

Dr. Lisa Goddard

The Cognitive Science of Religion: Are we Born to Believe?

Cognitive Science of Religion

- New, Popular and Rapidly Growing
- Explains Origins of Religious Beliefs

Scientific Explanation?

- Religious Beliefs are Natural
- Religious Beliefs are Intuitive
They arise naturally from the interaction of our mind with our natural and social environments
- Religious Beliefs are Cognitively Easy
Easily acquired, remembered and passed on

Scientific Explanation?

"That religion is natural ...means that religious ideas and behaviours ...are widespread because there is something in human nature that immediately makes some ideas more plausible and easier to acquire than some others."

Ilkka Pyysiäinen
Is Religion Natural? (2012)

Evidence for Religion as Natural

- Pan-cultural (e.g. music and sport)
- Held by Majority of People
- Occurs Early in Child Development

Born Believers?

"In fact, contrary to what many atheists tend to believe, recent findings from the cognitive sciences suggest that, just like a crude language sprouting up, at least some form of religious belief and behaviour would also probably appear spontaneously on a desert island untouched by cultural transmission, particularly beliefs involving purpose and origins"

Jesse Bering
The God Instinct (2011)

Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (Justin Barrett)

- Agents**

Agents move without contact and have intentions – they are self-propelled and goal-directed

- Not Just Human**

- Intentionality is Enough**

- May be Invisible**

Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (Justin Barrett)

"We are on the lookout for agents that are nonhuman, unseen, and acting on the world when we are not looking – secret agents. These abilities make it very easy to think about gods"

Justin Barrett

Born Believers (2012)

Teleofunctional World (Deborah Kelemen)

- Natural Events**

- Natural Objects**

- Animals**

Intelligent Designer?

"...the results not only indicate that children treat teleofunctional and intelligent design explanations of living and nonliving natural entities as particularly viable but that attributions of purpose are related to intuitions about intelligent design"

Deborah Kelemen and Cara DiYanni

Journal of Cognition and Development (2005)

Teleofunctional World (Deborah Kelemen)

- Promisuous Teleology?**

- Cultural Influence?**

- Ultimate Questions?**

Teleofunctional World Explanations in Adults

- Students**

- Scientists**

- Alzheimer's Patients**

Teleofunctional Lives: Signs and Purpose (Jesse Bering)

- Children and Princess Alice
- Adults and Teleofunctional Lives
- Illusion?*
- Ultimate Meaning?*

General Criticisms

- More Data
- Technical Difficulties
- Methodological Issues
- Theological Implications

God Does Not Exist

CSR Disproves God's existence

"If we have a complete or sufficiently complete causal explanation of how belief in God came about, without any reference to the existence of God, then God does not exist"

Aku Visala

Evolution, Religion and Cognitive Science (2014)

God Does Not Exist

CSR Supports Strict Naturalism

Strict naturalism is "the philosophical belief that everything arises from natural properties and causes, and supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted"

Oxford Dictionary

Strict Naturalism

- No Ultimate Purpose

- No 'Why' Questions

"Why are unicorns yellow?...Some questions simply do not deserve an answer. The fact that a question can be phrased in a grammatically correct English sentence doesn't make it meaningful, or entitle it to our serious attention"

Richard Dawkins

The God Delusion (2006)

Christian Theism

- 'Why' Questions are Important

- Ultimate Purpose and Meaning

"I am not an accident. No matter how my birth came about...it was not a surprise to God. He had planned for it long before I was born...[and] through Him and in Him I can discover ...[my life's ultimate] meaning and purpose"

Tim Challis

in a blog about The Purpose Driven Life (2001)

God probably Does Not Exist

Religious Beliefs are Unreliable

- Cognitive By-products*
- Cognition is Quick and Easy*
- Over-activity leads to False Positives*

Religious Beliefs as False Positives

- Context Sensitive
- Religious Contexts?
- Other Tools and Reasons for Belief

Religious Beliefs are By-products

"enthusiasm is building among scientists for the view that religion emerged not to serve a purpose ...but by accident. It is a by-product of biological adaptations gone awry"

Paul Bloom
Atlantic Monthly (2005)

"Religious concepts are parasitic upon other mental capacities"

Pascal Boyer
Religion Explained (2001)

Evaluative Criteria Other Than Evolutionary Fitness?

"Suppose that God exists and wants supernaturalistic belief to be a human universal, and sees ...that certain features that it would be useful for human beings to have – useful from evolutionary point of view: conducive to survival and reproduction – would naturally have the consequence that supernaturalistic belief would in due course become a human universal. Why shouldn't he allow those features to be the cause of the things he wants?"

Peter Van Inwagen
The Believing Primate (2009)

Other Evolutionary By-products

"the ability and propensity to pay attention to, and analyse, certain complex sound patterns became a factor of reproductive success ...in human history...However, such sounds can be produced artificially. And they have been, providing this module with a particularly rich cultural domain: music...The idea, then, is that humans have created a cultural domain, music, which is parasitic on a cognitive module"

Dan Sperber
Explaining Culture (1996)

Other Evolutionary By-products

"artworks exploit evolved tendencies of the human brain, such as sensitivity to clear lines and marked colour contrasts that is characteristic of the primate visual system. Because of their importance to the survival and reproduction of the organism, some cues are given priority by the early perceptual systems"

Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruzan
Philosophy of Behavioral Biology (2012)

Other Evolutionary By-products

"Science arose in the course of efforts by our ancestors to solve practical problems of survival...[and] appears to be an offshoot of technology, a by-product of cognitive capacities and tendencies that evolved for more practically orientated activities. Thus... "science"...is what Pascal Boyer calls, in regard to religious concepts and practices, "parasitic"..."

Barbara Herrnstein
Natural Reflections (2009)

Other Evolutionary By-products

"all sorts of scientific and everyday things are also 'incidental by-products' of our cognitive systems... We are able to form beliefs about quantum mechanics, calculus and God – as well as about many other things – because our cognitive mechanisms, that originally evolved to do something else, are flexible enough to process all kinds of inputs"

Aku Visala
Naturalism, Theism and The Cognitive Study of Religion (2011)

Quick and Easy Cognition

"a fast processing system that operates largely independent of conscious awareness or volitional direction."

Roger Trigg and Justin Barrett
The Roots of Religion (2012)

"I refer to God as a cognitive illusion...this mental apparatus of ours evolved quite without need of the latter's consultation, let alone His being real"

Jesse Bering
The God Instinct (2011)

Strict Naturalism and Illusory Intuitions

- Ultimate Purpose and Meaning
- Moral Realism
- Human 'Free Will'
- Concept of Self

Strict Naturalism and Illusory Intuitions

"The debate over free will is one example in which our intuitions conflict with scientific and philosophical arguments. Something similar holds for intuitions about consciousness, morality, and a host of other existential concerns... According to their view, free will is a figment of our imagination"

Shaun Nichols
Scientific American (2011)

Strict Naturalism and Illusory Intuitions

"The problem of the self – what it is that makes you you – has exercised philosophers and theologians for millennia. Today it is also a hotly contested scientific question, and the science is confirming ...that there is no concrete identity at the core of our being, and that our sense of self is an illusion"

Michael Bond
New Scientist (2012)

See also: Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Mark Balaguer, Bruce Hood.

Strict Naturalism and Illusory Intuitions

"there are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, meaning, purpose, thought, and value can be accommodated in a reductionist universe."

Thomas Nagel
Mind and Cosmos (2012)

"standard naturalism cannot explain objective moral/value facts or human freedom and since we clearly have knowledge of such objective facts... naturalism is in trouble"

Aku Visala
ESSSAT (2013)

Natural Intuitions in Science

- The Natural World Exists
- Uniformity in the Natural World
- Human Perception is Reliable
- Human Reason is Reliable

Natural Intuitions in Science

"in science it must be presupposed that our basic cognitive faculties such as perception, reason and memory are by and large reliable. One cannot rely on observations without presupposing that sense perception is by and large reliable, one cannot conduct experiments without presupposing that reason is by and large reliable"

René Van Woudenberg
Science and Christian Belief (2012)

Scientific Intuitions and Christian Theism

- Creation – the natural world exists
- Creation is Orderly
- Humans as made in the Image of God

Morally Incompatible with God's Existence

"One therefore seems to be in the position of saying that religious beliefs come about through, and only through, really vile evil acts"

Michael Ruse Evolution
Religion and Cognitive Science (2014)

Morally Incompatible with God's Existence?

- Agency Primed by Curiosity or Affection
- Other Mechanisms for Belief (e.g. Direct Revelation)
- Can God use Evil?

God's Existence is Unnecessary

- **Science explains religion so God is irrelevant**

People would be religious even if there was no God

- **Principle of Parsimony**

God's Existence is Superfluous

God's Existence is Unnecessary

"religious thought is...a consequence of cognitive fluidity...In this regard, there appears to be no need to invoke a moment of divine intervention that initiated the start of a revelation. For me, therefore, there is no supernatural, no God to be revealed"

Stephen Mithen
The Prehistory of Mind (1996)

God's Existence is Unnecessary?

- **CSR is Incomplete**
- **Other Reasons for Belief**
- **God can work through Natural Processes**

God's Existence is Unnecessary?

"In his providence God sustains all things in existence, maintaining their properties (preservation), works through the properties of each created object, causing it to act in accordance with his will (concurrence) and directs creation in such a way that his purposes are fulfilled (government)"

Paul Roberts
PréCis (2015)

God's Existence is Unnecessary?

"it could be true that God exists, that God is indeed the intelligent, conscious, loving creator of us all, and yet still religion itself, as a complex set of phenomena, is a perfectly natural phenomenon"

Daniel Dennett
Breaking the Spell (2006)

God's Existence is a Good Explanation

- **People are Naturally Religious because God Exists**

"To know is a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature"

Thomas Aquinas
Summa Theologica (1225-1274)

God's Existence is a Good Explanation

"That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [sensus divinitatis], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead ... this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget"

John Calvin
The Christian Institutes (1559)

God's Existence is a Good Explanation

"God created people with the capacity to know and love him but with the free will to reject him. Consequently, our God-endowed nature leads us to believe, but human endeavours apart from God's design may result in disbelief"

Justin Barrett
Why would Anyone Believe in God (2004)

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Practical Implications...

- Faith from Within
- Talk about God as Creator
- Talk about God's Purposes in Events
- Do Theology