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De Cruz & De Smedt, A NATURAL HISTORY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Natural History of Natural Theology, by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt. MIT Press, 2015. Pp. xvii + 246. \$40.00 (hardcover).

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The cognitive science of religion has attracted increasing attention from analytic philosophers of religion. Cognitive-evolutionary scientific theories of why humans have religious beliefs have, like counterpart explanations of moral beliefs, raised the question of whether religious beliefs are grounded in a cognitive process that can be trusted. Debunking arguments hold that the cognitive-evolutionary explanations of religious beliefs show that these beliefs do not track the truth of the religious facts, and conclude that we should suspend judgment about these beliefs. One now typical response to the debunkers says that if one holds a religious belief on the basis of good reasons, then one's belief may be justified. (See, e.g., Michael J. Murray and Jeffrey Schloss, "Evolutionary Accounts of Religion and the Justification of Religious Belief," in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland, Chad Meister, and Kaldoun A. Sweis (Oxford University Press, 2013) and Joshua C. Thurow, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational? The Epistemic Consequences of the Cognitive Science of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 [2013]: 77–98.) And many people do believe on the basis of reasons that dwell at the heart of some natural theological arguments; if those reasons turn out to be good, then many people may—even after knowing full well about the cognitive-evolutionary explanations of human religious beliefs—rationally maintain their religious beliefs.

But, what if debunking arguments sprout up amidst the field of natural theological arguments? Might human dispositions to accept these arguments also be explained by naturally evolved cognitive mechanisms? And if so, might those dispositions fail to track the truth of those arguments' premises? In this informative and stimulating book, De Cruz and De Smedt aim to address these very questions—questions which, before the appearance of their book, have been rarely addressed. (Exceptions include a couple earlier articles by De Cruz and De Smedt; Derek Leben,



"When Psychology Undermines Beliefs," *Philosophical Psychology* 27 [2014]: 328–350; Thurow, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational?"; Thurow, "Some Reflections on Cognitive Science, Doubt, and Religious Belief," in *The Roots of Religion*, ed. Roger Trigg and Justin Barrett [Ashgate, 2014], 189–207; and Thurow, "Does the Scientific Study of Religion Cast Doubt on Theistic Beliefs?" in *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief*, ed. Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain (Oxford University Press, 2014): 277–294.) Most of the book is devoted to arguing that various natural theological arguments draw on certain cognitive mechanisms that are likely to be evolutionarily adaptive and maturationally natural, i.e., that arise early in an individual's development without explicit instruction. They also discuss whether it follows that any of the natural theological arguments are debunked. De Cruz and De Smedt draw on a wealth of empirical studies to make their argument; indeed no other work to date has integrated anywhere near the number and diversity of studies as they have in investigating the cognitive foundations of natural theology. For this, those interested in the cognitive science of religion and/or debunking arguments owe them many thanks. However, their discussion of the possible debunking implications of their argument suffers from some flaws. Despite those flaws, this book is an invaluable resource for future work on natural theology and the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion.

After an introductory chapter explaining natural theology and the cognitive science of religion, and a second chapter summarizing parts of the contemporary cognitive scientific understanding of human cognitive abilities, De Cruz and De Smedt spend six chapters exploring the cognitive foundations of a variety of arguments and issues in natural theology: how to think of God's knowledge, the design argument, the cosmological argument, the moral argument, the argument from beauty, and the argument from miracles. Each of these six chapters explains its theistic argument in a sympathetic, historically sensitive way, argues that our assessment of the argument depends upon certain maturationally natural cognitive faculties, and concludes with some discussion of the plausibility of the theistic argument in light of the authors' account of its cognitive underpinnings. The book concludes with a chapter on whether these cognitive underpinnings debunk the arguments *in toto*. In this short review I shall examine their discussion of the cosmological argument as well as the final chapter since these chapters contain their most extensive discussion of debunking arguments. Very briefly, here's what they say about the other arguments: the design argument is grounded in abilities to attribute functions to objects, to see objects as designed, and to make probabilistic inferences; the moral argument is grounded in moral realist intuitions; the argument from beauty is grounded in intuitions about beauty and the sublime; and the argument from miracles is grounded in various content and context biases regarding the transmission of testimony. All of these intuitions, abilities, and biases are maturationally natural. They believe some versions of the

moral argument are debunked, but that the arguments from beauty and miracles and a certain kind of cumulative-case design argument are not, although these arguments probably won't be very persuasive unless one already has a high prior credence in God's existence. Their discussion of the neglected argument from beauty is especially fascinating and should prove essential to future work on the argument.

Cosmological arguments proceed in two steps, each of which, De Cruz and De Smedt argue, depends for its plausibility on maturationally natural cognitive abilities. In the first step it is argued that there is a first cause. This step uses some version of the causal principle or the principle of sufficient reason. De Cruz and De Smedt cite studies that indicate that from a very young age humans are prone both to look for explanations/causes for unexpected events and to find plausible unobserved or unobservable causes such as mental states, physical forces, and biological essences. They also—to my mind implausibly—suggest that an empirically-confirmed disposition to prefer deterministic to stochastic causes/explanations “inform(s)” (93) the commonly-drawn conclusion of step 1 that the first cause necessarily exists. It's not clear what they mean by “informs,” but if it means something like “inclines us to believe” then it isn't clear why a disposition to prefer deterministic causes would lead us to be inclined to think those causes necessarily exist. Indeed, we deny that most causes—even deterministic causes—necessarily exist. In step 2 it is argued that the first cause is God. They suggest that our (empirically supported) maturationally natural abilities to understand intentional/agential causes and to conceive of immaterial agents, together with dispositions to appeal to agential causes of the sudden motion of inanimate objects and to treat agential causes as requiring no further explanation, inclines us to find it plausible that the first cause is God.

De Cruz and De Smedt then argue that their theory of how our cognitive dispositions incline us to accept the two steps of the cosmological argument cannot be used to debunk the argument. They argue that on an internalist theory of justification, cosmological arguments can increase a theist's justification for belief by contributing to a more coherent worldview. But, a nontheist would likely not be persuaded—again, because of a low prior credence for theism. They then argue that an externalist theory of justification opens up the following sort of debunking argument (DA): our cognitive tools are selected for reliability under normal circumstances that humans encountered in the environment in which selection occurred, but reliability is not selected for when those abilities are used *for situations that are remote from the conditions under which they evolved*. To apply our causal and agential intuitions to the universe and potential causes of the universe is to apply them in remote situations, but they are not reliable in those situations, so we should not trust them when they are used as grounds for the cosmological argument. De Cruz and De Smedt reject this argument on two grounds: they argue, first, that it assumes there is no God and second, that the argument would also undermine our use of

the causal principle in science since the domains of scientific experiment are also remote from the conditions in which our cognitive abilities arose. They call this latter problem *the problem of collateral damage*.

I agree that their theory of cognitive dispositions doesn't undermine the cosmological argument, but I don't think *their* arguments establish this. First, DA, which they used to target externalist justification can, with only very slight modification, attack internalist justification. On internalist views, evidence of unreliability counts as an undercutting defeater for justification—so, as long as we have evidence supporting the premises of DA, DA will also target internalist justification. Second, it isn't clear that the cosmological argument increases the coherence of an internalist theist's beliefs. What does it add? The theist already believes that God exists and that God is the creator of the universe who exercises providence over the universe. Those claims are already coherent. The cosmological argument doesn't make the system more coherent, it just seems to illustrate the coherence of the theistic system. Third, DA doesn't assume that God doesn't exist. A process can be unreliable regarding discerning p even if p is true, indeed even if p is necessarily true (e.g., suppose I guess that p and p is true or even necessarily true; even so, my guessing isn't a reliable process). Fourth, John Wilkins and Paul Griffiths have developed a plausible response to the problem of collateral damage ("Evolutionary Debunking Arguments in Three Domains: Fact, Value, and Religion" in *A New Science of Religion*, ed. Gregory Dawes and James Maclaurin [Routledge, 2012], 133–146.). They grant that natural selection probably wouldn't directly select for reliable beliefs about scientific matters. But, they argue that natural selection would select for reliable commonsense beliefs and methods (e.g., perceptual beliefs, memorial beliefs, basic induction) and on the basis of those we can come to have reason to trust our scientific methods. So, perhaps we can trust the causal principle when applied to commonsense situations, but then we can test whether the causal principle holds more generally by making a causal hypothesis, drawing out predictions of that hypothesis, and checking those predictions using perception (which is reliable). Thus, we can come to have good reason to not only trust scientific methods of inquiry, but also to apply the causal principle in scientific contexts.

In their final chapter, De Cruz and De Smedt consider a more generalized version of DA, used to target the justification for the premises of many of the theistic arguments altogether. They object to it using the generality problem for reliabilism. The processes—understood broadly—underlying our beliefs in these premises are reliable because evolution likely has selected for cognitive mechanisms that generally yield the truth about the presence of causes and agents and intentional states. The processes—understood more narrowly to apply to beliefs about things that are out of the ordinary domain (i.e., that in which the mechanisms evolved)—may not be reliable. But, they say, we can't tell which process matters for justification. Here, once again, prior belief in God plays a role. If you have a high prior in God's existence, you'll take it that God has

created these processes to be generally reliable and so you'll think the broader process is more relevant. If you have a low prior in God's existence, you'll think our religious beliefs are likely false and so you'll think the narrower process is more relevant. They conclude, "it seems that both theists and nontheists reach reasonable conclusions and are justified in holding them" (199).

Although I agree that the generality problem is a worry for externalist theories of justification, I think it is less worrisome when we're simply interested in evidence of unreliability as a source of defeat, which is what debunking arguments try to give. For the latter, we want to take into account any evidence about the causes and circumstances of the use of the belief-forming process. Even if process P is generally reliable concerning my visual judgments, if I get evidence that it isn't reliable concerning my color judgments, then I thereby obtain good reason to doubt my color judgments. So, the narrower belief-forming process is relevant to whether belief is defeated, even if we grant that the reliability of the broader belief-forming process is sufficient for *prima facie* justification.

Despite these shortcomings in their discussion of debunking arguments, this is a very good book that I recommend to all interested in the cognitive science of religion. It doesn't end the discussion of whether the cognitive underpinnings of theistic arguments debunk those arguments, but it is undoubtedly an excellent place to start.

God, Modality, and Morality, by William E. Mann. Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 369. \$74.00 (hardcover).

WILLIAM F. VALLICELLA

This is a book philosophers of religion will want on their shelves. It collects sixteen of William E. Mann's previously published papers and includes "Omnipresence, Hiddenness, and Mysticism," written for this volume. These influential papers combine analytic precision with historical erudition: in many places Mann works directly from the classical texts and supplies his own translations. Mann ranges masterfully over a wealth of topics from the highly abstract (divine simplicity, aseity, sovereignty, immutability, omnipresence) to the deeply existential (mysticism, divine love, human love and lust, guilt, lying, piety, hope). As the title suggests, the essays are grouped under three heads, God, Modality, and Morality.

A somewhat off-putting feature of some of these essays is their rambling and diffuse character. In this hyperkinetic age it is a good writerly maxim to state one's thesis succinctly at the outset and sketch one's overall

