THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ATHEISM

*

Atheism in the Contemporary World

*

VOLUME 2

*

Edited by

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

St. Mary's University

MICHAEL RUSE

Florida State University

University of Guelph

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/
DOI:

First published 2021

Printed in <place> by <printer>

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 2 Volume Set 978-1-108-68899-4 Hardback
ISBN Volume 1-978-1-108-47493-1 Hardback
ISBN Volume 2-978-1-108-47434-4 Hardback

33

Naturalism

JOHN R. SHOOK

On the question of God, both religious and non-religious thinkers typically regard naturalism as the obvious and primary way to challenge supernaturalism. Naturalism is distinctive among philosophical worldviews for its reliance on the sciences. Other chapters recount how developments in specific scientific fields, such as biology, affected the intellectual climate around the question of God's existence. Naturalism's own role also deserves to be told. Naturalism as a comprehensive worldview only congealed during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and confronted God with the staunchest atheist philosophy to ever challenge supernaturalism. Modern naturalism elevated four main approaches to prominence for refuting supernaturalism: (1) scientific theorizing is genuinely explanatory, while religion is not; (2) nature's energies are causally closed, forbidding divine interaction; (3) scientific skepticism is warranted toward alleged revelations and miracles; and (4) naturalistic theories explaining religion's origin and function need no deities.

Naturalism, Science, and Theism

Naturalism and supernaturalism do sound like contrary worldviews. Supernaturalism asserts that more is real than just nature; naturalism denies any sort of reality beyond nature. Graham Oppy is an atheist philosopher who regards philosophical naturalism's plausibility, more so than the prestige of science, as an effective argument against theism (Oppy 2013). On religion's side, prominent theologian William Lane Craig takes theism's main opposition to be naturalism, and other theological voices echo that stance (Craig 2008; Craig and Copan 2009). However, more worldviews are available, and atheism has several homes. Pantheism claims that nature is God; naturalists and supernaturalists typically deem pantheism to be implausible, or tantamount to atheism. Dualism asserts both natural and non-natural realities, but

it need not find God among them. Idealism denies that nature is fully real on its own, yet the ideality to reality need not include any divinity. Phenomenalism (or strict positivism) assigns reality to the strictly apparent and phenomenal, but nothing godly may be manifest among what is narrowly empirical. Nothing prevents dualism, idealism, or phenomenalism from harboring an atheist stance. Supernaturalism harbors theism: among non-natural realities there is a God (or gods). Naturalism must deny supernaturalism, thereby denying theism, and so it is atheistic in that sense. Some varieties of naturalism can be receptive to much about religious experience and religiosity toward life and nature, but no naturalism countenances theistic supernaturalism (Crosby and Stone 2018; Oppy 2018).

Proponents of supernaturalism accomplish little by arguing merely for dualism or idealism. (Phenomenalism is little help for theism, and phenomenology aids theism where it supports dualism or idealism over naturalism.) "There must be more than nature" completes no argument for any deity. On the other hand, "There can be no reality beyond nature" argues for ruling out all deities. Due to that dialectical asymmetry, God's defenders often think that the lack of proof for "There is no reality beyond nature" is a good argument for God. This fallacy (an argument from ignorance) energizes the devout wanting to witness naturalism's embarrassment and their faith's vindication. All the same, on philosophical grounds alone, no straightforward argumentative victory could be expected. Although naturalism and supernaturalism cannot both be right, they could both be mistaken; they have vulnerabilities to long-standing philosophical objections and critiques. Philosophy, for its part, has epistemic resources for fostering skepticism toward both, and other worldviews too. Measured against those high standards, a worldview at most hopes to be less implausible than the rest. The formulation of naturalism therefore matters, as some versions may endure skeptical criticism better than others.

Naturalism in its broadest sense is that worldview that takes shape through observation, reason, and science, by prioritizing explanations justified through rational proto-science and fully empirical science. On any matter, established theories of mature science are preferable to thoughtful proto-science. Still, proto-science need not be ignored by naturalism. Plausible hypotheses designed for passing logical and empirical testing, so long as they harbor no non-scientific notions, can play a role in naturalism even if they do not join the ranks of highly confirmed theories. For example, the materialism of Democritus and Lucretius, postulating only unfeeling atoms and void between them, was only proto-scientific, yet that atomism is rightly

classed as a naturalism, despite the way that twentieth-century physics surpassed it. By contrast, panpsychism and hylozoism cannot count as naturalistic. The attribution of feeling or awareness, or a little liveliness, to the constituents of the world has always been non-scientific.

Naturalism is grounded on empirical evidence as sifted by logical inference in the methodologies of scientific investigation. Naturalism's core vulnerabilities are hence threefold: How would naturalism fully account for experience, reasoning, and science itself? This chapter cannot debate those philosophical issues, but they are not opportunities to advance theism. Arguing that naturalism cannot account for experience is the purview of dualism, idealism, and phenomenalism, yet any advantage they might gain over naturalism is far from a demonstration of God. Arguing that naturalism cannot account for reason itself is the purview of rationalistic dualism and idealism. Naturalism's resistance to Platonism and absolutism is an engaging dispute for philosophers, but supernatural theism must additionally prove that God lives among the forms, or Ideas, or the Absolute (Craig 2016). The claim that naturalism cannot explain science, because evolution would not produce humans intelligent enough to be scientific, does not yield plausible arguments (Beilby 2002).

Varieties of Naturalism

Naturalism need not worry that its grounds will be swept away from under it. Its relationship with science does deserve elaboration. Five primary attitudes taken by worldviews can be distinguished:

"No science": Science cannot be believed since science cannot explain anything.
"Values over science": Science should be contradicted on all matters that are important to human beings.
"Science bounded": Science can be contradicted on many matters beyond its own competence.
"Valuable science": Science should not be contradicted on any matters since its explanations are important to human beings.
"Only science": Science cannot be contradicted since science can explain everything.

No naturalism can agree with "no science" or "values over science." Naturalism hopes for more than conciliation, by seeking compatibility with all human values worth pursuing. Mere conciliation is represented by the

"science bounded" option, where science and non-science (such as religion) cannot conflict with each other as they together explain all reality, each in its distinctive manner. Because this option amounts to dualism, no authentic naturalism resides here, even if prominent scientists have endorsed a metaphysical compromise (such as Gould 1999).

Two main modes of naturalism remain. (Finer distinctions are given in Shook 2011.) "Valuable science" only says that for anything interesting and important, science can offer its inquiries and hypotheses to help build up full explanations. Nothing is satisfactorily explained unless and until adequate scientific inquiries have contributed information alongside other sources. By contrast, "only science" says that only science can satisfactorily explain anything, and alternative sources of information are worth far less by comparison. Two prominent examples from the twentieth century may serve as contrasts. Eliminative materialism (e.g. W. V. Quine) asserts that only theoretical entities discerned by the natural sciences, above all physics, are real. If something exists in some way, it must be reducible to what is real, by being composed of, or being an aspect or property of, what is strictly physical (Orenstein 2002). Pragmatic naturalism (e.g. John Dewey) asserts that no prior limit can be set on science's present or future capacity to inquire anywhere experience can go, and although whatever is encountered has its own reality, comprehending it should be largely shaped by what science can learn about it (Shook 2000). Partisan labels can get in the way, especially for those unfamiliar with philosophy's history; let us henceforth only mention "narrow naturalism" and "broad naturalism" as need arises.

One further point about naturalism in general is helpful. Naturalism's task is not to justify or defend science's current best theories. The sciences themselves bear the responsibility for reasonably justifying their theories. Naturalism proceeds from a fallible and modest scientific realism – no scientific theory is immune from revision or replacement due to additional evidence, but highly confirmed theories do model natural processes to a fair degree of accuracy. Naturalism attempts to elaborate a comprehensive and coherent worldview based on experience, reason, and science, and defends science's capacity to explore and theorize about anything, without interference from tradition, superstition, dogmatism, or ideology. Ensuring that the sciences are all coherently describing the same nature is not the task of any scientific field, yet only science tests and confirms naturalistic proposals about accommodations and adjustments among scientific theories.

Versions of naturalism can survive philosophical skepticism while aligning with science. Supernatural theism deserves much philosophical skepticism,

along with its vulnerabilities to scientific knowledge, against which religion enjoys no automatic immunity.

Science Is More Explanatory than Religion

Supernaturalism can appear to have a built-in explanatory advantage over science, so long as science cannot fully account for the universe's existence. Perhaps scientific theorizing must forever be inadequate to that task, no matter how it theorizes about ultimate origins. When science postulates X (laws of quantum physics, for example), an explanation for the availability of X is now needed, and if Y may account for X then an explanation for Y is needed, and so on. Nothing about religion prevents it from displaying a similar explanatory inadequacy. Gods birthing gods who birth more gods, who build up the world along the way, are not full explanations, even if a religion's origin myths begin with a parental primeval deity (polytheism), or they relate the deeds of a single deity (monotheism).

Seeking prior origins is reasonable, but certainties about knowing the "ultimate" origin are unreasonable. Claiming certain belief about how everything started only indicates where explanatory thinking has arbitrarily halted. This is no less true for theology than mythology. Neither theology nor science gains an explanatory advantage by proposing that an ultimate Z had to come from "nothing," or that Z is "necessarily" real. If one advances such a proposal, then so may the other, to neither's advantage or credit. To credit nothing with yielding something is the absence of explanation. To think that Z's unreality is inconceivable only explains how one must think, and fails to prove that Z must be real. God is ultimately responsible, according to theism, but rendering a divine act entirely mysterious, as utterly mysterious as God, is admitting the absence of explanation. Supernaturalism, whether it hosts personal or impersonal god(s), holds no explanatory advantage over science so long as God is practically incomprehensible.

Theology can allow God to be somewhat understandable by depicting God as an agent thoughtfully pursing means to ends. Postulating a willful and sentient agent to explain observed events is reasonable so long as less complex matters cannot suffice as an explanation. The behavioral and social sciences, and history, justifiably deal with person-level activities for explanations of socially complex matters. The scientific preference for postulating something of lesser complexity to explain greater complexity runs counter to the religious preference for using greater complexity to explain the less

complex. Rare exceptions are theological, not mythological. Christianity's doctrine of divine simplicity renders a Trinitarian God incomprehensibly monotheistic, and explanatorily mysterious (Dolezal 2011). Hinduism's Brahman is impersonally ultimate, but the gods are generated from it. Religions make personal gods such as Jesus and Krishna appealing to the faithful without hesitation.

Science hesitates to postulate agents because scientific methods prefer regular and stable relations between X and Y in order for X to satisfactorily explain Y. However, the high complexity of agents allows them to treat similar situations differently, depending on their shifting purposes and creative thoughts. Even divine agents of the most reliable character possess wills less than completely predictable, since wills are not attributed to things always behaving mechanically. A deity forever performing the same "deeds" with strict regularity becomes indistinguishable from one of nature's repetitive cycles or insentient powers (like earth's four seasons, or a physical force). By contrast, deities who perform unnatural deeds because they want to do them would be powers distinguishable from nature's ways, but accounting for each surprising event as it happens with a divinely willful act amounts to a "post-hoc" method that is inferior to scientific hypotheses reliably predicting future events (Shook 2018, ch. 8).

The appeal to divine agency sets up a dilemma for religion: either increase explanatory reasonableness for a deity by decreasing its agency, or maximize a deity's agency to account for surprises while eliminating explanatory reasonableness. Religions naturally prefer the second option (miracles surpass understanding, after all), while theological approaches to the first option expose God to disconfirmation by features of nature that God should not want. The argument from design positively credits God with all features of creation, but the argument from evil negatively discredits God with creation's bad features. Faulting other creative powers for the bad features does not increase the reasonableness of postulating unnatural agents (Shook 2016).

Theologies about a personal God have few remaining options. Only at personal–social levels would postulating a personal deity have a possibly explanatory role, and only through reliably regular relations at those levels could a personal deity have any explanatory power. Scientific method cannot outright forbid the postulation of person-like agency functioning with and within social groups, if their histories, norms, and ways are otherwise inexplicable. Although that sort of "deity" would seem somewhat supra-personal from an individual's perspective, it cannot just be transcendent while participating in human experience and activity with its stable character.

Only the most humanistic liberal theologies could take an interest in something godly functioning at humanity's level (although the mythic god-become-man is a precedent), along with philosophies of religion describing religious experience and community in earthly terms. For example, among American philosophers, Josiah Royce discerned Christ's spirit within the loving community's effort to harmonize in mutual loyalty, and John Dewey labeled as God the cooperating whole of nature-and-humans realizing moral ideals. So long as no scientific knowledge is controverted, broad naturalism can be hospitable to personalist interpretations of sociocultural phenomena.

The Causal Closure of Nature

Theistic supernaturalism may expect God to occasionally intervene in the course of worldly events by making something happen that would not have otherwise happened. An unnatural interaction occurs despite natural forces and violates nature's laws, temporarily suspending or obstructing them. A divine intervention cannot merely supplement nature's ways and works. If an event happens that would have happened just as it does without any divine intervention, then it is pointless to credit God. Only an event that would not have happened as it did without God's involvement could be credited to godly action, so in that event, nature's own ways would somehow have been prevented from operating as they regularly do.

Science must strongly doubt that godly interventions have ever happened, or could happen. For science, every natural event is caused by something equally natural. Nature is therefore closed to outside interventions of any non-natural origin, including God. This causal closure principle, stated broadly here, cannot serve by itself to show that God does not exist. Some versions of theistic supernaturalism, such as deism, do not expect God to intervene after creating the world. All the same, given causal closure, the amount of possible worldly evidence for God is dramatically diminished if not eliminated. This argument against evidence for God is not based on denying that God is a *cause* of worldly events. What is closed is the totality of natural causes; conceiving how a supernatural being *causes* a natural event seems impossible (and theology typically agrees). However a deity may want to be responsible for worldly interventions, causal closure is incompatible with their occurrence.

The plausibility of causal closure is not due to science's ability to completely comprehend nature. Physics, for example, is not finalized by

confirmed theories explaining all physical phenomena. That goal may never be reached. However, this admitted incompleteness is not the same thing as admitting that violations of known physical laws are possible or detectible. Sciences about regular natural laws and lawfully predictable events, such as the physical sciences, cannot be reconciled with divine interactions. Physics does not have to be agnostic about events allegedly occurring in violation of known physical laws. Physicists would eagerly investigate them, and if they are empirically observed, opportunities for theory revision then beckon, but the lawfulness of natural forces is not abandoned. Furthermore, religions rarely point to observably repeating events – unique events are preferred. Science's inability to fully investigate a past unique event from an allegedly divine cause does not compel science to stay agnostic. Science is reasonable for severely doubting that known physical laws have had odd exceptions or lapses, and naturalism agrees.

Theistic supernaturalism may complain that the principle of causal closure is only a postulate of naturalism, rather than anything established by scientific fields. If causal closure were just a postulate, then godly intervention is not ruled out by scientific knowledge, but only by naturalism, which appears to be begging the question against supernaturalism. No question is begged here, as naturalism does not supply first principles for science. The reasonableness of causal closure is based on the way that scientific theories about nature's laws have ample predictive successes, while religions talking about miracles have none.

If evidence from the natural world is ruled out, theology may turn to the life of the mind. For theism, God is spiritual, not material – perhaps God contacts or influences human mentality? However, any influence God could have over a mind seems futile unless that mental change led to a brain change and on to some adjustment in behavior and alteration of conduct. In recent decades, a specific version of causal closure fostered by narrow naturalism has been applied to argue against dualism. On that argument, mental states and events cannot have any causal effect on brain states or processes, because only *physical* causes can produce *physical* effects (Papineau 2009). A physical effect arising from a non-physical cause implies that some amount of physical energy abruptly appears in nature, but that violates the law of conservation of energy and the principle of least action. Non-reductive approaches to psychological and mental phenomena, which are classed under broad naturalism, do not imply violations of physical laws. However, broad naturalism cannot allow any supernatural influence over minds, since they remain embodied and

embedded: the mental life has its home with brain processes, bodily behaviors, and social conduct here on earth. Finally, even if some sort of mild dualism survives causal closure arguments, God's existence is not thereby made more likely, since a successful argument for God would still be required.

In summary, science is rarely presented with good candidates for possible non-natural events, and experimental inquiry and theorizing renders them, sooner or later, compatible with natural lawfulness and assimilated into nature. Theology has no grounds for claiming that science will not be able to continue to maintain that progress in the future. Religions instead focus on the past, when the most impressive miracles are supposed to have happened right in front of credulous observers.

Scientific Skepticism Toward Miracles

Events happening in the world due to God's acts rather than nature's ways would be miraculous, in a broad sense of "miracle." (If angels perform miracles, skepticism toward unnatural causes applies equally.) For religions, a divine intervention able to astound and count as empirical evidence for God takes place where it is accessible and observable by people. David Basinger's tighter definition takes into account why miracles are supposed to be persuasive: A miracle is "an unusual, unexpected, observable event due in part to the intentional direct interventive activity of God" (Basinger 2018, 17). Theologians like to quibble about cutting-edge science's capacity to grapple with surprising experimental data or gaps in complex theoretical paradigms. Religions instead place their faith in astonishing tales about such things as virgin births, speaking with animals, and dead bodies returning to life.

Reasonably denying that miraculous events have ever happened only calls for common sense familiarity with the world. As David Hume argued, even sincere testimony is not more credible when compared against the vast storehouse of human experience, especially if independent corroboration is lacking (Fogelin 2003). An acquaintance with basic scientific knowledge is not necessary for due skepticism, although it serves to buttress common sense. Naturalism adds a generic argument against all miracles:

1. The natural and biological sciences, from physics and chemistry to physiology and medicine, possess enough knowledge about earthly matters to place any alleged miracle, past or present, in serious doubt.

2. Scientific expertise and testing techniques are sufficient for investigating ongoing "miraculous" phenomena, either exposing them as non-existent or revealing their natural causes.
3. Therefore, no alleged miracle counts as evidence for God.

Religions pay little heed to scientific skepticism. The faithful are impressed by news of fresh miracles, and religions large and small never lack an abundant supply. Visions appear before the devout, yogis perform impossible feats of bodily energy, statues drip blood from their eyes or hands, intercessory prayer results in amazing health recoveries – each religion offers its characteristic miracles crafted to uplift the spirits of their own believers. None survive critical investigation (Randi 1987; Masters et al. 2006; Nickell 2013).

Despite the proliferation of miracle stories, each religion thinks that only its own miracles merit universal credence. Theology has no generic argument from miracles for God, because there is no singular miracle able to be convincing to most religious people. Each religious person naturally thinks over 99 percent of all miracle tales ever told around the world must be fables or superstitions. One's common sense, and perhaps some acquaintance with science, lets a person know when to be skeptical. Yet that good sense stops working for miracles from one's own religion. Which is the more objective kind of reasoning? Subjectively believing in miracles because they are familiar and comforting does not make them objectively reasonable.

The subjective side of belief accounts for the vast import that believers place in miracles. Miracles in that stricter sense are unnatural events of religious significance (Basinger 2018, 2–3). Taking a religion's extraordinary tales to be significant reports of miracles is something religious people can do, because they belong to that religion. People who believe in miracles already believe in a deity; a subjective propensity to accept miracles cannot objectively count as good evidence for God (Corner 2007). Theism is not reasonable just because science has not offered a natural explanation of an alleged miracle (contra Swinburne [1970] and Larmer [1988, 114]).

Consider this argument for God: "Science can't explain how Lazarus came back to life, but Christianity says that Jesus did it, then this satisfactory explanation must be accepted, and so God is real." This argument does not reach its conclusion without ample question-begging. One does not have to first agree that Lazarus really came back to life; no one except a Christian is tempted to think that Jesus brought Lazarus back to life; and no one relying on common sense imagines that the biblical passage counts as a satisfactory explanation of Jesus' deed. Someone who supposes that Lazarus really did

come to life already holds an unreasonable belief, so this argument cannot get further than its first dubious premise. That belief in the Lazarus story is unreasonable, not because it has been proven that God does not exist, but because common sense and scientific knowledge take the objective stand on that tale's extreme improbability (Flew 2006).

A direct encounter with God is a special kind of miracle. How does naturalism justify doubts about divine visitations through visions, messages, or other sensory manifestations? Richard Swinburne grounds his defense of visitation miracles on this premise: "it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present: what one seems to perceive is probably so" (Swinburne 1979, 254; consult Everitt 2004, ch. 8). We do grant credibility to direct perception, except under extraordinary circumstances, and the appearance of God must count as highly unusual. Common sense is not unreasonable for doubting such cases. Theism follows common sense, for the most part. Theism is not in the business of demonstrating the reality of all the world's deities. Which God is appearing to which people?

William Alston starts from Swinburne's principle of generous credulity about perceptual experience, and adds a second principle: So long as a believer is participating in a group doxastic practice, nothing outside that practice can prove that the believer is mistaken. Anyone already in a god-believing group, forming and maintaining beliefs in their distinctive manner, knows that they are justified in their beliefs about encountering God (Alston 1991, 183, 194, 227). For Alston, only a belief formed within a doxastic practice can bear upon the accuracy of another belief within that practice. Beliefs formed by a different (ungodly) practice cannot count as evidence against a god belief within a (godly) practice. Being a member of a doxastic group means that you can presuppose that your group won't be shown to be wrong (so long as everyone in your group stays so dogmatic). Alston's appeal to (godly) doxastic practice does not directly argue for God's reality, because it does not have to. On Alston's account, people within a godly doxastic practice already know their deity from their experience so no argument is needed there, while people within ungodly doxastic practices have no evidence for or against that godly knowledge. Alston's doxastic theism privileges the tenacity of conviction over logic, multiplies gods beyond belief, divides theists against each other, and fails to establish the objective reality of God.

Alston tries to maintain a façade of objectivity. He appeals to religious experience of a vaguely Christian sort, allowing non-Christians to experience God too. Could humanity join a single doxastic practice and know the One

God? That hope seems unlikely. Alston says that objections to his position on mystical experience largely come from naturalism (Alston 1991, 255). That is not the case here – no naturalistic tenet has been mentioned. In fact, Alston's view of doxastic practices blocks that ecumenical goal. No theologian or philosopher can tell staunch believers to converge on one thin notion of God, since doxastic practices are immune to external advice, as Alston depicts them. Alston's doxastic practices must proliferate just as religious experiences do. Religions do not seem interested in coalescing into a philosophical monotheism, or a murky mysticism.

Alston offers a third principle to forestall an abundance of gods: "It is a reasonable supposition that a practice would not have persisted over large segments of the population unless it was putting people into effective touch with some aspect(s) of reality and proving itself as such by its fruits" (Alston 1991, 170). Yet there is nothing reasonable here. The practice of persecuting "witches" is age-old and still prevalent in many countries, but it is unreasonable to think that witches, or their connections with the spiritual world, are probably real. Religions shedding their superstitions could not accept this principle, nor would religions agree that comparing their size indicates which deity is real. On Alston's model, the disciples of Jesus were not justified in believing that they encountered anything godly, since their "doxastic practice" was not established and too small – yet if they were not justified believers, later Christians could not be, either. Religions cannot recognize themselves in Alston's model of godly groups.

Natural Explanations for Religion

Theology has become far less antagonistic toward efforts to account for humanity's religiosity in natural terms. On the presumption that humanity's natural capacities, when rightly applied, yield what is good for people, a human propensity toward religiosity would be good, and hence reasonable for all. The traditional argument from universal consent, pointing to the prevalence of belief in God worldwide, was usually paired with the theological view that human nature has an innate intuition of, or inherent orientation toward, God (De Roover 2014). Religion's naturality was never in doubt for religions. Fitting naturalistic explanations for religion into that broader theistic account could allow belief in God to seem naturally reasonable. On that view, non-believers unnaturally and unreasonably deviate from their own humanity and deny themselves what is good for humanity.

This theological strategy for both naturalizing and normalizing religiosity calls for naturalism's rebuttal. Naturalism still has the straightforward objective of showing how natural explanations for religion omit the supernatural, so nothing about human religiosity requires anything godly to be involved (Boyer 2001, 2010). Theistic religions must disagree, since their origins involve some sort of deity, and each religion regards belief in that deity as entirely normal. This section illustrates how naturalism resists the normalization of god belief while removing God from human religiosity. Although human beings have propensities for being religious, the proper use of all our capacities allows plenty of room for doubting that theistic supernaturalism is reasonable.

To say that the human brain naturally engenders religiosity and religious beliefs hides an equivocation. For naturalism, all cognitive processes and their psychological manifestations in attitudes and beliefs are natural matters, since nothing unnatural is making them occur. Being non-religious has no less of a natural basis here than being religious. Nevertheless, focusing on the naturality of god belief has allowed the field of "neurotheology" to infer that god believers are cognitively normal, and hence have valid beliefs about the supernatural. Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary in *The Spiritual Brain* adopt a neutral pose toward brain science, but they are far from neutral about a higher power:

> The external reality of God cannot be directly proven or disproven by studying what happens to people's brains when they have mystical experiences. Demonstrating that specific brain states are associated with spiritual/mystical experiences neither shows that such experiences are "nothing but" brain states nor proves that God exists. It shows only that it is reasonable to believe that mystics do contact a power outside themselves.
>
> (Beauregard and O'Leary 2009, 38)

Andrew Newberg offers a less biased approach for neurotheology: "Neurotheology is a more recent attempt at discerning how the study of the human mind and brain . . . relates to the pursuit of religions and religious experience" (Newberg 2010, 2). The brain sciences, in concert with behavioral sciences, are arriving at tentative hypotheses about religious experiences and beliefs arise from normal brain functioning. It cannot be presumed that religiosity results of regrettable brain malfunctioning. Naturalism does warn against an "Is–Ought" fallacy lurking as religious brains are studied. How any brain is ordinarily functioning implies little about how a person ought to hold beliefs. Common psychological matters attributable to

ordinary brain processes – such as cognitive biases, learned framings, and lingering prejudices – easily result in unjustifiable and unreasonable beliefs. Living a religious life according to its values is not the target of naturalism's skepticism. Beliefs about the supernatural, inculcated and reinforced by appeals to cognitive biases, magical thinking, and emotional weaknesses, are unreasonably propagated by religions (Shook 2017).

The overall strategy of naturalism, assembling naturalizations of religiosity without normalizing theism, counters arguments for theism that appeal to human proclivities and priorities. Too many appeals preclude even a listing; examples include fear of death, existential anxiety, group cohesion, and psychosomatic healing. A general argument for theism from psychological need will have to serve in this limited space.

1. Theistic belief frequently satisfies some important psychological needs.
2. Humans naturally commit to beliefs satisfying their important needs.
3. Natural commitments to beliefs are reasonable.
4. Therefore, belief in theism is normally reasonable.

Gaps between these premises prevent them from adequately supporting the conclusion.

Premise 1 may be accurate for many people, but there are multiple ways to satisfy psychological needs, and not all psychological needs should be indulged. Premise 1 could read, "Theistic belief uniquely satisfies permanent psychological needs," but that is far less plausible, especially where religions play upon cognitive biases and emotional weaknesses to intensify the very needs that a deity is designed to satisfy. (Visions of eternal hell may be motivating, but they do not naturally occur to the non-religious mind.) Premise 2 seems accurate enough, but it reminds us how people commit to more satisfying beliefs, and theism may not be most satisfactory for all of life's needs. Premise 3 is a vague generality, unable to bear much of an argumentative burden. No belief by itself could be deemed reasonable just for its naturality – beliefs about empirical matters are weighed and reevaluated together, in vast webs of coherence relations enlarged and tested by ongoing experience. Perhaps a small portion of human beliefs are never tested or doubted by life, but god belief is evidently not among them.

The weaknesses to that general argument for theism points the way to a specific argument oft-heard from God's defenders.

5. Theistic belief uniquely satisfies permanent psychological needs.
6. Humans naturally commit to theism for its maximally satisfying benefits.

7. The natural commitment to theism is reasonably consistent with all experience.
8. Therefore, belief in theism is normally reasonable.

This argument's premises make falsifiable claims. Premises 5 and 6 make universal claims about humanity that lack confirmation from the social sciences. At the least, premises 5 and 6 are not accurate due to the significant percentage of non-theists in the world's population (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 7–9). Theism's defenders cannot respond by claiming that non-theists unnaturally ignore deep psychological needs, since that claim needs support from the failed general argument. Premise 7 can be reasonably doubted, as the problem of evil indicates (Overall 2006). If premise 7 is understood as non-falsifiable because this world is precisely what God wants, then naturalists gladly step aside to let religious critics question that theodicy. In conclusion, supernatural theism is shown to be unreasonable by humanity's natural common sense and achievements of scientific knowledge.

References

Alston, W. P. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Basinger, D. 2018. *Miracles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beauregard, M. and O'Leary, D. 2009. *The Spiritual Brain*. New York: HarperCollins.

Beilby, J. K. (ed.) 2002. *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Boyer, P. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Boyer, P. 2010. *The Fracture of an Illusion: Science and the Dissolution of Religion*. Göttingen: Vendenhoek & Ruprecht.

Corner, D. 2007. *The Philosophy of Miracles*. New York: Continuum.

Craig, W. L. 2008. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

Craig, W. L. 2016. *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craig, W. L. and Copan, P. (eds.) 2009. *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing.

Crosby, D. A. and Stone, J. A. (eds.) 2018. *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*. London: Routledge.

De Roover, J. 2014. "Incurably religious? Consensus gentium and the cultural universality of religion." *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 61(1), 5–32.

Dolezal, J. E. 2011. *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Everitt, N. 2004. *The Non-Existence of God*. London: Routledge.

Flew, A. 2006. "Miracles," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol . 6, 2nd edition. New York: Macmillan Reference, 265–274.

Fogelin, R. J. 2003. *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gould, S. J. 1999. *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. New York: Ballentine Books.

Larmer, R. A. 1988. *Water into Wine: An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Masters, K., Spielmans, G., and Goodson, J. 2006. "Are there demonstrable effects of distant intercessory prayer? A meta-analytic review." *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 32(1), 21–6.

Newberg, A. 2010. *Principles of Neurotheology*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Nickell, J. 2013. *The Science of Miracles: Investigating the Incredible*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Oppy, G. 2013. *The Best Argument Against God*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Oppy, G. 2018. *Naturalism and Religion: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation*. London: Routledge.

Orenstein, A. 2002. *W. V. Quine*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Overall, C. 2006. "Miracles, evidence, evil, and god: a twenty-year debate." *Dialogue* 45(2), 355–66.

Papineau, D. 2009. "The causal closure of the physical and naturalism," in A. Beckermann, B. P. McLaughlin, and S. Walter (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 53–65.

Randi, J. 1987. *The Faith Healers*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Shook, J. R. 2000. *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Shook, J. R. 2011. "Varieties of twentieth century American naturalism." *The Pluralist* 6(2), 1–7.

Shook, J. R. 2016. "What the hell is God up to? God's evils and the theodicies holding god responsible," in B. McGraw and R. Arp (eds.) *The Problem of Evil: New Philosophical Directions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 127–40.

Shook, J. R. 2017. "Are people born to be believers, or are gods born to be believed?" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 29(4–5), 353–73.

Shook, J. R. 2018. *Systematic Atheology*. London: Routledge.

Swinburne, R. 1970. *The Concept of Miracle*. London: Macmillan.

Swinburne, R. 1979. *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zuckerman, P. and Shook, J. R. (eds.) 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.