

**A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion**, Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, MIT Press, 2015, (ISBN 9780262028547) xvii + 246pp., hbk £31.95 / \$40.00

The Humean tradition of the natural history of religion has recently evolved another lineage known as the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). ‘CSR is the scientific study of religion as a natural, evolved product of human thinking.’ (p.13) CSR has flourished within an ecological niche that traces its scientific origins to the advent of evolutionary psychology and its tenuous connections to evolutionary biology and cognitive science’s inroads into neuroscience and psychology. Surprisingly, the just so stories of CSR are regarded as grist for the mill by *both* those who take these tales to reinforce the demur of debunkers of religion, and by those who think such stories vindicate the idea that God created humans to have numinous seeking cognitive mechanisms. Both perspectives draw our attention to an important conclusion: the data from CSR is indecisive and admits of multiple interpretations that depend on one’s prior beliefs about the plausibility of theism.

This is also the conclusion of *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (NHNT), by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, which employs the framework of CSR to construct a new niche for investigation: the cognitive science of natural theology arguments. In contrast to revealed theology’s faith in divine revelation, natural theology argues for God’s existence and nature without appealing to revelation. While there are nonreligious forms of natural theology, many of its proponents think natural theology arguments provide independent

rational justification for religious beliefs. And like the ubiquitous presence of some religious practices throughout human history, the history of natural theology is rife with rational arguments for the existence of God. Why do these arguments continue to survive despite salient objections and counterarguments? Is it due to the persuasiveness or cogency of these arguments? Or, is it because we have cognitive mechanisms that make such arguments seem intuitive?

The novel adaptation of CSR employed by NHNT is to address the latter. It uses CSR to investigate the evolutionary origins of the cognitive mechanism that produce the intuitions that underlie key premises deployed in natural theology arguments. CSR ‘has the potential to uncover the enduring appeal of natural theology and the intuitive plausibility of its arguments.’ It also ‘has the potential to challenge the reasonableness of religious beliefs’ (p.17) by evaluating the implications the psychological origins of these intuitions have ‘for the justification of natural theological arguments.’ (pp.86-88)

The book consists of an introduction and nine chapters. The introduction and first two chapters set the stage for the investigation of natural theology arguments in later chapters. These opening chapters provide a potted history and summary of the assumptions of natural theology and CSR. Chapters three through eight examine the causal origins of intuitions for divine attributes like omniscience, as well as for the intuitions that support the teleological argument, the cosmological argument, the moral argument, the argument from beauty, and the argument from miracles, respectively. Chapter nine concludes by addressing whether CSR debunks or vindicates natural theology.

One virtue of NHNT is its clear presentation of its methodological assumptions and its earnest endeavor to find a more nuanced and reasonable standpoint for evaluating the contributions of CSR to the cogency and viability of natural theology arguments. In the first chapter they acknowledge that ‘The metaphysical worldview one adopts has significant ramifications for one’s conceptualization of the intersection between cognitive science and natural theology. If metaphysical naturalism is right, the intuitions that underlie natural theology are incorrect; if theism is right, they are correct.’ (p.4–5). Eschewing both worldviews they adopt ‘moderate naturalism as a methodological assumption’ (p.5) which is neutral about metaphysical assumptions. Their moderate naturalism, however, is not neutral about naturalized epistemology, for they reject Sellars’ separation of the space of causes from the space of reasons. They contend that reason is on a continuum with causes, which is shown by the fact that the intuitions employed in rational arguments are themselves caused by natural cognitive mechanisms that are the product of evolution, and there are many cases where ‘the causal origin of a belief *does* say something about its justification.’ (p.87) However, they also maintain that ‘the reasonableness of intuitions that underlie natural theology cannot be assessed only by considering their psychological origins.’ (p.5) A comprehensive assessment requires additional assumptions about how a belief’s justification is related to its psychological origins. It is not clear to me that NHNT delivers any clear criteria for assessing when a causal history can or cannot debunk reason.

The first chapter sets out three assumptions of CSR. (i) Religious beliefs and practices are the products of normal human cognitive processes; religious cognition and behavior is a natural form of human cognition and behavior. (ii) Religion is not merely

cultural; it is a product of human cognitive processes that constrain and guide its cultural manifestations. (iii) Some version of massive modularity of the mind is true. (p.15) This fashionable but contentious view in cognitive science maintains the mind consists of evolved modules that function relatively independently for domain specific operations. These modules can run automatically and generate our “core knowledge” and default intuitions about folk physics, folk biology, and folk psychology. The intuitions behind religion and natural theology rest upon such intuitive folk knowledge.

Chapter two elaborates CSR’s commitment to (iii) and the ideas of “core knowledge,” intuitive ontologies, varieties of cognitive naturalness, and disagreements about the naturalness of religion and even natural theology. Once again NHNT should be applauded for aiming to circumnavigate simplistic ideas of naturalness, intuitiveness, and reflective beliefs. They conclude it is ‘impossible’ to situate beliefs from science or religion or natural theology into distinct categories like natural and intuitive or non-natural and non-intuitive. All complex belief systems and practices consist of a combination of maturational and practiced natural skills, intuitive and reflective beliefs.

Chapter three turns to the naturalness of natural theology and focuses on whether we intuitively develop concepts of divine attributes, like omniscience. The *anthropomorphism hypothesis* such omni-attributes are not intuitive, and require cultural learning. The *preparedness hypothesis* holds that children are ‘intuitively attuned’ to omni-attributes because they have to learn how not to over-attribute knowledge and power to others. NHNT proposes a third model between these extremes that draws on dual process theories of cognition, where the fast automatic processes are more anthropomorphic and the slow reflective processes are more like the preparedness view.

My own view is all three perspectives have completely over-interpreted the theory of mind literature. So far CSR has merely put forth an implausible correlation between some tendentious interpretations of mindreading data and a range of incompatible theological views about divine omnipotence. I am unconvinced that ‘maturationally natural inferences systems continue to inform theology’ in any interesting way.

Chapter four examines how the evolutionary origins of our cognitive mechanisms for intuitive teleology and intuitive probability assessments contribute to the attractiveness of the design argument and its rational justification. The chapter concludes that the existence of these universal intuitive inference mechanisms neither debunk nor vindicate any argument that moves from design to designer. This move relies on an abductive argument that rests on how one sets the prior probabilities for the existence of God. Making such priors explicit provides a rational basis for disagreement between theists and atheists. (p.84). Chapter five’s investigation of cosmological arguments arrives at a similar conclusion. Humans have intuitive capacities for inferring causes and agency that elicit the intuitions that support premises in cosmological arguments. Evolutionary debunking arguments that cast doubt on our capacities for causal reasoning ‘risk causing collateral damage’ (p.108) by undermining the cosmological argument as well as scientific practice and commonsense which also rely on causal reasoning. Again, evaluating the cosmological argument depends more on one’s prior beliefs about theism or atheism. Chapter six concludes that ethical naturalism can provide plausible evolutionary accounts of moral norms and this weakens the moral argument for God’s existence, which claims they cannot. Interestingly, chapter seven suggests that the aesthetic argument for God’s existence fares better than the currently unsatisfactory

naturalistic explanations of human aesthetics. However, as with the other arguments, its plausibility depends on one's prior view on the plausibility of theism. Chapter eight on the argument from miracles ends with a common refrain: unless one already believes theism to be plausible, there is no reason to find the argument from miracles compelling.

The final chapter examines the question: does CSR debunk or vindicate natural theology? It does neither. The conclusion of NHNT is that one's prior beliefs in the plausibility of theism or atheism is what ultimately determines whether one thinks CSR provides evidence for debunking or vindicating the arguments of natural theology. Can CSR tell us anything about why we have prior beliefs in the plausibility of theism or atheism? If not, then has CSR contributed anything to this debate that we did not know already? I guess that will depend on one's priors concerning the plausibility of the assumptions of CSR. My own priors remain skeptical.

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