

INTERNATIONAL BOOKS OF THE YEAR

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George Ainslie's *Breakdown of Will* (Cambridge University Press) breaks new ground on an ancient topic. As any economist will tell you, it is rational to discount the future, and we all do it. (Which would you prefer – £100 next Monday or £100 a year from next Monday?) But we don't do it well, Ainslie shows, unless we contort ourselves with a variety of ploys invented over the millennia. Evolution has apparently designed us to favour a less-than-optimal "hyperbolic" discount curve instead of the optimal "exponential" curve, but unlike animals without the benefit of culture evolution, we've noticed this awkward flaw in our animal motivation system, and our attempts to compensate for it generate many of the phenomena that have baffled theorists of addiction, self-control and related topics for several millennia. "Philosophers and psychologists are used to speaking about an organ of unification called the 'self' that can variously 'be' autonomous, divided, individuated, fragile, well-bounded, and so on, but this organ doesn't have to exist as such." Indeed, but as a virtual organ the self is an admirable construction, the outcome of a variety of "pico-economic" deals made by competing "interests" in our psyches. Another fine contribution to the Darwinian research tradition is the anthropologist Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* (Basic Books) which overturns traditional (and threadbare) theses about the biological, social and psychological functions of religion, and replaces them with acutely observed, well-argued alternatives. Contrary to the galling stereotype, these books are deeper, better informed, and much more original than the Darwin-free fare that is still favoured by some thinkers in the humanities and social sciences.
