

Article

How Not to Object to Demonic Realism

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Abstract: There are few academics today who actively argue against demonic realism. Much of this is perhaps due to the fact that there are comparably few defenders of such. This has created a vacuum for critics to comfortably object to the existence of demons without sophistication (for it is only in the professional exchange of ideas do bad arguments get weeded out and good arguments gain vitality). Add to this the common perception of demonology as an anti-intellectual superstition and we end up with a threshold for the success of anti-realist arguments to be set quite low. In this paper, I shall survey three of the most familiar objections to demonic realism to arise out of this skeptical intellectual environment: First, and most ambitiously, there is the impossibility of justified belief objection that proffers that belief in demons cannot even in principle be justified no matter how much (scientific) evidence there is. Alternative explanations are always to be preferred. Second, there is the demon-of-the-gaps objection (or category of objections) which insists that demonic realism is hastily posited as a pre-scientific explanation for physical, medical, and psychological mysteries. Third, there is what I call the ethical argument from scapegoating that questions the existence of demons on grounds that, if they in fact exist, such a fact would preclude moral responsibility and the possibility of retributive justice since we could never know if a bad actor was himself morally culpable for his own evils or if he was under the coercive influence of demonic agents. I argue that, despite their rhetorical appeal and kinship with the anti-supernatural sentiments of many academics today, these three arguments are not successful, for these are either based on egregious philosophical assumptions or assumptions about demonology few if any adopt.

Keywords: demonology; Satan; metaphysics; gaps-based objections; mental disorders; cognitive science; demons; devil; angels; explanatory reasoning



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1. Introduction

Demonic realism is the view that there are nonhuman spirits that reside beyond the spacetime universe and are oriented toward moral turpitude.¹ It is not a popular position held by mainstream philosophers. This is not surprising considering that only about 31.1% of professional philosophers recently polled even identify as metaphysical non-naturalists (Bourget and Chalmers 2021). Additionally, those who do hold to a demonic realism rarely offer any rigorous defense of it. However, there have been a few recent exceptions to this (Adler 1982; Kreeft 1995; Williams 2002; Wiebe 2004; Guthrie 2018; Hunt 2020; Van Eyghen 2022). The number substantially increases if we include the teeming number of theologians following a conservative and/or supernaturalist tradition (Dickason 1975; Twelftree 2007, 2010; Heiser 2015, 2020; Gilhooly 2018). However, such theologians tend to be dismissed outright despite any assessment of the evidential merit. Instead, they are perceived as religious partisans blindly operating in deference of their orthodoxy. The dismissive treatment of conservative theologians regarding demonology in all religious traditions is quite like how such theologians have been summarily dismissed regarding their opinions on a theological protology when it comes to human origins and cosmogenesis. Since these are supposed to be under the provinces of science and philosophy, any theologian's contributions are dispensed with at the outset.

The overall absence of substantial and thoughtful defenses of demonic realism by philosophers and scientists have thus permitted bad arguments by anti-realists to survive unabated. The same seems to be true in the public square. For when it comes to popular public discourse, believers in things like demonic spirits are dismissed as sensationalists, hacks, grifters, charlatans, and opportunists sporting a naïve and uninformed metaphysical vagary. Positing demons as an explanation for anything is tantamount to positing fairies, unicorns, and garden gnomes. This paves the way for demonic anti-realists to make their case expeditiously and without much rigor (for, who would bother to spend any time dispelling fairies, unicorns, and garden gnomes in academia?). Consequently, some anti-realist arguments are underdeveloped, poor, and even involve the kind of reasoning that would never pass as substantial criticism of other more mundane matters.

This does not mean that there are not good and challenging objections to demonic realism. Indeed, there are a few arguments worthy of one's attention (e.g., [Bamberger 1952](#), p. 203; [Schleiermacher \[1821–1822\] 2016](#), p. 161; [Van Eyghen 2018](#); [Guthrie 2018](#), pp. 69–96). But these other, more visible objections that I shall be discussing tend to be (unfortunately) missed opportunities for having a real conversation about the case for demonic anti-realism. Instead, the more familiar objections that tend to circulate today are less impressive. In this paper, I shall survey three of the most familiar objections to demonic realism to arise out of this skeptical intellectual environment: First, and most ambitiously, there is the impossibility of justified belief objection that proffers that belief in demons cannot even in principle be justified no matter how much evidence there is. Alternative explanations are always to be preferred. Second, there is the devil of the gaps objection (or category of objections) which insists that demonic realism is hastily posited as a prescientific explanation for physical, medical, and psychological mysteries. Third, there is what I call the ethical argument from scapegoating that questions the existence of demons on grounds that, if they in fact exist, such a fact would preclude moral responsibility and the possibility of retributive justice since we could never know if a bad actor was himself morally culpable for his own evils or if he was under the coercive influence of demonic agents.

After presenting each one, I shall argue that, despite their rhetorical appeal and kinship with the anti-supernatural sentiments of many academics today, none of them are remotely successful. The reason for this is because these are based either on egregious philosophical assumptions or assumptions about demonology few realists if any adopt. Let us now turn to these objections individually and consider these as to how one should not object to demonic realism.

2. The Impossibility of Justified Belief Objection

There are certainly good grounds for concluding that a particular belief may be impossible. With respect to belief in demons in particular, there are formidable arguments that would render belief in such spirit beings impossible if, say, one adopts a certain metaphysical framework. Thomas Hobbes, for example, believed that to identify a being as an “incorporeal substance” was to invoke a contradiction ([Hobbes \[1651\] 1985](#), pp. 429–40). Since “substance” is the same thing as “body”, according to Hobbes, to say that a spirit is an “incorporeal substance” is to speak of a bodiless body—words that “destroy one another” (pp. 429–30). It is to imply that beings “seeming to be *somewhat*, are *nothing*” (p. 434). Accordingly, if one adopts this Hobbesian framework, belief in immaterial demons will surely be an a priori impossibility. And that would be a legitimate, if not effective, way to object to belief in demons if and only if his metaphysics are sound. But the particular versions of why belief in demons is considered impossible are not due to such prior ontological or metaphysical commitments. They are (wrongly) considered impossible due to epistemological factors. Let us zero in on how these objections are made and why they are instances of how not to object to demonic realism.

In his paper, “Justified Belief in the Existence of Demons is Impossible”, David Kyle Johnson (2017) offers us one of the most robust critiques of demonic realism to date. For many demonic realists, there is explanatory value in pointing to the evidential contribution

of diabolical experiences as inductive grounds for believing that demons exist (Wiebe 2004; Montgomery 2015; Gallagher 2019). Johnson asks if “stories of demon possession or personal experiences of seeming demonic activity provide sufficient evidence for such belief?” to which he answers, “no” (p. 176). Johnson’s thesis is actually quite aggressive, for he insists that the very “method of reasoning that must apply to [diabolical experiences] entails that it is impossible for belief in the existence of demons to be justified” (p. 176). This “method of reasoning”, he explains, involves the assessing of the probability of a hypothesis over any rivals on the basis of certain explanatory virtues: fruitfulness, scope, parsimony, and conservatism. He thus opines:

I have considered both the natural and supernatural explanations right alongside each other and weighed them according to the same criteria. [. . .] [T]o be the best explanation, the “demons did it” hypothesis would have to be the simplest, most conservative, and wide-scoping explanation. By their very nature, however, demonic explanations are not simple, conservative or wide scoping. Thus, they will always fall short when compared to the available natural explanations (pp. 186–87).

It might seem that perhaps all he is saying is that the probability that any given belief in demons for any putative demonic harassment has always been comparatively less than any rival naturalistic alternative given the relevant explanatory virtues. This would be a more modest, *de facto* thesis as it were. But he says “by their very nature” such explanations lack any such virtue. And just in case any ambiguity remains, he overtly insists that his explanatory argument shows that “even if you see one with your own eyes, belief in demons is always unjustified” (p. 186). This is a sweeping extrapolation, and it creates an *a priori* umbrella over all future claims to the demonic.² It is an intrinsic deficit for the demon hypothesis. And it is for this reason he says that the inference to demonic realism “will always fall short”. It underscores the fact that this is indeed a principled objection to anyone’s appealing to the demonic, regardless of the evidence, in order to explain any would-be diabolical encounter.

Straightaway we can see that Johnson’s thesis is unnecessarily overstated. Had he relegated himself to the mere notion that naturalistic alternatives tend to be better than appeals to the demonic, such would be fair game.³ But his conclusion is that *in principle* no demonic explanation could ever be better than a naturalistic one without the kind of prohibitive metaphysics assumed by Hobbes. Accordingly, all one needs by way of response is a just-so story that exposes the obvious: that it is possibly more reasonable that a demonic encounter took place than any naturalistic alternative in at least one set of circumstances. For, if demonic realism is possibly a better explanation in at least one instance, then that is enough to demonstrate *contra* Johnson that justification for belief in demons is not impossible.

Suppose you are in your room in the middle of the day completely sober and under no circumstances that would potentially defeat any beliefs formed in that moment. Suddenly, a ghastly apparition appears in your room and identifies himself as a demon. Let us just stipulate that there are no good reasons to think that survivalism (the notion that human beings and/or animals survive their deaths and endure) is true. Let us also suppose that living-agent psi (that apparitions might be generated psychically by living beings) is not true (Sudduth 2016). These are to rule out possible alternative, even extraordinary, explanations for the ghastly apparition. Now suppose the apparition then proceeds to spend hours with you submitting to any tests you can imagine and proceeds to communicate thoughts and details that only you know (and you know that only you know those details). Surely this might reasonably convince at least one skeptic of a demonic presence, would it not? And it does not matter that this has never happened, it only matters insofar as it is a counter-possible to the notion that belief in demons cannot in principle be justified. As a nonbeliever in Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, I can certainly imagine scenarios wherein concluding that they exist (as creatures of a sort residing in this world) could be well-justified for a fair-minded person. As far as I know, Bigfoot and Loch Ness anti-realists do not predicate

their beliefs on the lofty standard of impossibility of any would-be justification to the contrary. As with Hume's approach to any evidence for miracles, or miracle identification, Johnson's coopted uniformity approach has no real currency. That is, no one today who was confronted with evidence for some unique, even extraordinary, event would dismiss it outright simply because up to now no such evidence was presumptive. For almost 50 years, scientists had been searching for evidence of a massive scalar boson (the Higgs particle) that gives some other particles mass. In 2012, this extraordinary particle was eventually discovered by a series of experiments at the Large Hadron Collider at CERN's accelerator complex. If one coopted the preemptive epistemic methodology of Johnson here, the 2012 research project should have been inconclusive because "even if you see one with your own eyes, belief in the Higgs particle is always unjustified".

Johnson's thesis that justification for belief in demons is impossible is ambitious and unnecessary. It detracts from his otherwise less offensive argument that, historically, naturalistic alternatives tend to better explain any of *those* alleged demonic encounters. For him to preemptively dismiss any counter-possibles that are so easily conjurable makes his brand of anti-realism dead on arrival. In short, the preference of an explanation on the basis of certain explanatory virtues should never mean that a defeated explanation is impossible or could not ever conceivably be right someday.

It turns out that there is a second species of the impossibility of justified belief objection. This one is not as presumptuous as to declare that a demon hypothesis is impossible to justify on the basis of any reasoning *simpliciter*. Instead, it is considered impossible to justify a demon hypothesis on the delimited basis of *science*. The objection is leveled by the theologians John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton in their recent book on demonology, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology* (Walton and Walton 2019). Therein, the Waltons begin by making the uncontroversial distinction between that which is supernatural and that which is scientific (i.e., empirically verifiable). They then point out that science is assumed by many demonic realists⁴ to be a "means of gathering knowledge that is suitable for some subjects but not for others [and] that the demonic realm is not a subject that is suitable for scientific study" (p. 44).⁵ Since demons are immaterial beings, the empirical tools of science will be unable to verify or falsify their existence. But then a tension arises. For, such demonic realists tend to "warrant their claim for the real existence of evil spirits by pointing to observable phenomena such as 'radical evil,' possession, and the results of 'spiritual warfare'" (p. 44). Accordingly, the Waltons agree. But they seem to also be suggesting that while science cannot verify (or falsify) the existence of supernatural things, demonic realists unwittingly believe that science can be used to verify the existence of demons—an apparent contradiction on their part. So, the Waltons advert to say that if demonic realism is to be shown to be true, it will need to amass nonscientific support (since even realists agree that demons are nonscientific things).⁶

To be clear, the Waltons are not card-carrying demonic anti-realists or even interested in falsifying demonic realism.⁷ But they mean to show that a certain kind of justification (=scientific) can never support belief in demons. They do this by attempting to catch demonic realists in a methodological discord. For, one cannot affirm that science is unable to verify the existence of supernatural things like demons and then subsequently use science to verify the existence of demons. And for those who will insist that science can indeed verify the existence of demons, they would be "scientizing" demonic beings against their better judgment. And doing so will lead to a poor metaphysical demonology no self-respecting realist would adopt. The Waltons explain:

If a thing is "supernatural" it means it cannot be known by the methods of science, period. It does not mean that it can be known by applying the methods of science in a haphazard and imprecise manner. If the scientific methods offered by conflict theologians [see n. v]⁸ to defend the existence of spirits are actually evidence of anything, it means that spirits are knowable by scientific methods and therefore are not "supernatural" after all; they are a subject for scientific

inquiry that happens to be largely undocumented and poorly understood, like “dark energy” or “antimatter” (p. 47).

While such a move allows the realist to employ science, it does so at a cost—a cost that saddles the realist with having to deny that demons are superhuman agents. It is an implication that is counterproductive to, if not downright destructive of, a more orthodox demonology.

All of this so far reveals that the Waltons believe demonic realists are inconsistent in their approach to arguing for the existence of demons. They are saying that either science cannot be a tool in this regard or realists will have to bite the bullet and no longer think that demons are ultramundane things. It’s a lose-lose situation.

Let us consider a specific, scientific case that the Waltons cite as an example (which is not the charitable choice on their part). In Clinton Arnold’s book, *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Arnold 1997) and quoted by the Waltons (p. 46), Arnold seems to be saying that in some cultures (e.g., Korea, Argentina, and Canada) there have been statistically significant observable successes at the hands of certain Christians. These successes are due to their having “battled” demonic influence (whatever that looks like) over neighborhoods, cities, and entire countries. The Waltons complain that this is a bad argument because it evinces a “scientific process being used to investigate a topic that is not supposed to be a subject for scientific investigation” (p. 47). This is remarkable. According to the Waltons, it is not that Arnold’s conclusion was not the best explanation or that the metric for favoring that explanation is unsatisfactory (i.e., “effective” and “successful” are not appropriate standards). Neither did they object by suggesting that there are better explanations for the *explananda* in question (which is what they should have said), rather it is that Arnold just is not supposed to employ science at all. But this amounts to circular reasoning. Presumably this example is to show how science cannot effectively show that demons exist. While rightly noting the imprecisions of what it takes for something to be “effective” and “successful”, their complaint is not Arnold’s lack of clarity, it is that he is epistemically forbidden from doing this even if sufficient clarity were offered—the very matter under dispute. But a bad metric does not imply that *any* metric is, therefore, inappropriate.

If this were not bad enough, they then ascribe to Arnold (and others, all without support) a theoretical hypocrisy. That is, had “the results of scientific investigation [been] undesirable, they [would have been] dismissed out of hand because the subject is ‘supernatural’ and therefore not a legitimate subject for scientific inquiry” (p. 47). The additional “support” for the Waltons’ own push-back goes from circular reasoning to now insinuating a methodological hypocrisy on Arnold’s (and others’) part. This is not an improvement on their original complaint against Arnold’s right to use science here. It is instead a complaint about his character (all on the basis of what looks to be something of a *tu quoque*). So, this was all a missed opportunity by the Waltons to easily critique Arnold’s case. For, where Arnold erred is not that he violated some principle of scientific applicability, it is that his preferred explanation of the scientific data that was invoked was unwarranted. And it is unwarranted because either the representative sample was not selective enough (e.g., perhaps only being reported by biased sources) or there are better explanations than the “success” of the community’s spiritual warfare (e.g., that any improvements are due to other concurrent factors). Nevertheless, even if Arnold was an epistemic hypocrite, this is not enough to imply that science cannot be used in some way to support a demon hypothesis.

Despite the ill-contrived way the Waltons object to Arnold’s use of science, it is important to clarify precisely *what* is supposed to be scientific or not regarding this subject.⁹ On the one hand, demonic realists have solidarity with the Waltons in that demons themselves are unscientific things. Unsurprisingly, none of the instruments of science can therefore detect or measure them. This is no more controversial than a theist who insists that God is also not a material being and, so, is not directly scientifically detectable or measurable. But these admissions are not the same thing as saying that science cannot in any way help support the conclusion that a supernatural being exists. We can underscore this by

considering another, but nonreligious, example of how science can be enlisted in support of a supernatural conclusion.

Suppose that philosophers of mind all come to agree that substance dualism is true—that any embodied sentient and self-conscious being (whether carbon-based or not) must also have an immaterial soul. We know that Turing tests, for example, are designed for investigators to discern whether a given artificial intelligence is in fact a conscious being (Shieber 2004). And let us suppose for the argument's sake that it is settled amongst philosophers that consciousness is located within or is itself the soul. Consciousness itself cannot be directly detected except by the one whose consciousness it is. However, neuroscience and perhaps Turing tests can, at least possibly, provide empirical (=scientific) data. For example, how a prospect answers certain Turing test questions and/or whether certain neural synapses are firing (if applicable) could be used in a larger argument for the presence of consciousness in that being. And we would have a separate premise in the larger argument that affirms this imagined settled metaphysical anthropology: "If a being is conscious, then that being is ensouled" (or something like that). This would be a perfectly acceptable probabilistic argument for the presence of a soul in a being suspected to be conscious. Consciousness itself (which would not be a scientific thing if substance dualists are right) does leave empirically detectable and measurable indications in the world if it is present. And to rely on such data would not be to naturalize said consciousness.

Likewise, there are conceivable ways to see how science could be used specifically to support a larger explanatory argument for demons. Suppose someone claiming to be possessed by an immaterial demonic spirit is relocated to a scientific laboratory. Further suppose that prior to the possession case, the victim has been properly vetted and subsequently contracts that if a possession should happen, he would be willing to submit to laboratory observation by dispassionate, unbiased scientists. When under observation, the demoniac then proceeds to speak a language everyone is satisfied he does not know or communicates truths he could not possibly have had access to (say, what a physician in another state wrote down on a ledger three minutes ago). The demoniac also performs extraordinary feats such as levitation and moving objects on demand with his mind. Being within a laboratory context, these things are clearly detectable, observable, and measurable (e.g., the demoniac levitates 12.6 m into the air). And the information about the ledger-writing physician can be confirmed by perhaps accessing a security camera. But why think that such scientifically established phenomena (if such were to occur) would not positively contribute to an argument for the existence of demons? Surely the scientifically derivable data here would figure prominently as the *explananda* with a demon hypothesis *qua* possession as the *explanans*. And nothing here contradicts the idea that the demon in the demon hypothesis is nevertheless an unscientific *qua* supernatural thing.

Therefore, the Waltons' sweeping complaint that one cannot believe in demons on the basis of science is quite mistaken. It is mistaken because their reasons for this are that (i) demons themselves are not scientific things, (ii) certain scientific metrics used are imprecise, and (iii) demonic realists are hypocritical in their methodologies. But though all of these may be true, they have no currency in showing how science cannot be used in support of a wider explanatory argument for a demon hypothesis.

Let us now move on to a different category of objections to demonic realism that no demonic anti-realist should utilize.

3. The Demon-of-the-Gaps Objection

Readers are perhaps quite familiar with the God-of-the-gaps objection to design arguments for the existence of God. As an objection, it tends to caricature the theist as saying something like: "I don't know what caused this mysterious event, therefore my favorite cause—God—did it". According to the charge, the theist is declared guilty of a non-sequitur, supposing that her theism is just an ersatz explanation for some mysterious event(s) on grounds that no known natural explanation is currently available.

To be clear, gaps-based objections are not in and of themselves arguments. They are only expressions of protest. A gaps-based objection is only a circumlocution for saying that one's proposed hypothesis is either (i) unjustified in concluding that a supernatural cause is the best explanation for some mysterious event (Johnson 2017, p. 180) or (ii) a lazy way to avoid naturalistic (would-be) alternatives for some mysterious event (Cupitt 1961).¹⁰ But (i) is just a counterclaim and amounts to nothing more than question-begging if no accompanying argument is offered; (ii) is nothing short of an *ad hominem* which nevertheless assumes that (i) is true. In the best light, this serves as a perspicuous way to begin one's protest. Enter the demonic realist who proposes a demon hypothesis to account for certain mysterious events. As for which mysterious events are in dispute, there are approximately two kinds: First, there are certain physical events specifically involving alleged alterations and manipulations of physical objects and/or physical laws. That is, sometimes demons are posited as manipulators of natural laws and/or as causes of some natural evils (including biomedical instances of organic damage), or perhaps the very genesis of natural evil itself (e.g., Murray 2008, pp. 103–6; Boyd 2001, pp. 293–318; Kelly 1997, pp. 29–42; Penelhum 1971, p. 249; Lewis 1962, chp. 9; Mascall 1956, pp. 301–2; Trethowan 1954, p. 128). Second, there are certain psychological events involving erratic or dysfunctional forms of human behavior. Most notably, there are some episodes of maladjusted human behavior that have been alleged to be due to demonic possessions. To both of these, anti-realists are quick to accuse those who would dare to invoke a demon hypothesis as shirking or ignoring obvious developments in the physical and cognitive sciences. They declare (sometimes without support) that the demonic realist is guilty of embracing a demon of the gaps.

Now, surely appeals to modern science and the cognitive sciences are good ways to push back against demonic realism, are they not? It is not that this is a bad strategy for the anti-realist, it is that some anti-realists either make their case on the basis of a straw man or on the basis of outright gaslighting readers about what the relevant sciences actually tell us. We're supposed to think the matter is quite settled, but this is far from obvious.

Let us consider the gaps objection to mysterious physical events first. When a demonic realist proposes that a demon, devil, or the Prince of Darkness himself is or may be responsible for some mysterious physical event, he is not necessarily arguing for the existence of Satan and his cohorts on the basis of those mysterious events. Indeed, academics like Michael Murray (2008), Gregory Boyd (2001), Stewart Kelly (1997), C. S. Lewis (1962), E. L. Mascall (1956), and Dom Trethowan (1954) are not offering up a natural diabolology. Instead, such thinkers are using the demon hypothesis as an explanatory option in the context of a wider (often Christian) *Weltanschauung*. That is, *if* demons exist, such *might* explain the physical mysteries under investigation. However, finding truly alternative causes to such events would not necessarily be a refutation of the existence of demons just in case one's demonic realism is not based on such *explananda*. Suppose an African American church was burned down in the U.S. city of Denver, Colorado due to arson. If there are violent racists living in the area, such might account for the incident. That the church's demise should end up being due to a group of local satanists instead would not subsequently constitute a refutation of the existence of violent racists in the area who just happen to not be involved. X's not confirming Y does not entail or imply that, therefore, Y does not exist.

But what if science shows that *no* physical events turn out to be due to demonic causes? Is this not an impressive inductive argument against such realism? Perhaps.¹¹ But herein lies a second problem not considered by gaps-based objectors. There is nothing about demonic realism that entails or implies that demons (or Satan himself) should directly interact with anything physical. In Scripture, we find no such example of this much less any didactic teaching on it. And given that demons are supposed to be evil *spirits* gives us *prima facie* reason to *not* expect that they should. And from passages like Numbers 22.31 and Revelation 7.2 even the good angels, from whom the demons allegedly derive, depend on God for their physical or psychokinetic interactions within the created order. Presumably demons do not work for God and, therefore, cannot obtain the same resource. We should not neglect the force of this. For, not only are demons not the kinds of things that

are expected to directly interact with the physical world, not even the good angels can do so without God's intervention. So, finding putative naturalistic alternative explanations to mysterious physical events would not render demonic realism improbable but would only confirm a more faithful biblical demonology.¹² That is, by virtue of the scientist shrinking those physical mysteries that one might have thought was caused by demons is in perfect accordance with what Scripture implies (even to the chagrin of some demonic realists throughout history). As an existential critique, it is only a straw man. The only thing that follows from this objection is that one must adjust their doctrine of demonology, not that demons do not exist.

Much more could be said about this, but this is enough to show the non-sequitur nature of the demon-of-the-gaps objection when used as an attempted refutation of demonic realism on the basis of the ongoing demystification of physical events.

We thus segue into the secondary target of the demon-of-the-gaps objection: mysterious psychological events. Specifically, there are demonic anti-realists and skeptics that confidently and ostentatiously pronounce the triumphs of modern-day psychiatry, psychology, and neuroscience to show that believing in things like demon possessions as explanations for strange human behaviors is passé. With fervor and finality, they herald the demise of a prescientific demon hypothesis because cognitive scientists now know what causes possession-like behavior. Examples of such pronouncements abound but let us consider just a few. Atheist John W. Loftus (2021) writes the following with a tinge of chronological snobbery:

Today we just don't think sick people are demon-possessed. With the advent of modern medicine we treat the physical causes, and with psychology we treat the mental causes of illnesses the best that we can. . . . All I can say here is what a mixed-up world the superstitious first century must have been! Formerly epilepsy was viewed as demon possession. But now we know some of the causes and can minimize the effects. Mental disease also has its known causes, and some specialists can help with brain surgery. (p. 282)

In a more dismissive manner, Matthew McCormick (2012) writes that

when our knowledge of the phenomena developed and we began to understand mental illness as a nervous-system pathology, we ultimately abandoned the concept of demons altogether. The idea was too embedded in an outmoded, nonfunctional, unhelpful ontology to make it usable in the better description of the world. Demons were eliminated in favor of a new concept; the term *mental illness* explained the symptoms in the context of a theory that conceived of the problem in terms of a physical illness and neuroscience rather than the elaborate metaphysics countenanced by the demon-possession explanation. (p. 283)

Not just wild-eyed atheists are decrying the legitimacy of a demon hypothesis in psychopathology, there are some professionals in the cognitive sciences that are doing the same. One group does not hold back:

Delusions of possession are a separate sub-category of religious delusions in psychosis. They involve a distorted perception of having one's mental processes or actions controlled by demons or spirits associated with local religion. (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021, p. 8)

Believing that possessions are real occurrences is to be deluded (I sense a Richard Dawkins sequel here.) From these pronouncements we are to believe that the devil is dead, and that the psychiatrist, the psychologist, and the neuroscientist have killed him.

Actually, the truth of the matter is quite scandalous and deserves considerable attention here. For, not only are these declarations about the displacement of the demon hypothesis "with the advent of modern medicine" in accounting for alleged possession cases grossly overstated, but these same industries are also not even able to adjudicate the etiologies of the more "ordinary" mental disorders (e.g., clinical depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and the various anxiety disorders). The infighting between psychologists and psychiatrists,

and now the neuroscientists, reveals the lack of solidarity as to the pathogeneses and causal pathways that give rise to these exemplary disorders. *Nobody knows what causes clear-cut mental disorders much less those that may or may not be mental disorders at all!* Is a possession case merely the misdiagnosis of a mental disorder? Well, what would it mean for a mental disorder to be the preferred explanation? One might point to the major diagnostic canon of the industries—the fifth *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) of the [American Psychiatric Association \(2013\)](#)—to answer this question. The anti-realist will feel sanguine to pontificate something like this: “See! Possession symptoms are actually due to known conditions diagnosed variously as Dissociative Trance Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, schizophrenia, and the like!” It is implied, if not overtly declared, that the cognitive sciences now have explanations for possession-like behavior. Everyone can move on now.

There are three reasons why this is gaslighting at its finest. First, despite their utility, this and other diagnostic manuals are hotly disputed by the professionals themselves. Among the numerous complaints of DSM-5, one of the most significant has to do with the fact that the diagnostic criteria are not predicated on proximate causes. Unlike somatic illnesses like influenza, epilepsy, and COVID-19, such diagnoses do not pick out, nor intend to pick out, etiologies for the disorders one might describe. A Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), for example, is a class or cluster of symptoms that clinicians agree characterize the disorder. But no causes are either being affirmed or excluded. And just to be clear, the same happens to go for a number of somatic illnesses such as tinnitus, urticaria (=hives), and hypertension. To diagnose a patient with any of these conditions is not to identify a cause or even pretend to.¹³

Now this is significant because it is an instance of explanatory legerdemain on the part of the skeptic through the nescient or unscrupulous use of medicalspeak. If such an objection were offered in any other situation it would be rightly eviscerated as a faux response. Let us illustrate how this medicalspeak can come across (wrongly) as an explanation. Suppose a woman is exhibiting mild but persistent bouts of depression that interferes with her ordinary life following a sexual assault. A psychologist determines that the patient is thereby suffering from dysthymia. It would be wrong for the assailant to subsequently think he had been exonerated because the victim’s condition was clinically diagnosed as dysthymia. Imagine this assailant with a straight face counter-accusing the victim of being guilty of an “assailant of the gaps”. To understand the absurdity here one would need to know that dysthymia is not itself a cause or an explanation but is a mere label for a condition that can be caused by any number of biological, social, and/or psychological factors. It just is a chronic, persistent depressive condition ([American Psychiatric Association 2013](#), p. 155). And that can certainly be inaugurated or triggered by a perpetrator’s assault. Accordingly, to identify one’s condition as dysthymia is not to rule out this or that cause, it is merely to identify a group of symptoms one experiences so that certain treatments can be authorized. If a rapist really attempted this kind of assailant of the gaps objection, we would consider his position desperate if not malicious.

When it comes to possession symptoms in particular, similar forms of medicalspeak are being invoked. As noted, before, a critic might invoke DID as an explanation for (some) so-called possession cases. But, as it turns out, the diagnostic description of something like DID is quite consistent with a genuine possession taking place. In fact, it’s quite consistent with there being any alien causes that may or may not be supernatural. The DSM-5 merely says that DID involves a

[d]isruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual. (p. 292)

The DSM-5 makes space for *any* cause—exogenic or endogenic, proximate or distal, material or nonmaterial—that might account for one’s “disruption of identity”, their “experience of possession”, and the various “related alterations”. At best, clinicians can only speak of causal pathways, stressors, triggers, and the like. While it’s true that psychiatrists and neuropsychologists both attempt to proffer a Biomedical Disease Model of mental disorders (that all mental disorders are reducible to biological diseases), such a model is far from settled and, instead, faces insuperable problems that likely prevent it from ever being a viable etiological candidate (Graham 2012, pp. 53–63). There just is no suitable contender for a disease model, or any other kind of model, which is why DSM-5 simply does not *bother* describing mental disorders in terms of causes. Calling something a mental disorder is not to clarify the cause of one’s condition, it is only to categorize it. The unsettledness of the relevant industries as to what a mental disorder is telegraphs that the science is being unfairly weaponized by anti-realists in service to their narrative. And that is just argumentative malpractice.

Second, the relevant industries are taking a second look at the therapeutic contribution of the practice of exorcism. Now, anti-realists presume that remedies to mental disorders (regardless of etiologies) never or should never include exorcism as an option. It would be, they say, an antiquated mistreatment of someone in a vulnerable and volatile condition. But, again, the industries are not able to identify much less isolate any causes; and in cases where causal pathways are discernible, therapeutics are rarely targeted toward *per impossible* elimination. The contemporary clinician will often take a holistic approach to therapies and avail herself to implementing what it takes to rehabilitate the patient. Her therapeutic arsenal will thus focus on the utility of psychotropic drugs, counselling, behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, hypnotherapy, and the lot. Only those with a metaphysical axe to grind will preclude something like an exorcism from the clinician’s repertoire. The fact that we cannot identify singular or determinate causes for even exemplary mental disorders has moved professional clinicians, to the chagrin of anti-realists, to make space for a symphony of therapeutics. When it comes to possession cases, there is a growing interest to give the exorcist a chance at remedy. Yes, exorcism is being taken seriously as a therapeutic approach to such cases—and not just by wild-eyed, conservative Christians or elitist Catholic priests dispatched from Vatican City, but by concerned non-partisan practitioners who wish to expand their therapeutic resources (Crooks 2018; Irmak 2014; Betty 2005). That exorcism is once again being taken seriously as a contributing therapeutic is a testament to the ambiguity of any causal factors involved in the so-called possession cases. As such, it serves as a backhanded compliment to realists by subtly implying that they have been prematurely discarded.

Third, even if one assumes a disease theory of mental disorders, the anti-realist would still not be in the right epistemic position to preclude the explanatory contribution of demonic influence. That biological etiologies might be in one’s history and be detectable (say, as biomarkers in the blood), this alone would not preclude the presence of a secondary condition at work. In fact, even if there was a known biological cause in place for, say, depression, this would not itself be a guarantor of one’s developing the experience of depression or any of its symptoms (Olbert and Gala 2015). It’s possible for the pathology to be present in someone and, yet, for them never to become depressed. But psychopathologists are aware of there being comorbid conditions present in a particular patient that may be the right recipe for what it takes to trigger such depression, even if biologically rooted. A patient has a comorbidity if she is simultaneously suffering from two or more disorders or illnesses. Sometimes the multiplicity of disorders is merely coincidental—that they are causally unrelated, having nevertheless arisen concurrently and for their own independent reasons. Sometimes the comorbidities are interrelated, serial occurrences—having both arisen because one has proceeded from or is triggered by the other. We find instances of this with the concurrences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression where the latter is often triggered by the former. Comorbidities may even be identified solely as matters of what a clinician might anticipate based on population groups. Regardless, the point here is

that designating someone as suffering from this or that mental illness, even if biologically ordained, does nothing to rule out or exclude a comorbid condition that would act as a trigger. And why could not a demonic possession be that trigger in some victims?

It is entirely possible, for example, that a patient that is schizophrenic is also under spiritual duress by a demonic intruder. And it is possible that the manifestation of schizophrenia only presents itself when triggered by another (causal) presence. For example, DSM-5 reports that “[r]ates of comorbidity with substance-related disorders are high in schizophrenia” (p. 105). [Mechanic et al. \(2014\)](#) report that studies “also [show] that there must be environmental factors at play” (p. 104). These environmental factors range from things like psychoses to stressors to even the emotional context of one’s family life and geographical residence. All this even though studies indicate that there is “a strong link . . . between genetics and schizophrenia” (p. 104). The fact of the matter is the causal pathways involved are quite diverse and may be necessary in some cases to realize schizophrenia in some patients. We are showing that a condition’s having a strong genetic link still does not preclude the cooccurrence of another condition that acts as a trigger. As such, it is not impossible or even unusual for someone to have a genetic predisposition toward schizophrenia at $t = 1$ but to never have such a disorder manifest at a later t . A subsequent trigger, like trauma, at, say, $t = 2$ could bring about schizophrenia in a patient such that the symptoms do manifest at $t = 3$. There is no clinical reason why that trigger at $t = 2$ might not or could not be an instance of demon possession (and what could be more stressful than a demonic harassment of the kind that gives rise to a possession?). That someone is diagnosed with schizophrenia at $t = 3$ is obviously no indication that there was no trigger at $t = 2$ given that, in this case, the patient’s schizophrenic symptoms would not manifest without the trigger at $t = 2$. So, the anti-realist cannot insist that if someone is diagnosed with a schizophrenic disorder that this inexorably implies that a demon possession could not be a comorbid condition.¹⁴ Thus, even if mental disorders just are biological disorders, they still are not necessarily counter-explanations to a demon hypothesis.

So, nobody knows what causes mental disorders, only what may contribute to or trigger such conditions. Matters will be different in each patient revealing that there are never sufficient or necessary conditions for one’s mental disorder, for no two expressions of the same condition are due to identical antecedents. Even if we grant a disease model, the alleged presence of a disease is not enough to rule out other compossible etiologies and triggers (including demonic beings). There is a continuum of factors that may or may not be present that ultimately give rise to a patient’s disorderly behavior. Accordingly, critics need to stop hoodwinking us into thinking that on any notion of a mental disorder that this automatically excludes other exogenic causal possibilities—including the ones that may offend their metaphysical sensibilities. In addition to the fact that it is almost impossible to identify (singular) causes for most mental disorders (which is why DSM and other diagnostic canons do not even predicate a diagnosis based on causes), some anti-realists unapologetically believe and proclaim that mental disorders have natural (and organic) causes just by virtue of being a mental disorder and that this *a priori* precludes any other cause as a contributing factor. But, as I also pointed out, even on a disease model of mental disorders (on which this gaps-based objection largely depends), the presence of the putative disease still does not rule out the contribution of other conditions (i.e., possessions) that may ultimately give rise to a mental disorder being realized in someone.¹⁵

Therefore, the demon-of-the-gaps objection is definitely not how the anti-realist should rebuff the existence of demons. When deployed against physical mysterious events, such an objection is based on faulty presuppositions not essential to a biblical demonology. The scientist closing the gaps in nature may serve as red meat for the anti-realist, but it only amounts to a red herring to the realist. When a demon-of-the-gaps objection is deployed against mysterious psychological events (i.e., possession cases), such an objection amounts to nothing more than gaslighting—pretending that clinical diagnoses of mental disorders have long displaced the demon hypothesis and that religious folks have yet to catch up to

the science. “Follow the science!” they might say. But to suppose that the science, in all its forms, has very clearly displaced a demon hypothesis is to be bedeviled oneself.

4. The Ethical Objection from Scapegoating

There is one more objection to the existence of demons no one should use that deserves our attention—our contempt, really. This one is predicated on concerns about the volitional impact of belief in demons. In some cases, objections highlighting the implications of certain propositions or hypotheses can be good grounds for rejecting them. For example, believing that leeches cure fevers or that ethnic minorities are not fully persons will have obvious harmful implications. That people will be harmed and/or killed can be good grounds for rethinking the hypothesis that provided the impetus for such atrocities to begin with. Of course, one might object by pointing out the obvious here—that such beliefs are simply false irrespective of their implications. But we can suppose that those beliefs are unknown to be true for the sake of argument. If we did not know, say, that leeches do not cure fevers and that swaths of people continue to die because of such medical “remedies”, it may still be grounds (for some) for choosing not to believe in the initial proposition.

When it comes to demonology, some skeptics and anti-realists do not hold back a similar strategy in their objecting to the existence of demons. [De la Torre and Hernández \(2011\)](#) imply such an objection in the context of a popular caricature:

The devil made me do it, and Jesus cleaned up my mess. As a new creature in Christ “I” can move on without really addressing the consequences of or restitution for those sins the devil made me do. Hence, Nazi concentration guards can torture all week long and still attend worship services on Sunday mornings. Politicians can lead armies to war under false pretenses without addressing the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, who are killed or maimed because, after all, our intentions were pure—it was the enemy who was really evil. (p. 198)

The consequences of believing in the devil (or, by extension I surmise, all evil spirits) is proffered to be unconscionable. For, if Satan and his cohorts do in fact influence human beings toward malice, it is a wonder how anyone who does evil, nay *significant* evil, could ever be at fault. If one believes he is under the influence or control of evil forces operating within him, he may even, as De la Torre and Hernández muse, absolve himself of a guilty conscience. Don [Cupitt \(1961\)](#) deploys this sentiment in a succinct argument:

Explanations of moral phenomena which have recourse to the Devil or devils must be repudiated because they are a device for shuffling off responsibility. (p. 413)

Some atheists have attempted to utilize this argumentative strategy against belief in God. They say that some believers in God find clever ways to “shuffle off responsibility” for their own atrocities ([Hitchens 2007](#), esp. 15–62; [Harris 2005](#), esp. 80–152). On a charitable reading of Cupitt, we could say that once the demon hypothesis has been rendered more improbable than not on other grounds, the ethical argument from scapegoating simply provides us additional motivation to resist such a hypothesis. But, so construed, it is no longer an argument against the hypothesis itself as much as it is an argument against the virtuous character of those who would abuse the belief.

What makes scapegoating arguments like these poor arguments is twofold: First, they do not actually change our doxastic attitudes about things like God and demons; second, as with some gaps-based objections, the objector sorely misunderstands the hypothesis to which she is objecting. Regarding the first point, a believer in demons is more likely to bite the bullet despite her actions being considered morally egregious. No amount of posturing about how awful one’s actions are in the name of God or in the name of Satan will change the truth-value of the proposition under dispute. Instead, she is more likely to adjust her behavior to be less visible to critics. Her response is, not to question a metaphysical hypothesis, but to be more clandestine in her behavior. Also, consider that if

a clever and powerful hypnotist was able to manipulate someone to perform an atrocity, we would hardly think that a scapegoating argument would be an effective refutation of the hypnotist's existence. Maybe those under similar influence by demons are rightly deflecting responsibility, one could retort. As unwelcoming as this may be, we should only reject such a hypothesis if it is genuinely wrong, not whether it is unsavory.¹⁶ This is why we do not reject the *existence* of oppressive dictators but, rather, their *esteem*. While we do repudiate the unethical dictator himself, we do not derive dismissive metaphysical conclusions about them. And that is the point: people can be repudiated on such grounds, not propositions. If a valueless, factual proposition entails unfair or unjust moral consequences, then all that that means is that there will be at least one truth we are going to hate.

But that is all assuming that deflecting moral responsibility is indeed entailed by demonology. This brings us to the second thing that makes scapegoating arguments poor: that the objector sorely misunderstands the hypothesis to which she is objecting. It turns out the demonic realist need not bite the bullet. Demonic realism is not a license for "shuffling off responsibility" at all under any rubric. Traditionally, the only kind of demonic influence that could be construed as that which circumvents or displaces the will of a human actor is a possession case. But there are only two kinds of possessions: (i) discordant possessions (those that are unwilling) and (ii) harmonious possessions (those that are willed). It cannot be (ii) that one would have in mind because that would involve the host giving consent to his possession and aligning with the will of the invading demon. This would not be grounds for scapegoating. The objector must instead have (i) in mind. Indeed, the more familiar kind of (malicious) possession tends to be (i). When a person is allegedly possessed by a demon, most understand by this that the host, whose will be not in accord with that of the demon's, has been hijacked in some way. Their ascendancy over their own body has been seized and supplanted by the invading demon's. Such possession cases almost always involve some measure of involuntary bodily resistance (manifesting as seizures, foaming at the mouth, self-harm, etc.) as well as some measure of mental resistance (i.e., that the victim-host seeks remedy from the invasion). But no one attempting to scapegoat their atrocities affirms that they have been controlled in this way. Instead, those who may seek self-exoneration tend to blame a more moderate form of influence over their will. That is, an assailant who claims to be influenced by demons is more likely to construe that influence in terms of hearing voices or some similar phenomenon.¹⁷

This leads us to consider that the critic instead has in mind demonic *temptation* as the mechanism for concerns about self-exoneration. If so, this will not serve the scapegoating objection either. It is obvious that those succumbing to temptation nevertheless bear the responsibility, at least in part, for their actions. If a Nazi soldier overtly stated that it was demonic temptation that led to his actions, this would not itself be exculpatory. Everyone recognizes that temptations from without are ubiquitous and come in a variety of forms and degrees. Billboards with attractive men and women, a neighbor's flirtatious behavior, and movies containing sex acts will be sources of temptation for sexual assailants, but one can hardly exonerate the assailant merely given the presence of those temptations in the world. The same goes for one's being moved or motivated by certain political rhetoric to take violent action. This is why there have been moves to regulate so-called disinformation and misinformation, particularly in social media. The concern here is that such influence drives some forms of human deviancy. But no one thinks that the one who finally acts on such rhetoric is himself exonerated.

According to most demonologies, demons only suggest or prompt human beings to engage in unscrupulous activities. It is considered a form of temptation. For those with deference to the New Testament, this notion has some direct and indirect support (e.g., John 8.38, 44; Acts 5.3–4; 1 Cor 10.13; 1 Pet 5.8–9; James 1.14–15; 4.7). And even before events like the Jewish holocaust, Christians were careful to speak about devilish influences in terms of such temptation. For example, as the seventeenth-century devotional work, *The (New) Whole Duty of Man*, argues, blaming the devil for one's giving in to temptation is unreasonable because it "is an error arising from a very false notion of the devil's power of

tempting men; it being nothing more, but like that of wicked men tempting one another” (Allestree [1658] 1810, pp. 326–27).

Thus, the mere fact that these sources of influence obtain are not even *prima facie* grounds for dismissing the acting agent’s culpability. Nor was it considered to be such. For such an agent is never constrained to act as she does. And because of that, one should not object to a demon hypothesis on the basis of an ethical argument from scapegoating.

5. Conclusions

It’s understandable why some hesitate to affirm the existence of demons given how much the hypothesis itself has been, well, demonized by critics. We have been largely conditioned to think that a demon hypothesis is nothing but a contemporary vestige of a prescientific age that stubbornly persists despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. While there is evidence to the contrary that realists should ponder, the ones surveyed in this paper, despite their popularity, are not among them. Herein we examined three of those arguments skeptics and critics should not use.

First, we looked at two versions of the impossibility of justification objection. The first version as proffered by Johnson ambitiously overstates the implications of drawing inferences to the best explanation. While natural explanations may be preferable in most or even all cases where demons are suspected, this has no currency toward showing that there can be no justification for the demon hypothesis. The Waltons’ version, though much more modest in scope, is predicated on a misunderstanding about the applicability of science in existential questions about demonology. Since demons themselves cannot be scientifically detected, the Waltons surmise that it is impossible to justify belief in demons on the basis of science. But this was demonstrated to be wrong by showing how this can be appropriately done in a variety of contexts—religious or not.

Second, we looked at gaps-based objections. These involve the twofold notion that the physical sciences and the cognitive sciences have long refuted the demon hypothesis when it comes to adjudicating what causes mysterious natural events and mysterious instances of disorderly behavior in human beings. Critics of a demon hypothesis unapologetically affirm that realists hold on to jaded vestiges that flout the science. They accuse them of defying the unmitigated success of science in increasingly closing those mysterious gaps in nature. But such is predicated on the false notion that demonology bases its justification on such mysterious physical events. Instead, realists are merely accommodating such mysterious events as possibly caused by demonic beings in the absence of a better explanation. Furthermore, the anti-realist’s position here is predicated on a misunderstanding about demonology altogether, for a particularly biblical demonology does not so much as imply that demons directly cause physical events.

And then there are those anti-realists who think that mental disorders are what cause the relevant disorderly behaviors in people that occasionally manifest and that this is well established science. However, as I have shown, the diagnostic canons of psychology and psychiatry do not identify causes of the conditions at all because such causes cannot be found. Only triggers and causal pathways can be posited. Even if one adopted the controversial Disease Model of mental disorders, it still does not preclude the possible concomitance of an external, even spiritual, trigger from inaugurating or exacerbating the sequelae of a preexisting condition.

The final objection the anti-realist ought not to use is the ethical argument from scapegoating. This argument attempts to repudiate the demon hypothesis on grounds that it is exploited as a convenient device for wrongly evading moral responsibility. But even if it did have this ramification, demonic realism is not consequently falsified. More importantly, no demonology entails or implies that human actions (outside of possession cases) are irresistibly determined by demonic causes so that an abuser’s blame-shifting does not follow from any orthodox demonology. It is yet another swing and a miss by the anti-realist.

Of course, none of this is to conclude that demonic realism is true or even metaphysically tenable. There are better reasons to be skeptical (Bamberger 1952, p. 203; Schleiermacher [1821–1822] 2016, p. 161; Van Eyghen 2018; Guthrie 2018, pp. 69–96). The objective here has been far more modest. I have attempted to show merely that anti-realists, if they are to disagree with demonic realism, should not consider these three particular objections in their argumentative repertoire. Adopting some kind of Hobbesian incoherence argument (i.e., that immaterial spirits are logically or metaphysically impossible) will afford the anti-realist a much more promising a priori case. Or the anti-realist could identify as an agnostic and more modestly argue that no past or present case for demonic realism has thus far been convincing. Either way, the anti-realist should defer to better arguments than the three profiled here and let the devil take the hindmost.

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Notes

- ¹ This notion of demonic realism is most common in Western religious traditions. Since this is the most prevalent understanding, and the object of the particular objections hurled against it, it is the focus of this paper. Ancient notions of *daimon* and variants of animism are not being considered here.
- ² This approach may remind us of another David: David Hume (1748). For, similar to Johnson, Hume's argument against miracles on the basis of "uniform experience" (§10) also prevents anyone from identifying whether a miracle ever obtains or will obtain.
- ³ In fact, I focus on his better case against demonic realism in (Guthrie 2018, pp. 120–22).
- ⁴ The Waltons use "conflict theologians" to designate those theologians who are demonic realists and believe in a traditional model of spiritual warfare where literal unembodied demons stand in an adversarial relation to human beings and God.
- ⁵ After noting the alleged cultural notion that science is just such a "repository", the Waltons overtly ascribe such a view to demonic realists (or "conflict theologians") who find empirical support for the existence of demons: "Conflict theology is a product of its own cognitive environment, and therefore has the same confused relationship to 'science' that pervades the entire culture" (p. 45).
- ⁶ The Waltons believe a more promising route is to turn to an authoritative source like Scripture to show that demons exist if indeed they exist at all. As for their own assessment of Scripture, the Waltons remain agnostic—finding neither biblical affirmations nor any biblical refutations of such beings. This is not to say that they think that demons are not mentioned in Scripture, only that any such mention is not assertoric. A scriptural author who refers to a demon, they say, means only to intimate a culturally familiar demonology as a narrative device to underscore messages unrelated to whether demons exist. Thus, Scripture is no more an affirming source for the demonic than it is an affirming source for, say, chaos monsters despite their being mentioned as well (e.g., Psalm 74.14; 89.9–10; Isaiah 27.1). See Walton and Walton (2019, pp. 99–105).
- ⁷ "In this book, it is not our intent to evaluate metaphysical realities" (p. 49).
- ⁸ See n. v.
- ⁹ Some responsible demonic realists are quite explicit about intimating science in support of the existence of demons. E.g., Boa and Bowman (2007) draw a comparison with natural theology and write: "Scientists have started finding positive evidence for God as a supernatural, intelligent Creator. . . . Likewise, some surprisingly rigorous investigations have yielded positive evidence for the existence of hostile supernatural forces. For example, careful research has shown that demonic possession is a real, if rare, phenomenon, and that it cannot be explained away as a natural psychiatric disorder" (p. 106).
- ¹⁰ Don Cupitt (1961): "Explanation by devils . . . is slothful and cowardly" (p. 414). Richard Dawkins (2006) prefers "fools" in describing such explanatory alternatives: "Those people who leap from personal bafflement at a natural phenomenon straight to a hasty invocation of the supernatural are no better than the fools who see a conjuror bending a spoon and leap to the conclusion that it is 'paranormal'" (p. 129).
- ¹¹ The demonic realist might push back on me here for being too congenial, noting that there are in fact gaps science has not closed that could only be due to demonic interactions. Specifically, one might have in mind certain seemingly unambiguous instances of paranormal activity. However, even assuming the legitimacy of such instances, herein lies another straw man. For, there is a possible alternative interpretation of would-be demonic interactions that allegedly give rise to paranormal events that does not depend on presuming spirit-matter interaction but affirms demonic causation nevertheless—one consonant with a spiritual nature. Kant ([1766]1900) once offered such an alternative model:

[P]ure spirits can indeed never be present to our external senses, nor communicate with matter in any other way than by acting upon the spirit of man, who belongs with them to one great republic. The spirits must act in such a way that the ideas which they call up in man's mind clothe themselves in corresponding pictures according to the law of imagination, thus causing any objects which fit into the picture to appear as if they were outside of him. This deception can affect any one of the senses, and, however mixed it may be with incongruous fancies, it should not keep one from supposing spiritual influences in it (Kant [1766]1900, p. 72).

Kant's speculation here allows for one's paranormal experiences to be interpreted as indeed being caused by "pure spirits" (e.g., demons) while at the same time not affecting the physical world, for these end up being "corresponding pictures" or "deception" that "can affect any one of the senses". It is a sort of demon-induced hallucination (vision? audition?). However, this would all be accomplished internally within the percipient and would not involve any physical manipulation in the external world whatsoever. The possibility of this alternative interpretation makes space for those who might have such genuine experiences without there being any scientific traces of those experiences.

Therefore, the realist's protest against my supposition that there are no instances of spirit-matter interaction assumes that Kant's alternative here is not a live explanatory option. Additionally, finding no gaps in the physics of it all regarding such paranormal experiences would not be a disconfirmation of the demon hypothesis unless Kant's alternative model is not possible.

12 I realize this view perhaps stands in contrast to most demonic realists. However, speculations about a demon's alleged ability to move on the physical world are not informed by Scripture apart from the phenomenal *explananda* but, in the light of the *explananda*, are shown to be accommodated by that Scripture in order to make space within one's orthodoxy for retaining a supernatural cause of those events where no naturalistic alternative is forthcoming.

13 The situation is even more acute when you consider that even given the so-called diagnostic criteria, it is difficult to even identify whether someone is suffering from a disorder much less to identify its cause. E.g., Bentall (2017); Cooper (2013).

14 We could say something similar regarding epilepsy which indeed does have a biological component (and is often associated, for better or worse, with identifying extreme possession cases in the past). That is, neurological injury or maldevelopment of the brain can give rise to one's having a predisposition to epileptic seizures. However, such conditions may not necessarily be sufficient to realize an epileptic seizure in someone. It's possible that one with such a predisposition never or seldom has a seizure episode. Sometimes it is the presence of other factors that ultimately trigger an epileptic seizure. The onset of a fever, dementia, or the ravages of age can inaugurate or exacerbate seizure episodes. There is also photosensitive epilepsy which is triggered by visual stimuli such as flashing lights or certain geometric patterns. If a possession case facilitates trauma or fever or involves a visionary experience that could set off a photosensitive epileptic seizure, then merely one's having an epileptic seizure would not be *prima facie* grounds for dismissing the possibility of one's being possessed if other, non-epileptic indicators for said possession are present and reasonably assessed.

15 Just to be clear, I am not suggesting, claiming, or affirming that mental disorders are always or even usually triggered by possessions. Nor am I associating any genuine mental disorder with a possession case in resisting a disease model of mental disorders. I am only suggesting that it is possible that in some patients a mental disorder only obtains as a debilitating experience when triggered by a demonic invasion. Additionally, this is enough to push back against the allegation that the presence of a mental disorder *ex hypothesi* displaces a demon hypothesis as a contributing explanation.

16 The demonic realist could also coopt a notion of compatibilism to deflect the objection. If human freedom is compatible with having been determined or constrained by antecedent causes, then there's no problem; it is both true that "the devil made me do it" and that I am responsible for my egregious actions. For culpability is not based, say, on a principle of alternative possibilities, but perhaps in something like Strawson's (1962) notion of "reactive attitudes" which does not require a libertarian sense of free will.

17 E.g., Nikolas Cruz—the Stoneman Douglas High School shooter in Florida—was reported to have been hearing such voices (Lynch et al. 2008). However, the phenomenon was not that of a discordant possession but something less coercive.

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