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# Has Religion Been Explained Away?

## *The Genetic Fallacy and Inference to the Best Explanation*

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### Abstract

This paper re-engages with the science versus religion debate in the light of the last three decades of scholarly progress in the study of religion coming from the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion. I begin by asking (1) ‘if it is indeed possible to account for the origins of religious belief, its cultural transmission and evolution, and its maintenance—*without* any appeal to the real existence of any supernatural deity—then are we in a position to say we have explained it all away?’ If we are, how does this affect central themes in the philosophy of religion about God’s existence? In (2) I provide an outline of the cognitive and evolutionary approach to explaining religion. In section (3) I discuss abductive reasoning (3.1), problems with the accusation of having committed the genetic fallacy when answering (1) in favour of positive atheism (3.2), the need for first-order justifications of religious belief (3.3), and in (3.4) a peculiar divine attribute (i.e. omnipotent potential in a causal chain of events) that appears to immunise religious belief in a particular kind of supernatural deity from having been explained away.

### Keywords

cognitive science of religion – agency detection – evolution – abduction – inference to the best explanation – genetic fallacy – omnipotence – metaphysical naturalism

## 1 Introduction

Throughout the last three decades in particular the scientific study of religion has steadily accounted for much of religious thought and behaviour; and *without* the need to appeal to the real existence of any supernatural deity in the process (E. Thomas. Lawson and McCauley 1990; Guthrie 1993; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Wilson 2002; Ara Norenzayan 2013; Wilson 2019). Whilst doing so, some of its proponents have maintained some distance from debates about religious claims to truth (e.g. White 2018; 2021) as if what could be said requires passing over in unspoken respect for such revered traditions. Nevertheless, discussion of the science versus religion debate in the light of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion has been brewing, and by no means should any scholar be expected to tiptoe away from it. The question is, ‘Does the science of religion explain religion away?’ By ‘explain it away’, I mean to ask in particular if scientific explanations of religion can allow us to reliably draw conclusions as to the real existence of a God of the sort around which many religious institutions are constructed to placate. My argument is that we can indeed now *at least* be less hesitant to debunk *some* of the claims of religion, but that there are still some areas about which we should remain cautious. One of these areas about which we should remain cautious concerns a fine line between ‘abductive reasoning’ and the ‘genetic fallacy’. That is to say, that even if one answers positively in favour of atheistic conclusions after reflecting on the scientific accounts of religious origins, the theist may still attempt to have the last word and decry the inference as classically erroneous. While contributing to the discussion about this, I draw from a number of authors—but principally Jonathan Jong and Maarten Boudry.

## 2 Religions as Products of Evolution by Natural Selection, and Explanatory Pluralism

Points of entry to the science versus religion debate include challenges to their respective epistemologies and their practical utility at a given point over evolutionary time, or, to champion the known facts of evolution over creationism. However, a perhaps unexpected twist in those arenas has been the claim that religions themselves are the products of evolution. From that naturalistic perspective, many important aspects of religion, such as God-beliefs, are culturally transmissible behavioural by-products<sup>1</sup> of ordinary individual-level cognitive

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1 N.B. Not every scientific stance on religion hinges on the by-product account, which would assign God-beliefs as somewhat incidental as opposed to being strictly adaptations.

faculties historically selected for in non-religious domains, and which are then in turn exapted for their practical and prosocial utility at multiple other levels of social organisation (see Atran and Henrich 2010).<sup>2</sup> Although approaching social systems as organic natural systems goes as far back as the ancients, sociologists afford a viable place for this kind of thinking as beginning in Durkheim (1912). To religion was assigned a prosocial function.

The lifeblood of its speciated systems was culture and its transmission. Theories of religion's cultural evolution were put forward ranging from the early idea of the replication of non-genetic information (Dawkins 1976) as a cumulative separate process from genetic interests, to the more recent thinking that genetic interests and culture have been intricately connected throughout much of *Homo sapiens'* history (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Henrich 2016). Cultural information which augments prosocial function is transmitted down successful generations of cooperating individuals. Cooperation in turn is augmented by the very notion that there is a supernatural deity who is morally concerned with human affairs. To have that notion in our ontology requires an account of the cognitive gumption needed for it.

In accounting for that supernatural ontology, Guthrie et al. (1980) began to formulate the first cognitive theory of religion and by Lawson and McCauley (1990) the cognitive revolution had begun towards its current full swing. Within the cognitive science of religion (CSR), we see stalwart themes in the explanation of key religious thoughts. These include the hyperactivity of a hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD) (Barrett 2004; Atran 2002), theory of mind (ToM) (Boyer 2001), existential meaning-making anxiety (Bering 2002), counterintuitive properties of supernatural agents and cultural narratives (Norenzayan et al. 2006), intuitive and reflective thinking; 'intuitive' being synonymous with the naturalness of religious ideas (McCauley 2011). For a thorough, in-depth (and in some cases entertaining) review of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion, see Geertz (2020) and White (2021).

The point about agency detection and its hyperactivity (or hypersensitivity) is worth some clarification and expansion. Agency detection is a primitive cognitive tool thought to be hyperactivated as a function of the error management (Haselton and Buss 2000) of false negatives that are potentially lethal mistakes to make. In our distant evolutionary past, there was a need to evade

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2 It is not possible to account for everything done in the last thirty years, so the account I give is admittedly at best a sketch with suggested further reading. It is assumed the reader is familiar with the fields attended to, and the reader should note that they are to be taken collectively, i.e. not *solely* the scope of the cognitive science of religion.

agents to minimise the risk of predation or injury.<sup>3</sup> To do that, we needed to detect agency. Failing to do so could render an individual agent another agent's lunch or casualty, for example; the cost is high. The cost of detecting an agent where there isn't one is much lower (better to mistake a stick for a snake, than a snake for a stick). Therefore, the evolutionary rationale for the hyperactivity of our ability to detect agents is that the ability would be calibrated by natural selection such that it makes the least costly errors more often rather than fail to detect a real agent. Thusly, we are prone to over-detect agents, i.e. "false" positives. Once an agent is detected, of course, the more recent and sophisticated evolutionary advent of ToM determines the intentional properties of the agent in question. It is supposed in the CSR literature, that this propensity to over-detect intentional agents gave rise to primitive notions of supernatural agency behind the workings of nature, and that from there, these small ideas gradually evolved over relatively deep time into full-blown notions of deities. What we have in that early ontogenesis, is the origin of religious belief beginning with false-positive agency ascription, going on to become theology in the present, as 'an incidental by-product of cognitive functioning gone awry' (Bloom 2005).

But surely this costly having 'gone awry' would be weeded out by natural selection. An organism that has an accurate picture of its environment should fare better than one that does not. Indeed, religious proclivities are costly.<sup>4</sup> However, a significant portion of the payoff for believing in a supernatural deity is thought to occur beyond the level of the individual (Norenzayan et al. 2016). From another evolutionary perspective (which occurred partially in tandem with the cognitive revolution) neo-Darwinians had been grappling with the problem of altruism, cooperation, and the levels of selection question supposing a complementary view to selection acting at the level of the genes (see Okasha 2010 for a useful overview). Where natural selection should favour selfish individuals, groups of altruistic cooperating individuals should outcompete groups composed entirely of selfish individuals. Natural selection could also operate *at* the level of a group (the group becoming the unit of selection) that was sufficiently organised around institutionalised modes of social contract. Darwin himself had similar thoughts;

[An] advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many

3 There are of course other reasons for needing to detect agents relating to social cooperation, hunting etc, but for now I refer to these themes to maintain a sense of emergency in the point.

4 e.g. they foster inaccurate beliefs about the environment, and require time and effort engaging in ritual practice etc.

members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes.

DARWIN 2009, 166

Religions, viewed through that lens, were seen *à la* Durkheim, as social structures that facilitate evolutionarily improbable,<sup>5</sup> large-scale cooperation (Wilson 2002; 2019) and that were thusly taken up by natural selection to the demise of less cooperative human arrangements over relatively deep evolutionary time. Other thinkers (Slingerland 2015; Ara Norenzayan 2013) were able to integrate the sorts of requisite agential cognition described by the CSR into that large-scale cooperation project by arguing that a process of selection had specifically acted upon god-beliefs such that gods that were less effective at maintaining cooperation went extinct—leaving the ‘Big Gods’ of the major monotheistic religions in place (those omniscient, morally concerned Gods with which most are familiar in the present) as the dominant deities in the religious stratosphere;<sup>6</sup> indeed, by that time the graveyard of the gods was rather full.

Thusly within the scientific repertoire on religion, the evolutionary dynamics of cultural transmission, the cognitive origins of supernatural agency, and the levels of selection at which evolution operates have been attended to in the slow progressive shamble of the academic gait to account for the variant forms of religious thought and behaviour in the present; from ritual behaviour to out-group hostilities.

The gradual emergence of the phenomena that we label as “religion” is perfectly understandable even if no Gods exist (indeed, **they are better understandable on the supposition of atheism and the causal closure of nature**).

BOUDRY, PAGLIERI, and FIGLIUCCI 2015, 443. Emphasis my own

Within that repertoire, there is a degree of explanatory pluralism such that accounts of religion at one level of explanation need not necessarily be seen

5 By ‘improbable’, I mean that reciprocal cooperation on a small scale is easier to maintain than social arrangements that become too complex: once a group gets to big, reciprocity becomes harder to track.

6 Most of the cognitive and evolutionary literature on religion has focused on the big monotheistic religions, and so this paper is similarly limited. Polytheistic religions such as Hinduism are discussed in Norenzayan (2013).

as being at loggerheads with those on another. For example. In explaining how your house stands up, one could say that the cement between the bricks is the result of the discovery of the chemical reaction between its compounds. One could say that the joists fortify structurally robust wall constructions. One could say that the builders were the best in the world. All of these explanations are relevant, perhaps true, and not mutually exclusive. However, where the propositional attitude favours explanatory pluralism, the risk of providing fertile terrain for outlandish contraposition is *both* lowered and, as we shall see, augmented. On the one hand, if explanatory pluralism is the case, then we find that a great many aspects of religion can be explained in different ways in terms of their generation, function, and maintenance. What is more, these explanations have not required any recourse to the real existence of any supernatural deities. On the other hand, explanatory pluralism allows for the additional claim that God sets the very states of affairs up that cognitive and evolutionary scientists of religion purport to be the case; and some theists do indeed seize that opportunity.

### 3 **Abductive Arguments and the Genetic Fallacy, First-Order Justification of Beliefs, and ‘God can do that, too’**

These next sub-sections interconnect a point of conflict that I argue is perpetuated as it ricochets between abductive reasoning, problems with the genetic fallacy, the need for first-order justification of certain kinds of belief, and belief in a God of a particular sort. I argue that although it does not follow that some religious claims to truth have been ‘disproved’ by the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion, there is good reason to be sceptical about them at least. Moreover, what is provided by those sciences is the ‘most likely’ explanation of how a religious state of affairs came to be. That amounts, perhaps, to having explained religion away, but this in turn, perhaps, runs into the genetic fallacy. However, I argue along with Boudry, that the charge is not as serious as it sounds. Theists in turn also need to navigate the need for first-order justifications of belief, and the need to make them compatible with established chains of causality—but—I argue that there is the potential to put forward a certain kind of disingenuous argument implicit in doing so.

#### 3.1 *Abduction*

Although some of the proponents of cognitive and evolutionary accounts of religion maintain a degree of standoffish neutrality about religious claims to truth, there are some who do not (Pyysiäinen 2009; J. Bering 2011; Shults 2020;

Braddock 2016). It is arguably the case that these authors seek to infer from the naturalistic accounts of religion described above that religion has been ‘explained away’ or ‘debunked’ (For discussion of debunking arguments in these contexts, see De Smedt and De Cruz (2020) pp. 56–61) and that there are important conclusions to be drawn in favour of positive atheism and beyond.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the kinds of arguments that scholars in the cognitive and evolutionary sciences have provided for the origins and evolution of thoughts and behaviours that are deemed religious, are perfectly sufficient. There is no need to invoke any supernatural ‘intervolvement’.

Consider the following scenario:

My car will not start.

The most likely explanation is either:

- a) The battery is flat.
- b) A faulty starter motor.
- c) God sabotaged the engine.

The most likely explanations are either *a)* or *b)* and it perhaps doesn’t even need to be pointed out. However, it does not follow deductively that this is the case. There could be a number of other reasons ranging from a loose wire or an empty gas tank. Perhaps there are a finite number of other possible reasons, and on eliminating all but one of them, it might follow that whatever potential problem remains is the culprit. Or, the problem might have been recurrent, in which case it would follow that if the car has had a flat battery several times before, then it very likely has one again. But still, *c)* “*Why, God? Why don’t you want me to go to work?!*” one might look to the sky and say during such antimeridian existential crises. Note that the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion maintain a *metaphysical naturalism* drawing on explanations within ‘the causal closure of nature’, yet are still able to account for inferences akin to *c)* on those terms (Bering 2002). None of this is to say that we have a *complete* account of all things religious. Indeed, we don’t, and there are many things left to account for (see Sosis et al. 2017) but, with what we’ve got, we do have some arresting material with which to tackle salient problems surrounding the existence of supernatural deities as essentially having been explained away. However, *what* we’ve got still doesn’t appear to be enough to unhorse the theist, for a recurrent line of defence rears its head to which I will now turn.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, in Shults (2020), with reference to the higher birth rates associated with religious affiliation, a need for discussion about the consequences of religious persistence for climate change is clearly pressed for.

### 3.2 *The Genetic Fallacy*

It appears to be agency detection and the historical ascription of “false” positives in the ontogenesis of religion that are of most concern to the theist<sup>8</sup>—at least, it is the one that appears to do the most damage to the foundations of a theistic worldview. It appears to worry some scholars enough to respond by recourse to a charge against those in the ‘explaining away camp’ of having committed a notoriously illogical *faux pas*; the ‘genetic fallacy’ (e.g. Peterson 2010; Jong 2012).

For a discussion of the implications of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion for theism, a good deal is to be found in Schloss and Murray (2011). However, only one mention of the genetic fallacy is contained therein, which is what I will focus on in this section. For a series of papers discussing ‘explaining religion away’ and some discussion of the genetic fallacy, see Glass and McCartney (2016). Essentially, the issue with the genetic fallacy is as follows: if one claims to have debunked religion (as characterised by the beliefs and practices surrounding the placation of supernatural deities) by accounting for its origins and so explaining them away, one commits to erroneous thinking ‘unduly conflating the context of discovery and the context of justification’ (Jong and Visala 2014). The genetic fallacy highlights a potential error in supposing that an account of a belief’s origin tells us anything about its truth (Murray and Goldberg 2011, 194). In the context of this paper, this alleged fallacy applies to the claim that cognitive and evolutionary accounts of religion beginning with false-positive agency ascription in our distant evolutionary past (and perhaps in some cases, the present (Barrett and Lanman 2008)) explain religion away as ‘airy nothing’ (Boyer 2001).

The charge of having “committed” the genetic fallacy sounds immediately disarming—as if to make the common-sense view that an idea’s origin bears some significance as to its value seem intellectually sub-par. However, that common-sense view is hardly decimated by giving one pause to think. For example, consider the objection that a word’s original meaning has nothing to do with its current use or meaning (an etymological fallacy). ‘Decimate’ is one such example, the original meaning of which is to reduce by a tenth. So here we have one example, and there are more, such that it appears to warrant a rule that should be followed in all similar contexts in order to prevent that kind of allegedly fallacious reasoning from becoming established across the board. But there are countless words whose original meanings are intact, and it is most likely that the majority of words retain enough fidelity in their

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8 Indeed, many other lines from the scientific study of religion have been wholly endorsed in the natural theist’s repertoire.

meaning or there really wouldn't be anything like etymology at all. But the theist might want to illustrate the genetic fallacy in other ways. Suppose a physicist working away at his desk discovers a way to synthesise a new stable super-heavy element. Then suppose another team of scientists verifies the existence of this super-heavy element. Then suppose our original physicist realises that he has made a blunder in his calculations and in fact discovered the element by mistake and cannot in good conscience accept that Nobel prize. Again, the origin of the belief in the existence of the new element is not based on the erroneous origins of its discovery. But then, the element must have been observable, and it is surely the observable, testable nature of the discovery that lends itself to the justification of the belief. Here's another example: it was once believed that the earth was the centre of the cosmos. Why not?—we're standing on it and celestial bodies appear to move around it. But that belief no longer has any merit outside the flanks of abject conspiracists since the Copernican revolution of the 16th century. We have had good reason to abandon geocentric beliefs and that is not likely to change. Moreover, the example of the new stable super-heavy element is of course taken from the popular television show *The Big Bang Theory*, is complete fiction, and as it turned out anyway, the scientists who confirmed its existence were actually mistaken having falsified their data. Though there are indeed serendipitous discoveries in the human endeavour from penicillin to Pluto, it is not likely that anything could be considered true of the physical world through some error in calculation—other than what is *not* the case. Indeed, scientific discovery proceeds on the correction of hypotheses that fail empirical application. That Columbus miscalculated the distance and direction of India resulting in the discovery of the real existence of North America only goes to show that the original proposition "India is this way!" was indeed false. What could have got the fictitious physicist off the hook in the hypothetical example of the new stable super-heavy element, is verification through hard observation. In that case, the context of erroneous discovery would indeed have been irrelevant, because a new context of discovery is put in place that would justify the belief.

### 3.3 *First-Order Justification of Beliefs*

The genetic fallacy, as it is alluded to by theists, and despite its *prima facie* disarming nature, is not without its criticisms (Boudry and de Smedt 2011; Boudry, Paglieri, and Pigliucci 2015; Boudry 2021). For example, Boudry argues that although it seems all fair and well to point out the potential application of the genetic fallacy to religious debunking arguments, it doesn't altogether get the theist off the hook. Suppose, he says, one were to hold a belief that cigarettes are bad for you because Hitler was anti-smoking and that it was the Nazis who first

sought to impose an anti-smoking ban. Suppose, then, that someone were to say that your belief in banning smoking was therefore following in the footsteps of the Nazis. Indeed, tobacco companies were quick to point that out when Western countries were considering the prospect.

The point of the genetic fallacy is that those Nazi proscriptions had no evidential weight at all on whether we ought to ban smoking, and this is true even if Nazi proscriptions were historically influential in the formation of such bans. In this (and many) cases, the history of a particular belief has no bearing on whether or not that belief is true. The origin of the belief (in that hypothetical scenario) is irrelevant, but the belief that smoking is bad for you is still held for a very good reason: there is an *abundance* of evidence (and casualties) to support the belief that smoking is bad for you. However, an abundance of evidence ‘doesn’t apply to many of our beliefs, including religious beliefs, for which we don’t have such incontrovertible first-order evidence.’ (Boudry 2021). Boudry furthers this line of thinking in a lengthy footnote in response to Jong and Visala (2014).

If we really have a conclusive proof for God’s existence (or for ghosts or witches), it hardly matters how belief in the supernatural originated. But there are no such water-tight arguments, and religious belief is typically defended on the basis of spiritual experiences (encountering God), or intuitions about design, improbability and fine-tuning. Given that those arguments have no secure basis in logic or evidence, and we have a good evolutionary explanation for why they seem so compelling (even if totally wrong), the most parsimonious explanation is that no such supernatural beings exist. Again, bringing up the “fallacy” charge detracts from the real probative value of psychological accounts of belief.

BOUDRY, PAGLIERI, and PIGLIUCCI 2015, 442

However, it appears to be the case in Jong (2012) for example, that there is indeed appeal to perennial themes in traditional philosophy of religion in order to conflate *à la* Hume (1757/2008, 134) the *justification* of religious beliefs with *explanations* of them; and to make matters worse by shifting the goalposts, Jong claims to have avoided the genetic fallacy by arguing that certain first-order justifications of religious belief are immune to its trappings if in the special case that ‘not all religious belief systems insist on their own supernatural origins.’ (Jong 2012, 527). In that special case, as long as the two views (the scientific account of religion and actual religious belief) don’t conflict, then we can all enjoy basking in the warmth of explanatory pluralism—a move Jong takes further shine to by invoking the additional relevance of developmental psy-

chology and other forms of scientific account of religion; as taking place at multiple levels of explanation. However, this jettisons a large number of apparent crewmates who do adhere to centuries of creationist dogma. What is more, the move still represents a flinching shift of stance in anticipation of being dealt something of a real blow, and a wise move at that. Ergo, in the light of renewed natural explanation, historical theisms are hardly impervious to pain, such that the ‘Philosopher’s God’ is called into the ring to help settle the score—and that’s not the same God the science versus religion debate started out with.

### 3.4 *God Could Do That, Too*

This related kind of defence of theism pitched in response to explaining-away arguments is that, even if accepting of the cognitive and evolutionary accounts of religion (in some cases co-founding them e.g. see Barrett 2000), the theist need not be concerned. It is the view that a proactive God could have steered evolution in the very way the cognitive and evolutionary sciences describe so that *Homo sapiens* come to be equipped with the sorts of cognitive and cultural repertoire needed to engage with that sort of spiritual life (Barrett 2004; Murray 2011).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, to fail in this respect perhaps indicates some form of developmental pathology<sup>10</sup> (Barrett 2012, 203). It represents reasoning that appears to be warranted because the deity in question is sufficiently powerful (perhaps omnipotent) to have brought about the causes of religion attended to by scientific accounts of it. It is essentially a loophole appeal to the very explanatory pluralism of value to the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion.

If there are two suspects, Smith and Jones, for a particular crime, can it be assumed that if Smith is guilty then Jones is not?

GLASS 2016, 1

Though there is immense value in explanatory pluralism, and though one might argue that such a move shifts the goalposts for young-earth creation-

9 Note that the same applies to beliefs in other religious figures such as Satan, and ‘other gods’.

10 This is an allusion to autism, as caricaturised by a deficit in ToM, and the claim that atheists fail to detect the relevant agency. Although there is some evidence to support the claim about autism (Ara Norenzayan, Gervais, and Trzesniewski 2012), the claim that atheists fail to detect the relevant agency *because* they’re autistic is absurd. They do experience false positives of the relevant sort, but in their particular cases override them pending further evidence as to their significance.

ists when arguments for God's causal efficacy in the world are brought into the realm of evolution over deep time, I believe this kind of trump-card thinking warrants the designation of another type of fallacy which I will allude to in conclusion. Consider the following, returning to the 'car not starting' problem: Glass and McCartney (2016, 230) illustrate the "explaining versus explaining away" problem as follows (emphasis my own):

... suppose your car will not start and two possible explanations spring to mind: a flat battery and a faulty starter motor. When you discover that the battery is flat, this counts against, or explains away, the alternative explanation that the starter motor is faulty. The reason for this is not because of an incompatibility between the two explanations; it is certainly possible, though unlikely, that the battery is flat *and* the starter motor is faulty. Instead, it occurs because there is no need to infer two explanations when one will do.

Relatedly, Glass and McCartney summarise a further paper in their special issue (Schupbach 2016) as follows:

The central idea is that they [explanations] compete if, upon accepting one of them, the other no longer retains its explanatory power. However, they also do not compete if they provide different types of explanations or form a causal chain where one causes (or explains) the other, which in turn causes the evidence in question.

GLASS and MCCARTNEY, 231

Let's merge these two descriptions of the problem with some additional substitutions:

Suppose your car (returning to the previous example) will not start and two possible explanations spring to mind: a flat battery or a God sabotaged the engine. When you discover that the battery is flat, this counts against, or explains away, the alternative explanation that God sabotaged the engine. The reason for this is not because of an incompatibility between the two explanations; it is certainly possible, though unlikely, that the battery is flat and God sabotaged the engine. Instead, it occurs because there is no need to infer two explanations when one will do. The central idea is that the two explanations compete if, upon accepting one of them, the other no longer retains its explanatory power. However, they also do not compete if they provide different types of explanations or

form a causal chain where one causes (or explains) the other, which in turn causes the evidence in question; therefore God sabotaged the battery.

The problem here is that a sufficiently powerful God (which is of course usually the sort that theists allude to) can nearly always be the cause of any other explanation's chain of events, even if that much invocation is superfluous to the chain of events. This is indeed the thinking:

On top of theism's relative immunity from arguments from CSR theories of religion, by virtue of its emphasis on God as the ultimate cause, creator and sustainer of all things, it is also consistent with the naturalness of religion thesis

JONG 2012, 530

That a God is likely to satisfactorily reveal its own role in the matter is always forthcoming it seems—yet the additional supernatural explanation can always be there. To what extent, though, and in how much detail, does something need to be explained by recourse to ordinary states of affairs before the theist stops appealing to the slippery nature of this convenient divine attribute? Until such time that the first-order justification for theism is established one way or another, we are just going to be playing whack-a-mole *ad infinitum* unless the fallacious nature of appealing to a God's sufficient potency is institutionalised as a *faux pas* in itself.<sup>11</sup> It appears that the seemingly omnipotent nature of the deity in question, is the very thing that makes its inclusion in the natural order of things seem plausible, for when dealing with arguably supernatural causes that are less grand in scope, the absurdity of invoking such explanations is clear, yet no less formally distinct in logic.

The nature of this potential *faux pas* is illustratable, therefore, in terms perhaps less noxious to theistic sentiments. For example, Evans-Pritchard's (1965) study of the Zande people, showed that they believed certain members of their community were witches who possessed the power to injure and kill other individuals, harm their crops, or make houses collapse<sup>12</sup> into the mud on which they were built (Boudry and de Smedt 2011, 464). Indeed, the Azande invari-

11 It may indeed warrant to registration of a new fallacy. One might suggest naming it the 'fallacy of eternal return'.

12 In Boudry and de Smedt (2011), 'houses' are specified, but in Evans-Pritchard the example is of a granary barn. It makes little difference one way or the other as a barn houses grain.

ably attributed death, disease and other forms of misfortune to the malignant actions of these witches making no distinction between that mode of causation and natural causes. Evans-Pritchard noted, however, that the Zande people were certainly not unaware of the natural causes leading to such events. Instead, they believed that witchcraft acted *through* chains of natural causation (*not* magic); making a subtle contribution as a ‘co-operating cause’ (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 24). They knew very well that when one of their buildings collapsed, for instance, a colony of termites had been gnawing through the pillars on which they were founded and undermining those foundations for quite some time, and though they accepted this as the natural cause of the event, they still insisted that only witchcraft explained why the house collapsed at that particular moment—the superfluous causes either precede the natural chain of events or are superimposed on them.

The attribution of misfortune to witchcraft does not exclude what we call its real causes but is superimposed on them and gives to social events their moral value

EVANS-PRITCHARD 1976, 25

The appeal to God’s existence as the cause of natural events that might explain the belief in that God, is as unnecessary as the appeal to the role of witches in the Zande community and arguably, similarly superimposed on what is the case. Indeed, *that* house is collapsing, too.

#### 4 Conclusion

Although it may be argued, that the cognitive origins of supernatural agency derive from the false-positive hyperactivity of agency detection and the overzealous ascription of intentionality to the workings of nature, that does not disprove the existence of God beyond reasonable doubt. In the strictest logical sense, the status of the truth of some key religious beliefs in a deity is left untouched by a naturalistic approach to religion in general. Though it does not follow deductively from the scientific account of religion that there is no God, and even though many proponents of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion adhere to a neutral stance on matters of religious claims to truth, they could just be being polite (Boudry 2021; Talmont-Kaminski and Atkinson 2022). There simply could be a black hole in the logic needed to get from origins to justification. Indeed, where it might be the case that some theistic scholars have accepted the tale told by the cognitive and evolutionary sciences

of religion, the burden of proof now lies with them in order to evade capture by it—not just by appealing to the disarming convenience of the genetic fallacy, but by the rigorous construction of first-order justifications that maintain theistic beliefs. A new fallacy where it is considered disingenuous to appeal to the existence of a seemingly omnipotent deity (capable of pretty much anything the imagination so desires) as a cause of states of affairs that give one good reason to suppose there is no such deity simply to rescue and assert the existence of that deity—especially when original premises are altered in the process—appears very much to be needed. For example, if the theist had previously supposed that the Bible was the literal word of God and that the heavens and the earth were created in six days about six to ten thousand years ago, it would then be a peculiar thing to justify continued belief in that deity based on the possibility that the deity in question could have steered evolution over the course of billions of years so that we might come to believe in him. It amounts to the following: ‘If an omnipotent deity exists, it could do  $x$ ;  $x$  is the case, so an omnipotent deity exists’, proves nothing, and shifts the goalposts. Furthermore, it is not the point to have disproved religious claims to truth but that if it has indeed been possible to account for religious evolution *without* appeal to the real existence of supernatural deities or any other supra-empirical claim, then that parsimony need not be embellished by anything of the sort. Indeed as Jong puts it, though disobeying the rule before hedging on scope (see footnote to p. 526), ‘parsimony dictates a preferences [*sic*] for the more ontologically economical explanation, and theism includes one additional supernatural agent than does metaphysical naturalism.’ (Jong 2012, pp. 525–526). However, these are not my only concluding points. A further development within the broader science versus religion debate is that the former has been able to gradually absorb the latter as would one of two warring corals competing for sunlight. In the mere shift from creationist thinking to the cognitive and evolutionary adaptationist thinking that some argue supports theism, there has indeed been ground lost to science. In turn, however, science has also rolled back the new-atheist claim (Dawkins 2006) that religious belief is nothing more than a crass delusion clung to by conspiring individuals stuck in a permanent state of infancy that was perhaps skewed by unscrupulous parental indoctrination.

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