these disciplines. Ultimately, this volume gives readers interesting insights into the role of play, belief, and ritual in both evolutionary processes and, the somewhat related development of early human societies from a wide range of perspectives and case studies.

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Wit's End: What Wit Is, How It Works, and Why We Need It

James Geary

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2018. Notes and bibliography, illustration credits, and index. 128 pp. \$23.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780393254945

It has been difficult to write a review for James Geary's *Wit's End: What Wit Is, How It Works, and Why We Need It*. It is a book about being clever and finding paradoxical connections between disparate things. Layers of nuanced understanding of the newly connected things form in the process. It is not that the book is problematic. Hardly! Indeed, it is insightful and fun, illuminating how we can creatively "connect the dots" through play. Rather, it has been difficult to write this review because I have been struggling with how to make it also at least partially clever. I mean, how could someone write a dry review of a book dripping with wit?

I first thought I should riddle this review with puns (what could be more fun?). That is how Geary starts, deconstructing the pun and framing what makes some puns true wit. Hint: it is more about juxtaposing meanings to shed new light on a situation than merely using homonyms or rhymes. As I kept reading, however, I discovered that each chapter was laid down in a different literary style, so I thought that maybe I could follow suit and attempt a review in verse. This, unfortunately, revealed to me how terrible a writer I am, my own clumsiness foiling any demonstration of rapier wit. Here is an excerpt:

Even the lowest form of wit under the sun,
the pun,
can expose creatively through some
much-needed levity.
Puns work best when they make ideas