

**Religious Belief is Not Natural.
Why Cognitive Science of Religion
Does Not Show That Religious
Belief is Trustworthy**

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Abstract:

It is widely acknowledged that the new emerging discipline cognitive science of religion has a bearing on how to think about the epistemic status of religious beliefs. Both defenders and opponents of the rationality of religious belief have used cognitive theories of religion to argue for their point. This paper will look at the defender-side of the debate. I will discuss an often used argument in favor of the trustworthiness of religious beliefs, stating that cognitive science of religion shows that religious beliefs are natural and natural beliefs ought to be trusted in the absence of counterevidence. This argument received its most influential defense from Justin Barrett in a number of papers, some in collaboration with Kelly James Clark. I will discuss their version of the argument and argue that it fails because the natural beliefs discovered by cognitive scientists of religion are not the religious beliefs of the major world religions. A survey of the evidence from cognitive science of religion will show that cognitive science does show that other beliefs come natural and that these can thus be deemed trustworthy in the absence of counterevidence. These beliefs are teleological beliefs, afterlife beliefs and animistic theistic beliefs.

Keywords: cognitive science of religion, religious epistemology, trustworthiness, reformed epistemology, natural beliefs.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the new emerging discipline called cognitive science of religion has a bearing on how to think about the epistemic status of religious beliefs. Both defenders and opponents of the rationality of religious belief have used cognitive theories of religion to argue for their point. This paper will look at the defender-side of the debate. I will discuss an often used argument in favor of the trustworthiness of religious beliefs, stating that cognitive science of religion shows that religious beliefs are natural and natural beliefs ought to be trusted in the absence of counterevidence. This argument received its most influential defense from Justin Barrett in a number of papers, some in collaboration with Kelly James Clark. I will discuss their version of the

argument and argue that it fails because the natural beliefs discussed by cognitive scientists of religion are not the religious beliefs Barrett and Clark have in mind and are not any of the beliefs of the major world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. I will also argue that cognitive science does show that some other beliefs come natural and that these can thus be deemed trustworthy in the absence of counterevidence. These beliefs are teleological beliefs, afterlife beliefs and animistic theistic beliefs.

In section 2, I lay out the argument in support of the trustworthiness of religious beliefs on the basis of naturalness. In section 3, I provide an overview of the scientific findings from cognitive science of religion that is used to argue for the naturalness of religious belief and in section 4, I argue that the scientific findings do not suffice for the argument discussed in section 2. In the last section, I discuss the beliefs for which cognitive science of religion does provide trust.

2. Naturalness of Religious Beliefs as Justification

An argument in the debate over the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion states that cognitive theories of religion increase the epistemic status of religious beliefs because they show that religious beliefs are natural. The argument was most prominently defended in several articles by Justin Barrett; both in papers of his hand alone and in collaboration with Kelly James Clark [3], [4], [5], [8], but has its roots in work by Alvin Plantinga [39]. They claim that it is rational¹ to trust natural outputs of human cognitive mechanisms as long as there are no good reasons to doubt them. Since cognitive theories of religion allegedly show that religious beliefs are natural outputs of human cognitive mechanisms², they ought to be trusted as well. Plantinga added that natural outputs are only trustworthy in absence of defeaters (see below) and hence grants them an ‘innocent-until-proven-guilt status’. Although they do not discuss it explicitly, Barrett and Clark seem to think there are no defeaters for religious beliefs.

The argument runs as follows:

1. Religious beliefs are natural outputs of cognitive mechanisms.
2. Natural outputs of cognitive mechanisms are trustworthy in the absence of defeaters.
3. Therefore, religious beliefs are trustworthy in the absence of defeaters.

The argument is formally valid; if both premises are true, so is the conclusion. The ‘innocent-until-proven-guilty principle of rationality’ [15, p. 10], on which the second premise relies, goes back in Western philosophy to Thomas Reid (1710–1796). According to the principle, beliefs that humans form spontaneously or find themselves having, should be trusted as long as there is no evidence to the contrary. The principle is sometimes connected with relying on common sense. Plantinga refined this principle, stating that outputs of properly functioning cognitive mechanisms, following a good design plan, in a suited environment, successfully aimed at truth should be deemed trustworthy [39]. Relying on the outputs of our cognitive mechanisms is usually motivated by claiming that the alternative would lead to radical, or at least far reaching, skepticism. Thomas Reid’s common sense philosophy is sometimes considered an anti-sceptic alternative to David Hume [6], [43]. Plantinga’s views on proper functioning were partly motivated by his critique on older evidentialist views which he thought were too stringent [38, pp. 70–71]. The idea is that relying on the outputs of cognitive mechanisms without further confirmation is necessary for all sorts of beliefs which we consider true and requiring evidence for them is too big of a task. For example, people rely on it for beliefs about the existence of an external world and other minds without ever having considered the evidence in favor or against their belief. Plantinga argues that since the outputs of our cognitive mechanisms are usually deemed trustworthy, making an exception for religious beliefs is uncalled for [37].

For Plantinga, proper functioning is closely linked to a design plan; a mechanism is functioning properly when its function follows the intention of the design plan. A design plan need not result from a personal designer as Plantinga allows for an evolutionary design plan [39]. Barrett and Clark use the term ‘natural’ instead of ‘proper functioning’. They do not refer to a design plan and adopt a more general strategy. Especially Justin Barrett stresses how our cognitive make-up

naturally produces religious beliefs [3], [5]. He uses the term ‘natural’, not as opposed to supernatural, but roughly as the opposite of cultural or learned. Natural beliefs are thus those that arise spontaneously, independently of culture or upbringing. In this regard, a natural belief can be defined as follows:

Belief *p* is a natural belief iff *p* is produced independently of culture or upbringing.

The term ‘natural’ is thus used as a synonym of ‘intuitive’ or ‘spontaneous’. The naturalness of religious beliefs is important because beliefs that (partly) result from culture or upbringing can no longer unambiguously be called mere outputs of cognitive mechanisms. Although beliefs are not automatically rendered untrustworthy when resulting from culture or upbringing, their trustworthiness depends on many factors, like the reliability of testimony. As a result, they do not enjoy the same innocent until-proven-guilty status but require additional arguments to defend their rationality.³

Authors relying on common sense or defending an innocent-until-proven-guilty stance towards natural outputs of cognitive mechanisms are, however, not naïve. According to Plantinga, outputs of properly functioning mechanisms can be overridden by defeaters. In his discussion of Christian religious beliefs, Plantinga writes: “The claim [of those who argue against the trustworthiness of religious belief] is that there are serious defeaters for Christian belief: propositions we know or believe that make Christian belief (...) *irrational* (...)” [39, p. 358].⁴ Barrett and Clark write: “(...) [w]e can trust beliefs produced by our cognitive faculty until that belief is undermined or defeated by stronger or better corroborated beliefs” [15, p. 10]. As a result the innocent status of natural beliefs is always preliminary since we cannot know what future defeaters will be found. Plantinga argues that there are no convincing defeaters for religious beliefs⁵. Barrett and Clark seem to hold similar views.

What does and does not count as religious is notoriously hard to define. Barrett and Clark are not clear on what they mean with ‘religious beliefs’. They mainly discuss ‘belief in God’ and at one point ‘belief in spirits or polytheism’ [15, p. 11]. The term ‘God’ of course also lacks a uniform definition. In analytic philosophy of religion, ‘God’ is often defined as a perfect being, having perfect qualities like omniscience and omnibenevolence. In Abrahamic traditions, God is a transcendent, very powerful being who created the cosmos. In older polytheistic religions, gods are associated with natural phenomena like the wind or the oceans and some modern day animistic religions use the word ‘god’ in a similar way. Many Indian religions use the term ‘god’ to refer to celestial beings who have attained a higher (spiritual) status than ordinary humans. Barrett and Clark do not specify what they mean by the term. Their papers do make it clear that they are writing from a Christian perspective. We can thus safely assume that their understanding of the term ‘God’ comes close to the Abrahamic understanding where God is a transcendent, very powerful being who created the cosmos.

The conclusion of the argument does not state that religious beliefs are trustworthy. To make this claim, one must argue that no defeaters are available. Defenders of this kind of arguments devote most of their attention to defending the second premise. Most criticisms are also aimed at this premise [18, pp. 194–199], [44], [24]. Some critics have granted both premises and the conclusion but argue that there are successful defeaters for religious belief [16], [35]. Some authors have attacked the first premise. Jason Marsh argues that the wide diversity in religious beliefs poses a problem for thinking that religious beliefs are natural outputs of our cognitive mechanisms [32]. Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh and Aku Visala argue that the God of classical theism does not match the idea of God that comes naturally and therefore appear to deny the first premise [27]. My argument is different since it does not involve the God of classical theism but religious beliefs. Although there may be some overlap between some religious beliefs and the God of classical theism, the overlap is limited and religious beliefs move well beyond the God of classical theism.

In this paper, I will grant the second premise and focus on the first premise. I will argue that the first premise does not hold under scrutiny because religious beliefs move well beyond the natural outputs of properly functioning cognitive mechanisms and often even contradict them. For this purpose, a closer look at the evidence from cognitive science of religion is needed.

3. What Natural Beliefs?

Clark and Barrett claim that recent insights from cognitive science of religion support the first premise stating that religious beliefs are natural outputs of cognitive mechanisms. Indeed many authors in cognitive science of religion subscribe the claim that religious belief is natural.⁶ In this section, I will survey the evidence from cognitive science of religion in support of this claim. A number of cognitive theories of religious beliefs can be used as evidence. Since the theories in cognitive science of religion are diverse, I will focus on the most widely discussed theories and distinguish three groups; one suggesting that a number of natural beliefs prepare the way for religion, one suggesting that theistic beliefs themselves are acquired easily and naturally, and one suggesting that people naturally find themselves having theistic beliefs. All theories I will discuss put the emphasis on unconsciously formed, intuitive beliefs rather than on consciously formed, reflective beliefs.⁷ They all suggest that religious beliefs should primarily be explained on the level of the first kind of beliefs. In all this, a caveat must be made that none of the claims about natural beliefs discussed below should be taken as established. Although some are better confirmed than others, none of them is uncontroversial.⁸

Some psychologists suggest that a number of beliefs of importance for religion emerge naturally during childhood development. Though these natural beliefs cannot be called religious themselves, they are thought to prepare the way for religious beliefs or make the acquisition of religious belief easy. A first kind of natural beliefs is teleological beliefs. Deborah Kelemen and her team observed that children are prone to give teleological explanations for phenomena where teleology is absent [29], [30]. When children were asked questions like ‘What are clouds for?’ or ‘What are lions for?’, many of them gave answers along the lines of ‘Clouds are for raining.’ and ‘Lions are for visiting in the zoo.’ Older children were less likely to give similar answers and adults usually gave mechanistic, non-intentional answers. However, when adults were asked to answer question under time pressure, they were again more likely to give teleological answers [30]. A study on Romanian Gypsies showed that adults who had not received much education were more likely to give teleological answers [13]. According to Kelemen, these results provide evidence for the claim that humans have a general bias to treat objects and behaviors as existing for a purpose. After learning scientific (i.e. mechanistic, non-intentional) explanations for phenomena, the bias recedes but does not completely disappear. According to Kelemen, ‘promiscuous teleology’ is believed to be a conceptual prerequisite for intuitive theism [30].

A second kind of preparatory natural beliefs are beliefs about mind-body dualism. According to Paul Bloom, it is not controversial that naïve physics is different from naïve psychology and therefore people think of physical entities in different terms than psychological entities. Bloom claims the difference results in the intuitive belief that the mind is distinct from the body or can exist separately from it. Experiments showed that young children tend to believe that the brain is only responsible for some mental activities, like solving math problems, but not others, like pretending to be a kangaroo or loving one’s brother. They believed the latter activities are done by persons and not by their brains. Mind-body dualism is thus a by-product of people having two different cognitive systems, one for physical entities and one for psychological entities. This dualism makes it possible to imagine an immortal soul and immaterial gods [11]. Bloom’s common sense dualism is closely related to the third kind of natural beliefs, immortality beliefs.

Jesse Bering and his colleagues concluded from experiments that children intuitively believe that people continue to have psychological states after biological death [9], [10]. In one experiment, children watched a puppet show in which one character died. When the children were asked whether the dead puppet still had mental states, they tended to answer in the positive. For older children and adults, not all mental states continued after death but mainly epistemic, emotional and desire states like ‘being hungry’ or ‘being sad’ [9].

Teleological beliefs are very different from beliefs about mind-body dualism or afterlife but these (kinds of) beliefs are similar insofar that they are believed to prepare the way for religion.

Bloom suggests that a combination of these beliefs is needed to arrive at religious beliefs but Kelemen and Bering seem to believe that one is enough. None of the authors discusses in greater detail how the intuitive beliefs result in religiosity. They do suggest that religiosity is the evident next step when the intuitive beliefs are in place. For example, Paul Bloom writes: “The proposal here is that there are certain early-emerging cognitive biases that give rise to religious belief. (...) These biases make it natural to believe in Gods and spirits (...). These are the seeds from which religion grows” [11, p. 170].

A second group of theories has also gone one step further and argued that belief in God itself is acquired easily and naturally. Justin Barrett argued that humans tend to overdetect agency. Upon hearing sounds like rustling of leaves or seeing things like a branch that resembles a snake, people tend to believe that they are caused by or are agents. Barrett suggests that this was evolutionarily beneficial for our ancestors; detecting too many agents was much safer than detecting one too little because detecting one too little could have resulted in not noticing an approaching predator. Usually the initial beliefs about agency are overruled by checking the environment and finding an explanation for the perceived phenomenon. Sometimes no explanation is found and then humans will tend to infer that an invisible agent caused the phenomenon. Once the presence of an agent is inferred, humans will begin reasoning about the agent and form more elaborate beliefs about its nature [2].

Kurt Gray claims that humans intuitively look for a moral agent and a moral patient in situations they experience as morally significant; moral agents being those who do good or bad, and moral patients being the recipients of good and bad [22]. In situations where people find themselves as moral patients (e.g. when they are harmed or helped) but cannot find a human moral agent, they form beliefs about an ultimate moral agent. Clear examples of such situations are natural disasters. For Gray, belief in God is thus intimately tied to beliefs about morality. People can thus infer to God both in good and bad situations but Gray suggests bad situations are more likely to lead to belief in God. Gray finds support for his theory in studies stating that suffering and belief in God are significantly correlated [23].

Jesse Bering argued for something similar like Gray and Wegner but in his view people (unconsciously) infer to God when experiencing meaningful events. He claims that people have an ‘existential theory of mind’, a cognitive system that allows people to attribute meaning to certain experiences. Meaning is intuitively connected to agency so when people experience something as meaningful they look for an agent who invested the event with meaning. For some meaningful experiences no human meaning giver is to be found. For example, in the case of a beautiful sunset which is experienced as meaningful or again a natural disaster, no human can be pointed to as meaning giver. In these cases, people will infer to an ultimate meaning giver according to Bering [7].

Barrett, Gray and Bering all suggest that vague theistic beliefs are acquired naturally. Although vague, the theistic beliefs are not just the bare belief in the existence of a god, but belief in (a) divine agent(s) for Barrett, in a divine moral actor for Gray and in a divine generator of meaningful events for Bering. On the three theories, people arrive at theistic beliefs in different ways but they are not mutually exclusive. Gray explicitly connects his theory to Barrett’s [23], and all are similar in claiming that theistic beliefs result from an overly active cognitive mechanism. These three theories are less well backed up by empirical evidence than theories from the first group. Bering offers some limited evidence himself but Barrett and Gray leave it at stating their theory.

A third group of theories states that people naturally find themselves having theistic beliefs. The difference with the previous group is that these theories suggest that theistic beliefs are not so much acquired after experiences of agency, morality or meaning, but rather preprogrammed by our evolutionary history. One influential theory connects belief in God to social cooperation [36], [41]. Defenders of this theory note that people rely on social cooperation for their survival to a far greater extent than any other animal. Our ancestors already had to make arrangements to coordinate the activities of the tribe (hunting, food gathering, etc.) and with the emergence of states coordination

became even more important. A problem is that people can forego their obligation and rely on the efforts of others because no one can be sure if someone will keep their promises. When people have the belief that a God with full access to people's intentions and desires is watching them and that this God will punish or reward people in accordance to their obedience to the norms, people are far more likely to keep their promises and cooperate. As a result, tribes with the belief in God were more successful in surviving and belief in God was inherited. A number of philosophers have argued that this evolutionary story might have been God's way of letting Himself be known [34].

Another theory suggests that gods function as attachment figures who provide comfort and alleviate psychological stress. Belief in God is said to provide a safe haven in times of distress and serve as a secure base for risky and challenging endeavors. In this regard, attachment to God is similar to attachment to parental figures [20], [21]. Lee Kirkpatrick suggests that believing in God as an attachment figure could be evolutionarily beneficial, but holds that this is not very important for the theory [31]. An evolutionary account would account for why people would naturally find themselves with beliefs about a divine attachment figure. To my knowledge, implications of an evolutionary account have not been discussed by philosophers but this could also be God's way of letting Himself be known.

Both theories share the suggestion that people naturally have vague theistic beliefs. In contrast to the second group, both theories have little to say on how theistic beliefs are acquired but rather suggest that people naturally find themselves having these beliefs. Their beliefs are also not bare theistic beliefs but belief in a morally concerned, all-seeing god for the social cooperation theory and in a comforting, loving god for the attachment theory. The theories are also not as well backed up by empirical evidence as theories of the first group. Empirical evidence for evolutionary theories is of course more difficult because they cover processes stretching over millennia that cannot be repeated.

4. Natural Religious Beliefs?

Now does the evidence from cognitive science of religion establish the first premise, stating that religious beliefs are natural outputs of properly functioning cognitive mechanisms? At first glance, the answer should be negative for the vast majority of religious beliefs. Although the major world religions are very diverse, it is safe to say that most of them move well beyond the intuitive beliefs from the first group of theories. Teleology is filled in a number of very different ways; Abrahamic religions will state that the teleology in nature flows from the will of God and many Indian religions will state that teleology results from the universal laws of karma. Religious traditions that subscribe to mind-body dualism also do not rest at the belief that the mind is somehow different from the body but hold that mind and body are separated after death. Many religious traditions also have beliefs about what will happen after death that are much more elaborate than the belief that psychological states will continue.

All theistic religions⁹ also move beyond the vague theistic beliefs discussed by the second and third group of theorists. No cognitive theory states that full-blown religious beliefs, like belief in the Trinity or the avatars of Vishnu, are the natural outputs of our cognitive mechanisms. Often cognitive scientists will admit that culture plays an important role in shaping religious beliefs. If that is the case, religious beliefs can no longer themselves be called the natural outputs of our cognitive mechanisms¹⁰ because natural is defined in opposition to cultural or learned (see section 1). Clark and Barrett acknowledge this point but respond with: "(...) [T]he initial function of the godfaculty [Clark and Barrett's term for the cognitive mechanisms producing theistic beliefs] (...) is to make humans aware (...) of the sacred dimension of reality rather than clearly defined Judeo-Christian conceptions of God (...)" [14, p. 187]. Their response does not avoid the problem. If only awareness of the sacred dimension of nature comes naturally, only the belief that nature has a sacred dimension is shown to be trustworthy by their argument and not the Judeo-Christian conceptions of God. To argue for the trustworthiness of religious beliefs more will be needed.

Defendants could also respond that current cognitive theories still provide some reasons for trusting religious beliefs because important elements, like belief in God, do come naturally. This is a valid response but since those theories claiming that theistic beliefs are natural only discuss vague theistic beliefs the trust will be limited. Complex theistic beliefs, like the Christian belief in the Trinity, move very far from the vague theistic beliefs discussed by the second and third group of theories in section 2. If vague theistic beliefs come natural this gives some trustworthiness to the Christian belief in the Trinity but the trustworthiness is of the same order like the trustworthiness article 10 of the Belgian constitution, stating that all Belgian citizens are equal before the law and hence allowed to hold public and military office,¹¹ gets from the natural, intuitive belief that people should be treated equally. Moving from a vague theistic belief to the belief that God created the world, became incarnate, and sends his Spirit to live in each of us, requires many intermediate steps which do not come naturally and need to be rendered trustworthy on other grounds.

The first premise of the argument can also be relaxed, stating that religious beliefs are not natural outputs themselves but result from natural outputs of our cognitive mechanisms via some intermediate steps. Stated as such, religious beliefs themselves do not come naturally but can rightly be called natural outcomes of our cognitive mechanisms. This approach is suggested by the first group of theories, discussed in section 2, and also by Barrett. It draws on ideas from dual process accounts of cognition where beliefs result from both online, fast, intuitive thinking and offline, slow, reflective thinking [28]. Barrett distinguishes nonreflective beliefs from reflective beliefs. Nonreflective belief is Barrett's term for intuitive or natural beliefs and reflective beliefs are beliefs arrived at through conscious, deliberate mental activity. He argues nonreflective beliefs influence reflective beliefs in three important ways; they act as a default for reflective beliefs, they make (some) reflective beliefs more plausible and they shape memories and experiences [2, pp. 2–26]. Since reflective beliefs are thoroughly influenced by intuitive beliefs, claiming that the latter come natural will show that the former are trustworthy.

This approach is problematic. Apart from the fact that it is hard to assess to what extent reflective religious beliefs are influenced by intuitive beliefs, a problem arises. Barrett's view does not hold for the reflective beliefs of the major religions. In all major religious traditions at least some of the intuitive beliefs discussed in section two are contradicted. We already noted the mismatch between intuitive theistic beliefs and nontheistic religions. Christian doctrine contradicts the intuitive beliefs discussed by Barrett and Gray. In the Christian tradition, God's activity in the world is limited so that most intuitive beliefs about invisible agency, which Barrett discusses, will be dismissed. For most Christians, morally bad events do not directly result from God's agency but rather from sin or the fallen status of the world so the intuitive belief of God as ultimate moral agent will be dismissed. Most Christians will also portray God as forgiving in nature rather than punishing. Jewish and Islamic doctrine contradicts Kirkpatrick and Granqvist's intuitive beliefs. The Jewish and Islamic traditions, where God is believed to be strictly transcendent, does not fit well with an intuitive belief in a comforting God who alleviates stress that defenders of the attachment theory discuss. Finally, Indian religions tend to contradict the intuitive beliefs discussed by Bloom and those of the third group of theories. Many Hindu traditions, Sikhism and Buddhism will discard the intuitive mind-body dualism and the intuitive moralizing nature of God.

The fact that all major religious traditions subscribe to some intuitive beliefs and dismiss others poses no problems to their internal consistency because each tradition can serve as an overrider system.¹² Each tradition can override certain intuitions on the basis of sacred texts, authority of important figures or knowledge from certain ritual practices. Sacred texts, authority of important figures and/or knowledge from certain ritual practices can thus be defeaters for intuitive beliefs. Christians can dismiss the intuitions that God is frequently intervening in nature and yet hold on to the intuitive belief in God's moralizing and comforting nature because the latter beliefs are confirmed in the Bible whereas the former are denied. Muslims will base their objection to a comforting God by referring to Quranic surahs. Jews will do likewise by referring to the Torah. A follower of Hindu advaita vedanta might overrule her dualist intuitions because of the authority of

Adi Shankara's writings or because of her experiences during yoga meditation. A Buddhist can refer to her experiences of unity with the universe during meditation.

Furthermore, when religious traditions endorse intuitive beliefs, they usually don't do this by merely claiming that they come natural but often claim they were confirmed by revelation, experience or reasoning. Natural beliefs thus appear to play some role in establishing religious beliefs' trustworthiness, but their role is very limited because the authority of sacred texts, authoritative figures and knowledge from ritual practices is much greater. The question whether the traditions themselves are trustworthy falls beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, clear that an appeal to naturalness is no longer warranted since natural beliefs are often discarded and when they are affirmed they are rendered trustworthy in other ways.

5. What Does Come Natural

We noted in the previous section that the evidence from cognitive science of religion is insufficient for defending the trustworthiness of religious beliefs and thus that Clark and Barrett's claim does not hold water. Theories in cognitive science of religion do, however, claim that some beliefs come naturally and hence are trustworthy in the absence of defeaters if one subscribes to Clark and Barrett's (and Plantinga's) argument. I will discuss each of the three groups separately.

Kelemen's experiments provide evidence that the belief about teleology in natural comes natural. The experiments do show teleological beliefs receding when people learn mechanistic explanations but this only shows that in some or many cases there are defeaters. In cases where there are no such defeaters, teleological beliefs can thus still be trusted. Bloom's intuitive mind-body dualism also comes natural, but here there appear to be convincing defeaters. Modern science (especially neuroscience and psychology) show such an intimate connection between mental operations and the physical body that a strict separation between the two is implausible. Recent defenses of mind-body dualism [19], [42] also do not rely on intuitive beliefs. The naturalness of afterlife beliefs discussed by Bering and his colleagues supports the belief that physical death is not the end. Often this belief is overruled by a commitment to some form of physicalism.¹³ For those who do not subscribe to physicalism, the belief that life continues after death is supported.

The intuitive theistic beliefs discussed by Barrett, Gray and Bering support a form of theism closely resembling animism or spiritism as it is still practiced by indigenous tribes in Africa and America. Boyer discussed at length how many tribes believe that spirits are often interacting in the world and are morally concerned [12]. Animistic rituals and shamanism suggest that animistic spirits or gods are also believed to invest meaning in events. David Hume famously claimed that animism was the original religion from which all other religions developed [25], and Boyer makes a similar suggestion [12]. We noted that the development cannot be as straightforward as Hume and Boyer claim because religious traditions contradict many of the animistic beliefs. Nonetheless, animism can be deemed trustworthy when overrider systems like those of the major religious traditions are absent.

The theories from the third group are interesting because they yield contradictory beliefs; on the first belief in a morally concerned, punishing god comes natural and on the second a loving forgiving god. The first thus gives trust for theistic beliefs resembling those of Judaism and Islam whereas the second gives trust for beliefs closer to those of Christianity and bhakti strands of Hinduism. Each of both theories can also be made compatible with the beliefs discussed by the second group of theories, yielding trust for an animism with punishing or loving gods and spirits. A combination seems difficult. This might signal that one of the two theories must be false or that both are incomplete. Assessing this falls beyond the scope of this paper.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that arguments to show that religious beliefs are trustworthy on the basis of their naturalness fail because religious beliefs are not natural. The beliefs of major religious

traditions differ greatly from the natural beliefs discussed by cognitive scientists and often even contradict them. Religious traditions can be consistent when rejecting natural beliefs because natural beliefs can be overridden by elements from their tradition, like sacred texts, authoritative figures or experiences during rituals.

I have also argued that cognitive theories of religious belief do yield trust for some beliefs, namely some teleological beliefs, afterlife beliefs and animism. Two theories provide trust for contradicting beliefs; one in a punishing god and another in a loving forgiving god.

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Notes

1. Clark and Barrett are not clear on what they mean by ‘rational’. For Plantinga, someone is rational if she has not violated any of her epistemic obligations. This fits well with Clark and Barrett’s argument. The term is, however, used in a wide variety of ways by epistemologists. In the remainder of this paper, I use the term ‘trustworthiness’ to avoid confusion.
2. The term ‘cognitive mechanism’ is used to talk about specific functions of the human mind. Some cognitive scientists take a firmer stance and argue that cognitive mechanisms are distinct modules in the brain. Most cognitive scientists, however, take a more relaxed view.
3. One could argue, like Plantinga, that testimonial beliefs also enjoy an innocent-until proven-guilty status. But then the trustworthiness of religious beliefs no longer depends on their naturalness like Clark and Barrett claim.

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4. Plantinga distinguishes between rebutting and undercutting defeaters; rebutting defeaters being propositions that rule out the truth of a belief you hold and undercutting defeaters being propositions that are (inconclusive) reasons for giving up a belief.
 5. Plantinga primarily discusses Christian beliefs.
 6. Prominent cognitive scientists, besides Justin Barrett who defended this claim are Robert McCauley [33], Pascal Boyer [12] and Jesse Bering [8]. Of these, only Justin Barrett discusses the consequences of religious belief allegedly being natural for its trustworthiness.
 7. This distinction was popularized by Daniel Kahneman [28]).
 8. For example ,cognitive scientist Jonathan Jong writes: “(...) [C]entral tenets of the ECSR [evolutionary cognitive science of religion] are (...) notoriously under-determined by data, as anyone intimately familiar with the primary research literature knows.” [26]
 9. I take theistic religions to be religions that accept the existence of at least one god. This excludes among others Theravada Buddhism and religious naturalism. If the category gods is limited to creator gods, it also excludes other strands of Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and animism. Obviously Barrett and Clark’s argument does not rule in favor of them.
 10. This point was also made in a somewhat different way by Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh and Aku Visala [27]. They, however, do not explicitly discuss the ramifications for the trustworthiness of religious beliefs.
 11. http://www.senate.be/doc/const_nl.html#const
 12. The term ‘overridder system’ was first used by William Alston [1].
 13. Physicalism is the philosophical doctrine that everything is material or physical.