

Article

Cognitive Science of Religion and Classical Theism: A Synthesis

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Abstract: Launonen and Mullins argue that if Classical Theism is true, human cognition is likely not theism-tracking, at least, given what we know from cognitive science of religion. In this essay, we develop a model for how classical theists can make sense of the findings from cognitive science, without abandoning their Classical Theist commitments. We also provide an argument for how our model aligns well with the Christian doctrine of general revelation.

Keywords: cognitive science of religion; classical theism; natural religion

1. Introduction

While recent work done in the field of cognitive science of religion (CSR) informs us that religious beliefs (i.e., belief in God, gods, ghosts, spirits, etc.) are natural (defined below), what theological conclusions can reasonably be derived from the evidence is still a matter of debate. Launonen and Mullins (2021) move the needle forward in this regard by asking (and investigating) whether the natural cognition of human beings is theism-tracking. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 1) According to Launonen and Mullins, answering this question will depend crucially on what type of theism one believes is correct. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 2) Launonen and Mullins juxtapose two popular models: classical theism and open theism, arguing that the latter is natural (cognitively speaking), while the former is not. This gives the impression that classical theism is at odds with CSR. Our focus in this essay is narrow: We develop a model for religious knowledge that shows that classical theism can fit well with CSR. It should be noted that our paper is more of an in-house paper in that it will assume that theism of some form is true. For our purposes, theistic belief should be considered both natural and properly basic.

What is meant by the claim that religious beliefs are natural? Launonen and Mullins provide a fairly broad (and helpful) survey detailing how many of the key players in the CSR literature answer this question. One remark from Matthew Braddock encapsulates the general idea:

(Natural Religion): [H]umans are disposed to believe in non-human, invisible, disembodied, immortal, super-powerful, super-knowing, super-perceiving, infallible, morally interested, punishing/loving, causally active, and minded agents (with beliefs, desires, intentions, character, and free will) who possess creator or designer status. (Braddock 2018, p. 178) As Tyler Dalton McNabb states elsewhere, ‘When one states that religion is natural, one just means that basic human psychology plays a meaningful role in explaining religious belief’. (McNabb 2018, p. 27)

Following contemporary cognitive science, Launonen and Mullins bifurcate cognitive systems into the categories of cognitive System 1 and cognitive System 2.¹ It is generally understood that cognitive System 1 produces immediate and non-reflective beliefs while



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cognitive System 2 produces beliefs that come about through intentional and conscious reflection. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 2) Launonen and Mullins are primarily concerned with the beliefs produced by System 1 as System 1 produces our natural beliefs.

As for the theologically specific consequences of CSR, Launonen and Mullins note that natural religion lends credence to the claim that humans have been created with a God faculty (what Calvin termed the *Sensus Divinitatis*) as well as the related Christian doctrine of general revelation (that God has, to an extent, made himself known to his creation apart from divinely inspired Scripture). That said, as the authors point out, CSR also informs us that our faculties naturally produce many beliefs that are incompatible with Classical Christian theology (such as a belief in many gods or highly anthropomorphic gods. See Launonen and Mullins 2021, pp. 3–4). Thus, Launonen and Mullins ask “Despite theological incorrectness, are our natural cognitive biases and systems reliable enough? They go on to define theism-tracking as follows:

(Theism-tracking): natural cognitive biases and systems are theism-tracking if the god concept they give rise to approximates the theologically correct model of God. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 4)

Here, a ‘god concept’ is the set of beliefs formed by System 1 about the nature of God(s) and a ‘model of God’ is one’s theologically explicit (System 2) understanding of the nature of God (beliefs about the nature of God formed through conscious, analytic thinking processes). For Launonen and Mullins, in order for the doctrine of general revelation to receive support from CSR, Natural Religion must be theism-tracking: our intuitively formed god concept must align (to some degree) to our theological models of God.

The criterion for success for Launonen and Mullins is not that one’s model of God must map perfectly onto our intuitive (natural religious) god concept. Some counterintuitiveness is allowed and is actually necessary. However, models of God that better correspond to Natural Religion should be seen as evidence in favor of the truth of those models (and evidence against the truth of models of God that do not align well with Natural Religion). Crucially, for Launonen and Mullins, in order for CSR to be considered compatible with (and supportive of) theology, Natural Religion must lend credence to the doctrine of general revelation (again, that God has made himself known to his creation apart from special revelation). As the authors state: “If theistic belief were counterintuitive, unnatural [i.e., contrary to Natural Religion] . . . , it would speak against the claim that God has created all humans for a fellowship with him”. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 5) Thus, for Launonen and Mullins, the compatibility of CSR with theology depends on whether or not one’s model of God aligns with Natural Religion. We now turn to lay out the classical theistic model of God, as well as Launonen and Mullins’ argument for why it is unnatural.

Classical theism has much in common with other traditional Christian models of God (neoclassical theism, open theism, etc.). However, where classical theism parts ways with these other models is what is relevant here. Specifically, classical theists hold that God is timeless, immutable, simple, and impassible.

The immutability thesis, at least as it is traditionally understood, is the thesis that there is no change in God. If change is just potentiality turning into act, God is pure act; God has no potentiality. This would entail that God is also impassible. As Launonen and Mullins states, “it is impossible for God to be caused, moved, or influenced by anything outside of himself. God cannot be influenced by anything external to think, feel, act, or be in any particular way. God is completely and utterly uninfluenceable”. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 5) This also leads the classical theist to deny that God is in time. A being in time experiences change such as existing from some time, t^1 to t^2 . God exists rather, outside of time. Finally, by God being simple, one just means that God is without parts. As Launonen and Mullins put it, “God’s actions are identical to each other such that there is only one act. This act is identical to God’s existence. Furthermore, all of God’s so-called attributes, thoughts, and feelings are identical to each other and identical to God’s existence”. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 6)

Launonen and Mullins argue that classical theism (specifically, the four attributes of God described above) deviates from Natural Religion in a number of ways. To see this, we must first be a bit more specific about what exactly Natural Religion entails. Launonen and Mullins utilize the following specific, cognitively natural (god concept) beliefs from the CSR literature (specifically, Justin Barrett's work) to highlight how classical theism is unnatural:

- (A) Elements of the natural world, such as rocks, trees, mountains, and animals are purposefully and intentionally designed by someone(s) who must, therefore, have superhuman power;
- (B) These agents are not human or animal;
- (H) Gods exist with thoughts, wants, perspectives, and the free will to act;
- (I) Gods may be invisible and immortal, but they are not outside of space and time;
- (J) Gods can and do interact with the natural world and people, perhaps especially those that are ancestors of the living and, hence, have an interest in the living. This interaction with the world accounts for perceived agency and purpose in the world that cannot be accounted for by human or animal activity;
- (L) Gods, because of their access to relevant information and special powers, may be responsible for instances of fortune and misfortune; they can reward or punish human actions. (Barrett 2012, p. 322)²

Launonen and Mullins highlight the tension that exists between classical theism and the aforementioned points. First, the doctrines of classical theism conflict with (A), (B), and (L) given that God does not cause any specific event to occur, but rather is *the prime cause of every event*, rendering it impossible, at least according to Launonen and Mullins, to distinguish when God is involved in certain events from when he is not. (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 6) The authors also argue that God being impassible is in conflict with (L) as "it [is] difficult to hold on to the idea that God really rewards or punishes human actions . . . since we typically conceive of such actions as reactions to human behavior". (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 7) Of course, (I) is antithetical to classical theist's commitment to timelessness. God's timelessness, according to Mullins and Launonen, also conflicts with (H), as free will (generally understood) "is conceptualized as occurring over a series of moments of time" and a timeless God "cannot transition from not performing an action to performing an action. Nor can a timeless God transition from not making a choice to making a choice". (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 6) Relatedly, Launonen and Mullins also argue that God being impassible conflicts with (J) as, according to them, the former entails that God does not interact with the natural world.

More broadly, however, Launonen's and Mullins claim that the implicit god-concept of Natural Religion is, at its core, fundamentally personal, while, in contrast, the God of classical theism is strikingly impersonal. The authors explain: "[T]he finding that 'gods exist with thoughts, wants, perspectives, and free will to act' (H) implies that cognitively natural gods are essentially persons, not unlike human persons. However, the classical God is unlike a human person in many respects". (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 7) This leads Launonen and Mullins to conclude that if the classical concept of God is correct, "Our cognitive mechanisms are not theism-tracking". (Launonen and Mullins 2021, p. 8)

The classical depiction of God is of course to be contrasted with the open theist glossing. God on this glossing is in time, mutable, passible, and complex. If one wants to think that the *Sensus Divinitatis* is theism-tracking, the classical conception of God is not an option. Instead, we should opt for a depiction of God that fits more in-line with the open conception of God.

2. Classical Theism and CSR: An Expanded Model

One way for the classical theist to respond is to argue that the classical depiction of God is compatible with (A)–(L), minus (I). Maybe if we understand that our beliefs related to (A)–(L) are true in an analogical sense, classical theists could endorse the following:

(Theism-tracking*): natural cognitive biases and systems are theism-tracking if the god concept they give rise to is an analogically accurate concept of God.

Notice that Launonen and Mullins' argument rests on applying words like 'punishment,' 'design,' and 'interact' to God in the same sense as they are applied to creatures. However, if these words are to be understood as only analogically true, then classical theists could still say that God punishes, designs, and interacts. Of course, while a vast majority of people in the world would think that these terms are applied to God in a univocal sense (which would be an incorrect assumption), nonetheless, according to classical theists, it could still be said that (A)–(L), minus (I), are true, analogically. Human cognition is then theism-tracking*.

This sort of response deserves more publication, and we hope other philosophers will give this bare-boned response more muscle. However, we seek in this paper to make an altogether different point. One that should seem less controversial, especially to those familiar with cognitive science. For the sake of argument, we want to concede that Launonen and Mullins are right in that human cognition is more narrowly theism-tracking if open theism is true, and, we should not think that human cognition is narrowly theism-tracking, if classical theism is true.

The word 'narrowly,' here is doing a lot in our concession, hence, we offer the following unpacking. By narrowly truth-tracking, what we mean is that the cognitive mechanisms involved depict reality in an extremely accurate and fine-grained way. If there are faculties that are responsible for forming theistic beliefs, they form beliefs that map onto God with precision. If individuals form the belief that God is interacting with them*, then it is accurate in a strict univocal sense that God is interacting with them*. Similarly, if individuals form the belief that God designed them*, then their belief is true in the most literal or univocal sense of the term.

Of course, all classical theists would agree here that our faculties responsible for producing theistic belief can not be narrowly theism-tracking, given that God is metaphysically simple. We can, after all, only understand God by way of analogy. However, for open theists who believe God is a maximally great person, similar to you and me, then it makes sense to talk about God univocally or in a fine-grained sense. Therefore, our concessions should not come across as too much of a surprise.

In *Religious Epistemology*, Tyler Dalton McNabb follows Justin Barret and Kelly James Clark in arguing that if theism is true, our cognitive capacities that are responsible for producing theistic belief would be reliable in a very broad sense. (Clark and Barrett 2011) That is, human cognitive faculties reliably get humans to become aware of Divinity or, even more generally, the supernatural. It is not narrowly reliable of course, but it does its job in getting humans to become aware of another reality. As McNabb states, 'God has given us a dim light of the heavenly reality, and there is room for our view of Divinity to grow and mature'. McNabb then argues that this can be likened to a group of strangers who are in an extremely dark room:

Each individual's faculties might produce false beliefs about what is in the room. However, there is a sense in which the faculties in question reliably produce the belief that there are objects in the room. The participants can then co-operate together to figure out what is actually in the room. I imagine that there would be a certain trial-and-error process that would be implemented, basic principles of metaphysics and logic would be utilized, and each individual would need to trust certain individuals in the room and perhaps learn to not trust other individuals in the room; but eventually, it seems plausible that the individuals in

the room could gain a general knowledge for what objects are in the dark room. (McNabb 2018, p. 31)

While it would be false that the relevant cognitive faculties would be reliable in a narrow sense, they are indeed reliable in a broad sense. God could have created human beings through the process of evolution and, utilizing certain evolutionary processes, God intended to bring out in humans an awareness of Divinity simpliciter. Perhaps, as Max Baker-Hytch points out, there could be various goods—such as exercising certain intellectual virtues and developing interpersonal reliance on others—that could only be had if humans co-operated with each other in coming to accurate religious belief. (Baker-Hytch 2016) So, wanting human beings to cooperate with each other to bring about certain higher order goods, God does not give too much away through general revelation. Instead, God wants humans to work together, using philosophy, science, and religious testimony, to get at what exists at the supernatural level.

Of course, all of this is consistent with God being timeless, immutable, impassible, and simple. God does not intend for us to have narrowly accurate theistic beliefs via cognitive System 1 faculties. He simply wants us to know that Divinity is. He calls us to then join hands and use cognitive System 2 faculties to get our awareness to become more fine-grained. Hence, we propose classical theists take our model when considering whether or not classical theism is consistent with CSR.

Perhaps a comparison can be drawn between the situation we find ourselves in as it relates to our intuitive cognition and Natural Religion and that of our intuitive cognition and the natural world. Most reflective Christians, of course, believe that God has provided us (through the evolutionary process) reliable cognitive faculties which produce true beliefs about the nature of the external world. That said, if one accepts some of the theorizing of modern scientists regarding the true nature of the external world, it becomes clear that our intuitive cognition only informs us about a very small sliver of what the external world is really like. Take, for example, the Many Worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. In this view, Schrodinger's wave function (Ψ) is seen not as a superposition of probabilities describing where a single particle could be, only to collapse into an actual position when observed, but *representing every entity in the world (including human beings) existing in a superposition*, with every possible outcome of these superpositions branching off into its own reality. Thus, at every moment a seemingly infinite number of realities branch off of one event, and, at the next moment, each of those infinite branches individually branch off into an infinite number of branches; a process which happens again and again at every preceding moment. If this is actually how reality is (and some, like prominent physicist Sean Carroll, believe this to be the case), [see (Carroll 2019)], then clearly our natural cognition only provides us a very limited picture of what the actual world is like.

Similarly, many ethicists take it that human cognition generally points us in the right direction as to knowing what is right and what is wrong. Yet, we need higher-order and reflective reasoning to correct some of our misunderstandings about ethics. Again, there is a belief that our moral faculties are broadly reliable but that only gets us so far.³ We need cognitive System 2. In the same way, God has given us enough by way of natural cognition to become aware of His reality. But in order to understand Him more, in a much deeper sense, a more robust picture of reality is needed. We need to use faculties of system 2. With this in mind, we now turn to analyze what Christian Scripture has to say about the doctrine of general revelation.

3. Romans 1 and the Justice of God

Some classical theists, often those of the Christian and Reformed points of view (though not exclusively), read Romans 1 as supporting the view that humans can be said to know that God exists by the natural faculties possessed by all properly functioning humans. In this way, all humans are justly accountable for rejecting God and not trusting in Him. Romans 1:19–21 states:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.⁴

But, if what we have argued for here is right, and the general revelation had by human beings is minimal, can we really say that God is just for condemning those who reject Divinity simpliciter?

First off, what in Romans 1 entails that our natural cognitive capacities are narrowly reliable? Why can broad reliability not be sufficient for saying that humans have natural knowledge of God, and that God is right and just to condemn us for not acting responsibly with the minimal awareness that we do have? Imagine walking down a street that elicits unease in you. Perhaps it is foggy outside, the area is known for its crime and you become aware that, not too far off, there seems to be a person in need of help as you see what appears to you as a person on the ground. Perhaps you form the belief that someone was intentionally assaulted and is now dying. Are you responsible for investigating the situation further? It seems likely that you are. Even if it turns out that your original belief that someone was assaulted was false (we can say that there was not just one person lying on the ground but three, and that they are lying on the ground because they were hit accidentally by a car). You are obligated to figure out what is going on. In the same way, God gives you a fuzzy idea of Himself, and you are responsible for further exploration. If you reject Divinity simpliciter, you reject God, even if your original beliefs about Divinity turn out to be false. You need to act with the information that you have which points to the truth about God. Upon failing to act, it can rightfully be said that you are rejecting God and, thus, are accountable for this rejection.

Second, it is not clear to us that the knowledge discussed in Romans 1 is talking about natural and immediate knowledge. It could be talking about the knowledge of God that is had when doing natural theology (i.e., knowledge from cognitive System 2). Moreover, it is not even clear to us that Romans 1 has propositional knowledge of God in mind. For all we know, the knowledge being discussed is more akin to knowledge by acquaintance. Of course, a question will emerge about whether or not God is just to judge those who simply possess knowledge by acquaintance (and not propositional knowledge), but this goes beyond the scope of this paper. For now, it is enough to say that those who read Romans 1 as support for thinking CSR is at odds with classical theism have more work to do. Before we are convinced that there is a genuine problem, this objection needs further development. We, of course, leave this development up to non-classical theists.

4. Conclusions

For now, we think we have moved the conversation forward. Thanks to a very clear and thought-provoking article by Launonen and Mullins, literature now exists that discusses the different conceptions of God and CSR. We agree with Launonen and Mullins that the classical theist must tell more of a story than the open theist when it comes to making CSR consistent with their beliefs. We hope to have offered at least a very basic model for how classical theists might go about doing this. If so, we believe that our paper makes an important contribution to this now developing literature.

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Notes

- ¹ For a good explication of the differences between System 1 and System 2, see [Daniel \(2011\)](#).
- ² This list is a truncated version of the original list provided by Launonen and Mullins, including only those points that are relevant to their argument. The lettering of each point is kept the same for ease of reference.
- ³ We would like to thank a reviewer for this point.
- ⁴ ESV translation.

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