Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, Aku Visala

Born idolaters: The limits of the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion

Summary: In recent years, theoretical and empirical work done under the rubric of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) have led many to conclude that religion (or, at least, some aspects thereof) is "natural". By this, it is meant that human beings are predisposed to believe in supernatural agents, and that their beliefs about these agents are constrained in various ways. The details about how and why these predispositions and cognitive constraints developed and evolved are still largely unknown, though there is enough of a theoretical consensus in CSR for philosophers to have begun reflecting on the implications of CSR for religious belief. In particular, much philosophical work has been done on the implications of CSR for theism, on both sides of the debate. On one hand, CSR might contribute to defeating particular arguments for theism, or indeed theism altogether; on the other hand, CSR might provide support for specific theological views. In this paper, we argue that the CSR is largely irrelevant for *classical theism*, and in particular that the "naturalness hypothesis" is much less congenial to theism than some have previously argued.

Zusammenfassung: In den letzten Jahren hat die theoretische und empirische Arbeit unter der Rubrik *cognitive science of religion* (CSR) viele zu dem Schluss geführt, dass Religion (oder zumindest ein Teil ihrer Aspekte) »natürlich« ist. Damit ist gemeint, dass Menschen prädisponiert sind, an Übernatürliches zu glauben und ihr Glaube auf verschiedene Weise determiniert ist. Die Details, wie und warum sich diese Prädispositionen und kognitiven Zwänge entwickelt haben, sind größtenteils immer noch unbekannt, aber dennoch gibt es für Philosophen einen ausreichenden theoretischen Konsens in CSR, um mit der Reflexion der Implikationen von CSR für religiösen Glauben zu beginnen. Im Speziellen wurde philosophisch viel in Bezug auf die Implikationen von CSR

Jonathan Jong: Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, UK-Oxford OX2 6PN, E-Mail: jonathan.jong@anthro.ox.ac.uk
Christopher Kavanagh: Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, UK-Oxford OX2 6PN, E-Mail: christopher.kavanagh@anthro.ox.ac.uk
Aku Visala: University of Helsinki, PL 4 (Vuorikatu 3), Room 118, FIN-HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO, E-Mail: aku.visala@helsinki.fi

hinsichtlich des Theismus gearbeitet, auf beiden Seiten der Debatte: Auf der einen Seite könnte CSR dazu beitragen, einzelne Argumente für den Theismus zu unterstützen oder sogar den Theismus als solchen. Auf der anderen Seite könnte CSR Unterstützung für speziell theologische Positionen liefern. In diesem Beitrag argumentieren wir, dass CSR weitgehend irrelevant für den klassischen Theismus ist und speziell die Natürlichkeitshypothese weit weniger für einen Theismus austrägt, als oft angenommen wurde.

The nascent *cognitive science of religion* (CSR) has sent philosophers of religion scrambling to take sides on whether the sorts of naturalistic analyses that CSR theorists engage in justifies or falsifies theistic belief. A cursory survey of recent monographs[1], collected volumes[2] and journal special issues[3] reveal that conclusions fall neatly along party lines, just as one might expect. In short order, theists have published screeds defending religious believers from the big bad spectre of naturalistic scientific explanation.[4] Indeed, some have even attempted to argue that CSR supports their particular version of theism.[5] It may be said that

---

1 E.g., Daniel Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking, 2006). Aku Visala, Theism, Naturalism and the Cognitive Study of Religion: Religion Explained? (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). James Van Slyke, The Cognitive Science of Religion (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

2 E.g., Gregory Dawes & James MacLaurin (ed.), A New Science of Religion (London: Routledge, 2013) and Jeffrey Schloss & Michael Murray (ed.), The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflection on the Origin of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3 James Beebe, The Monist 96 (2013). Special issue.

4 E.g., Kelly James Clark & Dani Rabinowitz, "Knowledge and the Objection to Religious Belief from Cognitive Science", in *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011), 67–82. Jonathan Jong, "Explaining religion (away?)", in *Sophia* 52 (2012), 521–533. David Leech & Aku Visala, "The cognitive science of religion: A modified theist response", in *Religious Studies* 47 (2011), 301–316. Michael Murray, "Scientific explanations of religion and the justification of religious belief", in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflection on the Origin of Religion*, ed. by Jeffrey Schloss & Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168–178. Michael Murray & Andrew Goldberg, "Evolutionary accounts of religion: Explaining and Explaining Away" in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflection on the Origin of Religion*, ed. by Jeffrey Schloss & Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 179–199. Leo Näreaho, "Cognitive science of religion and theism: How can the be compatible?", in *Religious Studies* 50 (2014), 51–66.

5 Kelly James Clark & Justin Barrett, "Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion," in *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010), 174–189. Kelly James Clark & Justin Barrett, "Reidian religious epistemology and the cognitive science of religion", in *Journal of the American*

this is a case of theists protesting too much, as direct arguments *against* theism from CSR-derived premises have been much rarer,[6] though many atheists have at least vaguely insinuated some tension between CSR and religious belief.

The debate thus far is characterised by an assumption that the cognitive science of religion has, as its subject matter, something relevant to theism. On the contrary, we argue that from the point of view of the *classical* theist, this assumption is misplaced. Thus, with respect to these and other philosophers of religion, this paper shall argue that CSR is, at least as it currently stands and at least to the classical theist, theologically uninteresting. That is, CSR has nothing to say – either in support of or against – classical theistic belief, simply because it has little to do with classical theistic belief. This is not to say that it could not, in principle, expand its horizons to deal with classical theistic belief, just that the sorts of religious beliefs CSR currently attempt to explain are – by the lights of classical theistic belief – more like idolatrous beliefs, than the belief in God proper. In other words, the cognitive science of religion could equally be dubbed the *cognitive science of idolatry*. Its relevance to classical theism may therefore be in the light it sheds on a suspicion shared by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians throughout the ages, that idolatry and heresy are frustratingly attractive.

I The stories cognitive scientists tell about religion

The "cognitive science of religion" is a ragbag term that covers the diverse activity of scholars from a wide range of disciplines – including anthropology, psychology, history, philosophy, and biblical studies – united, such as it is, by an

---

Academy of Religion 79 (2011), 639–675. Joshua THUROW, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to Be Irrational? The Epistemic Consequences of the Cognitive Science of Religion", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013), 77–98.

6 E.g., Paul GRIFFITHS & John WILKINS, "Evolutionary debunking arguments in three domains: fact, value and religion", in *A New Science of Religion*, ed. by Gregory DAWES & James MACLAURIN (London: Routledge, 2013), 133–146 and Robert NOLA, Robert "Do naturalistic explanations of religious beliefs debunk religion?", in *A New Science of Religion*, ed. by Gregory DAWES & James MACLAURIN (London: Routledge, 2013), 162–188. Many atheists have at least vaguely insinuated some tension between CSR and religious belief: see, e.g., Scott ATRAN, In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); DENNETT (see above, n 1) and David Sloan WILSON, Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

enthusiasm for the methods and theories of cognitive and evolutionary psychology. While it is research on the evolutionary history and psychological development of religious belief that has captured the popular and philosophical imagination, this element only represents a subset of the field. Even on this point, there is no strong consensus. Nevertheless, CSR researchers who do work on such issues of religious phylogeny and ontogeny can be said to accept a standard narrative, if only as a hypothesis to be tested. The story they tell goes something like this:

Human beings are hypersensitive detectors of agents.[7] That is, we infer the presence of intentional entities – chiefly other human beings and non-human animals – in our environment from very little evidence. Leaves rustle, twigs snap, and we immediately suspect that there is some friend or foe, prey or predator nearby. It is not only the sheer presence of agents that we infer, but also their mental states. This ability – to attribute specific thoughts and feelings to other human beings, based on scant information – is crucial to our social lives. Indeed, deficits in this kind of social cognition, often called a "theory of mind", can be debilitating, as in severe cases of autism.[8] It is not only to other human beings that we do this; we also attribute mental states to non-human animals such as our pets, and even to non-agentic natural forces and artefacts. We act out against computers and vending machines as though they were conspiring against us; we hear voices in the wind and see faces in the clouds, and speak of invisible hands and blind watchmakers. On top of being hypersensitive detectors of agents, we are promiscuous anthropomorphizers. According to CSR theorists, some of the agents that we pick up in our environment under evidentially ambiguous circumstances are elaborated upon to become gods, which are really just agents with special powers. This elaboration is driven by a variety of other cognitive biases and motivations, both basic to human beings and culturally specific. A simple illustrative example may be useful here:

Imagine a family that has just moved into an old house. It is not uncommon for old houses to creak at night. Even for those of us who know something about the effects of temperature change on wood and the rest of it, creaking floorboards might sound uncannily like some person or animal walking has caused them. Perhaps the thought "Who's that?" occurs to us, but we quickly

---

7 Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God? (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004).
8 Simon Baron-Cohen, Simon, "Theory of mind and autism: a fifteen year review", in *Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2nd edition, ed. by Simon BARON-Cohen, Helen Tager-Flusberg, Donald Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–20.

dismiss it when our prior knowledge of the natural causes of creaking floors kick in. But let's imagine that this family is not so familiar with this phenomenon and its explanation. They might "detect" an agent as the cause of the creaking, and fail to reject the immediate assumption that there is agent at loose in the house. So, they search for the culprit. Failing to find any offender – there is none, after all – they might come up with the idea that there is an *invisible* person or animal in the house. This idea might prove to be a very useful one in many different contexts. It might help to explain why the car keys have been lost, or why the painting on the living room wall never stays straight, or why the cat seems to avoid a particular room. It might also prove useful for the control of behaviour: the parents might be tempted to say to their child that the invisible person kidnaps naughty children who do not wash behind their ears.

What this example illustrates is a move from an account of certain inchoate ideas about intentional agents as a byproduct of cognitive biases to a functional analysis of elaborations of those ideas. This is, more or less, the standard story told by CSR theorists. Gods begin their lives as agents detected by human beings in uncertain situations, who are then elaborated upon to solve certain explanatory or practical problems. Thus, gods have been implicated in helping human beings to explain natural phenomena, alleviate death anxiety, ensure moral behaviour, and other such useful things. Some of these "useful things" are so useful or existentially significant, as to engender costly devotion to gods. For example, we might expect costly devotion when gods are linked to the production of food or to important milestones such as birth and death. Furthermore, some gods may be identified with important historical or familial figures, such as founding members of a community or ancestors. To return to the example above again, the family might begin to suspect that the invisible person is, in fact, a deceased matriarch (perhaps the creaking began on the anniversary of her death). If so, the supernatural agent takes on further personal and emotional significance. It is useful to note here that the most common gods are ghosts and ancestral spirits.[9] Indeed, CSR theorists tend to think that such gods precede higher gods in the evolution of religion.[10]

While it is not unreasonable to speak of a "standard model" in CSR, there is also much disagreement in the field. For example, CSR theorists disagree about the precise set of things that gods help human beings to do. Some emphasise

---

9 BARRETT (see above, n. 7) and Pascal BOYER, Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religion Thought (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

10 E.g., Ara NORENZAYAN, Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

moral policing[11] and others focus on questions of misfortune and death.[12] CSR theorists also disagree about the role of evolutionary forces in this story. Most agree that the cognitive biases that lead us to initially "pick up" intentional agents in our environment are evolutionary adaptations in the straightforwardly biological sense. However, whether or not religious beliefs are themselves evolutionary adaptations is still controversial. Some theorists do indeed take this further step, to say that gods proved to be so useful that individuals or groups who believed in gods outperformed those who did not, such that the tendency to believe in gods itself evolved by natural selection.[13] Others are happy to talk about the cultural evolution of particularly explanatorily powerful or practically useful religious ideas without asserting that religious beliefs are biological evolutionary adaptations.[14] Finally, and most relevantly for the present discussion, CSR theorists disagree about the *content* of human beings' religious beliefs that can be said to be "maturationally natural", governed by the pan-cultural cognitive mechanisms posited above.[15] Some argue that religious beliefs are incorrigibly anthropomorphic, based as they are on person perception[16]; others argue that children's god-concepts are naturally non-anthropomorphic[17]. This debate will be scrutinised in greater detail in due course, but to presage that analysis, we may nail our colours to the mast and say that even Barrett and Richert's non-anthropomorphic god fails to approximate the classical theists' God.

To conclude this descriptive preamble, it should also be said that there is little in this narrative that is novel in the history of ideas about the origins of religious belief. Similar ideas may be found in Xenophanes and Lucretius, and Hume, and Feuerbach and Freud and, Marx and Malinowski; throughout the ages, theories linking religion to anthropomorphism and other cognitive biases and existential needs have been proposed. CSR updates such ideas, locating

---

11 E.g., Jesse Bering, God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2011).

12 E.g., Barrett, Why Would Anyone (see above, n. 7) and Boyer (see above, n. 9).

13 E.g., Wilson (see above, n. 6); Bering (see above, n. 11) and Jeff Greenberg & Mark Jordan Landay & Sheldon Solomon & Tom Pyszczynski, "The case for terror management as the primary psychological function of religion", in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion*, ed. by David Wulff. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

14 E.g., Atran (see above, n. 6).

15 Robert McCauley, Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

16 E.g., D. Jason Slone, Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious Believers Believe What They Shouldn't (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

17 E.g., Justin Barrett & Rebekah Richert, "Anthropomorphism or preparedness? Exploring children's God concepts", in *Review of Religious Research* 44 (2003), 300–312.

them in a new idiom – of the cognitive sciences and evolutionary theory – freeing them from the shackles of ostensibly outmoded ideas, like Marx's historical materialism or Freud's ontology of the mind or pre-Socratic metaphysics. CSR replaces this musty theoretical baggage with a shiny new collection of more respectable theories drawing from the legacy of Charles Darwin, and the works of Noam Chomsky, and Jerry Fodor. The main conceit of CSR, however, is that it is a *scientific* approach to questions about religion, driven by empirical evidence and experimentation. On that count, CSR has yet to fully deliver on its promises: the disagreements alluded to above – between adaptationists and byproduct theorists, and so forth – exist in large part because CSR's theories are still massively underdetermined by data. Even the main claim that religious ideas originate in an evolved tendency to detect agency in ambiguous situations has not yet enjoyed much direct empirical support.[18] Nevertheless, it is not CSR's present empirical inadequacies that are of interest here. Rather, it is the view of God – or, more appropriately, the gods – assumed by CSR and philosophical and theological commentators thereof.

II   The (implicit) theology of CSR

While eschewing the view that religion is a natural kind, complete with necessary and sufficient conditions, CSR does work with a stipulative definition of "religion", if only to delimit its field of enquiry.[19] "Religion" and its cognates refer to the belief in supernatural agents and the phenomena associated with those beliefs, such as rituals, social structures, and emotional and perceptual experiences.[20] Furthermore, agents are supernatural by virtue of their ability to "supersede … natural constraints" and "overcom[e] the intuitively expectable

---

18 There is some. See, e.g., Tapani Riekki, Tapani & Marjaana Lindeman, et al. Marjaana & Aleneff, Marja et al. "Paranormal and Religious Believers Are More Prone to Illusory Face Perception than Skeptics and Non-Believers", in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 27 (2012), 150–155 and Tapani Riekki & Marjaana Lindeman & Tuukka Ralj, "Supernatural believers attribute more intentions to random movement than skeptics: An fMRI study", in *Social Neuroscience 9* (2014), 400–411.
19 See especially Pascal Boyer, The Fracture Of An Illusion: Science And The Dissolution Of Religion (Vandenhoek & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2011).
20 See especially Atran (see above, n. 6.); Barrett and Why Would Anyone (see above, n. 7); Bering (see above, n. 11). See also, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods and Buddhas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Todd Tremlin, Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

limitations of normal agents"[21]. CSR's project – or at least, the part of it that has led to some excitement in philosophical circles – is to explain the origins, transmission, and persistence of gods.

If they existed, the gods of the cognitive science of religion seem to be things in the world, effectively parts of the spatio-temporal universe; agents among other agents that interact with other things in the world in much the same way that we do. They are more or less like normal agents, except more powerful. Indeed, *ex hypothesi*, gods are anthropomorphic entities generated by precisely those cognitive mechanisms that evolved to deal with other persons and non-human agents. Recall that in the standard story told by CSR, gods are those agents – real or otherwise – picked out by our hypersensitive agency detection devices and promiscuous theories of mind. Furthermore, according to some CSR theorists, gods serve as causal explanations for natural phenomena, especially if those phenomena are existentially significant. Barrett, for example, supposes that gods are particularly useful for explaining the various fortunes and misfortunes that befall human beings.[22] Thus, the gods of CSR operate at the same level as other causes and explanations: a theological explanation of a misfortune is one candidate among many. To take another example, according to other CSR theorists, gods also serve as the moral police, who keep potential sinners in check on pains of punishment in this world or the next.[23] Thus, the gods of CSR perform the same function as other kinds of policing agents, albeit with powers of surveillance that reach much further. To be fair, alongside these clearly anthropomorphic conceptions of gods that CSR theorists take to be their *explanans*, there has also been some attempt to argue that at least children start off with *non*-anthropomorphic proto-theologies. In other words, there has been some attempt to argue that children naturally have more or less orthodox, if unsophisticated, views about divine agents. For example, Clark and Barrett have argued that children are developmentally "prepared" to believe in a superpowerful being, who is superperceiving, superknowing and perhaps even immortal.[24] As we shall see later, it is unclear if such claims are empirically warranted; indeed, it is also unclear whether even such a superpowerful being counts as non-anthropomorphic in any relevant way.

---

21 Harvey WHITEHOUSE, Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 10–11.
22 BARRETT, Why Would Anyone (see above, n. 7);
23 E.g., Dominic JOHNSON & Jesse BERING, "Hand of God, mind of man: Punishment and cognition in the evolution of Cooperation", in *Evolutionary Psychology* 4 (2006), 219–233; NORENZAYAN (see above, n. 10).
24 CLARK & BARRETT, Reformed Epistemology (see above, n. 5).

Recent philosophical work on the theological implications of CSR also seems to have adopted CSR's implicit theology. The arguments against theism from redundancy, for example, imply – as above – that theological explanation operates at the same level as naturalistic or scientific explanation, such that they can come into conflict. So, if CSR can explain religious belief in evolutionary and psychological terms, then God can have no part in causing religious belief. If *nature* produces religion, then *God* must not. On the other hand, those who seek to show that the alleged naturalness of religious belief supports theism have attempted to lump the cognitive mechanisms described above together to form a "god module" or "god faculty". They then suggest – in vague, noncommittal ways, to be sure – that this "god faculty" might just be what John Calvin recognised as the *sensus divininatis*.[25] This is an interesting suggestion that will be picked up again later. Suffice to say for now that the implication seems to be that the sorts of things these cognitive mechanisms pick up are divine things, or close enough; in other words, among the proper functions of the cognitive mechanisms described above is to detect God or things like God. So, God – on this view – is an agent that may be heard in the "voices" we hear in the wind, the "faces" we see in the clouds, the "agency" we detect behind snapping twigs or creaking floorboards and the "mental states" we attribute so freely to other agents and a multitude of inanimate objects. In other words, these arguments that seek to link the naturalness of religious belief to the reasonableness of theism are, in effect, arguments that rely on the naturalness of belief in anthropomorphic gods, that are objects in the world, more or less like us, albeit more powerful, to belief in the classical monotheistic *God*. It seems, on this view, that the Abrahamic God is assumed to just be a god, one example of the category of supernatural agents; that is, theism is assumed to be the belief in a god of the anthropomorphic variety. But this may be a mistake, at least if one seeks to take the doctrinal accounts of classical theism seriously.

III   The doctrine of God in classical theism, Part 1: simplicity and oneness

Having said something about CSR's implicit theology – its doctrine of God (or rather, gods) – we now turn to what classical theists have explicitly asserted

---

25 Justin BARRETT, Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds (West Conshohocken: John Templeleton Press, 2011) and CLARK & BARRETT, Reidian Religious Epistemology (see above, n. 5).

about God and belief in God. By "classical theism", philosophers of religion typically refer to the monotheistic belief of the Abrahamic religion as exemplified, for example, by medieval philosopher-theologians like Moses Maimonides, Avicenna, and Thomas Aquinas. Arguably, similar ideas can be found in Buddhist and Hindu writings too. Doubtless, what David Burrell calls "the grammar of divinity"[26] is a contested issue, and it remains so even when we narrow our scope solely to the Abrahamic tradition. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to argue for classical theism over later responses to it (e.g., theistic personalism, open theism, process theism), but the choice to focus on this version of theistic belief is hardly an arbitrary one, as despite recent challenges, none of which are obviously decisive, classical theism remains a dominant strand in mainstream Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theological discourse. Thus, while a foray into theological personalism will prove inevitable, the core focus of this paper is the relationship (or lack thereof) between CSR and classical theism.

The Abrahamic religions are, as we have said, monotheistic. The *Shema Yisrael* captures this well: Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Likewise, the first line of the Nicene Creed goes: We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. And again, the *al-Ikhlās* commands Muslims to declare God's absolute oneness: Say, "Allah, the one and only; Allah the eternal, absolute; he begets not, nor is he begotten; and there is none comparable unto him". It is important from the outset, for reasons that will hopefully become clear, to distinguish the monotheistic belief in one God from the belief that God is a single individual. The oneness of God in classical monotheisms is not the oneness of cardinality: God is not one as opposed to two or three or sixty-five million. Rather, the belief that God is one is the belief in God's unity and uniqueness. The unity of God is such that in God, there are no distinctions; as St Augustine put it, for God "there is no difference between what [God] *is* and what [God] *has*"[27], no difference between God's essence and God's attributes. Indeed, as Thomas Aquinas is famous for defending, there is also no distinction to be made between God and God's nature, God's essence and God's existence. The uniqueness of God follows from all this. For example, Saul Kripke is an individual human being, one example of a human being, one member of the category "human beings". Even if no other human beings existed (say everyone else dropped dead right now), Kripke would still be one – albeit the only surviving – member of the category "human beings". This is because there is a difference between Kripke and the sort of

---

26 David Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 2.
27 St. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, XI.10.

thing that Kripke is, namely a human being. No such difference applies in God – God is all godhead – and therefore God is not an individual, a single example of a kind or a single member of a category. God is not a god. Indeed, God is not *an* anything, an example of any type. God just is.

Whatever we make of this idea of divine simplicity – whether we think it cogent or otherwise – it remains mainstream doctrine in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Interestingly, the recent challenges to the coherence of the doctrine of simplicity have largely come from theistic personalists, most notably Alvin Plantinga.[28] An explicit complaint that Plantinga and others make is that the doctrine of divine simplicity renders it impossible to think of God as a person, which is the characteristic contention of theistic personalists: they want to think of God univocally as a person. In response, a classical theist may flatly deny that God is a person in the sense that Plantinga wants God to be. The Christian theist might add that she believes that God is *tres personae, una substantia*; God is three persons, rather than one, and this personhood cannot be attributed to the divine nature itself. Indeed, to use CSR's language, the classical theist might flatly deny that God is an *agent*, at least in the sense that CSR uses the term. The psychology of intention and the metaphysics of causation that apply to the acts of finite intentional agents do not, for the classical theist, apply to God, who is pure act. This business of classical theists applying words to God by changing the sense of those words can be frustrating, particularly to analytic philosophers of religion. But the classical theist's point is well taken: it seems absurd to think that words and concepts would apply in the same way to finite creatures and an infinite God. Down that route lies anthropomorphism and, indeed, idolatry. This is not to say that the classical theist advocates using words willy-nilly: words are used to refer to God neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically. There is nothing particularly odd about this in our post-Wittgensteinian world.[29] Modern thinkers are now rightly accustomed to the idea that words have different meanings in different contexts. The word "good" is perhaps the most common example cited: to say that a meal is good is to mean

---

28 E.g., Alvin PLANTINGA, Does God Have a Nature? (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980). For critical responses, see, e.g., Brian DAVIES, "A modern defence of divine simplicity", in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. by Brian DAVIES (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 549–564; William MANN, "Divine simplicity", in *Religious Studies* 18 (1982), 451-471; Eleonore STUMP & Normam KRETZMANN, "Absolute simplicity", in *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), 353–382; William VALLICELLA, "Divine simplicity: a new defence", in *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), 508–525.
29 For more, see Fergus KERR, Theology after Wittgenstein (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and Craig PATERSON & Matthew PUGH, Matthew (ed.), Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006)

a different thing from saying that a dog is good (unless, in the latter case, we are trying to say that the dog that we ate was tasty or hearty or healthy). To say that God is good is to mean a different thing again, namely that God is the cause of the goodness of creatures. Or, at least, this is the best way the classical theists have of expressing this idea.

We have already seen one disanalogy between CSR's gods and the God of classical theism. CSR's gods are agents – and sometimes even persons – in more or less the same way that other agents and persons are, except perhaps with an optimal number of counterintuitive properties thrown into the mix. In particular, CSR's gods are individual agents that can be detected by our perceptual and cognitive faculties, in this bush but not that, in this gust of wind but not that. Some Christians seem to want to add that these perceptual and cognitive faculties form a "god faculty", the proper function of which is to detect gods, of which God is a particular example. But by the lights of classical theism, this is just an idolatrous mistake.

IV   The doctrine of God in classical theism, Part 2: creation and divine action

The doctrine of divine simplicity is generally thought to follow from classical theists' commitments to the belief that God is the creator of the world, that God is the cause of the existence of all things. Indeed, the reason that classical theists deny that God is a thing alongside other things, is that things are that which God creates. God therefore stands outside the superordinate category of all existent things. Now, before we get into what else classical theists have maintained because of this commitment to the belief that God is the creator of all things, we should clarify that the doctrine of creation is not to be confused with the popular belief that God is causally responsible for the beginning of the universe. It is not, for example, the claim that God kick started the Big Bang. This is not to deny that classical theists may also believe in God as the first in a sequence of causes, but merely to clarify what the theistic doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* consists in: to affirm God as creator is simply to assert that the world is dependent on God for its existence. Indeed, in classical theism the doctrine of creation remains independent from whether or not there was a Big Bang, whether or not the universe has a beginning. Rather, the doctrine of creation is the belief that God is responsible for the existence of anything at any point in time: for any thing that exists, God supplies its existence for as long as it exists. This issue is closely related to the issue of what it means for God to be a cause.

Just as God is not an object in the world, alongside other objects, God is not a cause among other causes, not one additional causal agent alongside you and me and billiard balls and other things that exert measurable forces in the world. God does not exert measurable forces in the world. Rather, God is always in everything causing everything to exist. As the late Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe put it, God "makes no difference to the universe"; that is, "we do not appeal specifically to God to explain why the universe is this way rather than that … What God accounts for is that the universe is there instead of nothing"[30]. In other words, God supplies the *existence* of all that exists always and everywhere; God is the reason that each and every thing *is* and continues *being*. If finite objects in the world are real causes at all, they (and we) are only thus because God has made it so. Far from the deistic picture in which God does little more than light the touch paper that sets creation going, there is a sense that the God of classical theism does everything, such that it is impossible to point at particular events that God causes as if to distinguish them from those that God does not cause. It is impossible to point at a particular bush that God rustles, a particular gust of wind in which God is present; God rustles all bushes and is present in all gusts of wind. Thus, insofar as the cognitive mechanisms described above – considered by some to be a "god faculty" – detect God in this bush but not that, this gust of wind but not that, then it is not a particularly good detector of God, who is everywhere always acting in all things, causing them to be.

More generally, however, it ought to be clear by now that, under classical theism, there can be no competition between natural causes of things and divine causes of things. The search for natural causes, such as in CSR, is the search for the answer to why things are this way rather than that; as we have seen, this is not the sort of question for which "Because God" is a good answer. To the classical theist, God is the cause of the existence of things, of their being, that is to say, of their being what they are, whatever they are. That is, behind every natural causes is the divine creative act, sustaining the natural cause in existence as itself, complete with its causal powers. The charge of redundancy is thus misplaced: the completeness of naturalistic explanations of phenomena, religious or otherwise, is no threat to classical theism because theological "explanation" does not occur at the same level as naturalistic explanations. Theological "explanation" is not concerned with why this happened rather than that, but only with why there is something rather than nothing, why things do exist (and not just why they *began* to exist). Of course, it is possible that this question – why there is something rather than nothing? – is a silly one, one that is inco-

---

30 Herbert McCabe, "God: I – creation", in *New Blackfriars* 61 (1980), 412.

herent or one the answer for which is not "Because God". Bertrand Russell is perhaps most famous for arguing as much. It might also be argued, with the logical positivists that theological "explanations" are meaningless because they are devoid of empirical content. But our task is neither to defeat nor to defend classical theistic ideas, except to show that advocates of this perspective could regard it as perfectly unaffected by CSR's explanatory project.

So far, we have seen how God – the God of classical theism – is not the sort of thing that can be picked up by the sorts of mechanisms described by CSR, at least not in any kind of direct way. This is not to say that the sorts of beliefs encouraged by the perceptual and cognitive faculties posited by CSR cannot eventually, with enough critical reflection, lead to the belief in God. Indeed, it is plausible that the belief in God usually, not to say necessarily, goes through the belief in a more anthropomorphic conception of god. More broadly we have also seen that any naturalistic explanations of phenomena, whether religious or other, can present no threat to classical theism. Indeed, even a future "complete" naturalistic science presents no threat to classical theism, which preserves the autonomy of finite causes. However, this is not to say that naturalistic explanations of phenomena present no threat to other versions of religious belief, nor is it to say that classical theism is immune to all challenges but these issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

V   God, the sensus divinitatis, and CSR

In this next section, we will consider the question of whether those who claim that CSR supports the idea of a *sensus divinitatis* are justified in doing so. Have, as Clark and Barrett claim, "contemporary anthropologists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists" in fact "amassed empirical evidence" for the kind of "god-faculty" that they claim Alvin Plantinga and other Reformed Epistemologists have been arguing for recently?[31] Before we turn to the relationship between CSR and Reformed Epistemology in particular, it is important to specify what the Reformed Epistemology view on the "god faculty" amounts to. To elucidate this we will examine, the poster child of Reformed Epistemology, Alvin Plantinga's position, with reference to Kelly James Clark and Justin Barrett's recent work on CSR and Reformed Epistemology. Alvin Plantinga defines the *sensus divinitatis* as a "many sided disposition to accept belief in God (or propositions that immediately and obviously entail the existence of God) in a variety of cir-

---

31 All quotes from Clark & Barrett, Reidian Religious Epistemology, 641 (see above, n. 5).

cumstances"[32], which were it not for the effects of sin, would lead us to believe in God with the "same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past"[33]. The variety of circumstances in which this disposition may be activated includes being confronted by the beauty of the natural world and by a sense of personal guilt. More importantly for the present discussion, Plantinga seems to think that the *sensus divinitatis* leads to the belief in God, whom he defines as a person who "exists *a se*, is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power". Now, Plantinga is not a classical theist, and explicitly rejects some of the doctrines outlined above (e.g., divine simplicity). He might therefore have no problem with the idea that God is an individual in more or less the same sense that we are individuals, albeit (maximally) more powerful, knowledgeable, and good than we are. Plantinga's God may well be a kind of anthropomorphic god. Already the relationship between CSR and Reformed Epistemology seems more promising than the relationship between CSR and classical theism, which is generally uninterested in gods.

At this point, it might be useful to note how the Reformed Epistemology view of the *sensus divinitatis* differs from those to Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, despite the fact that this view is sometimes dubbed the Aquinas/Calvin model. As we have seen, Plantinga believes that the *sensus divinitatis* delivers the belief in God, even – as Clark and Barrett put it – "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Bible"[34]. There are similar ideas found in Aquinas and Calvin, but Reformed Epistemology hardly has a claim to being either Thomist or Reformed. Thomas Aquinas writes that, "To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude"[35], but this is not quite the same thing as believing that God has implanted in us a means to know that God exists without the need for argument or evidence. Indeed, Thomas's claim here is not even primarily epistemological, for he proceeds to say, "For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him". Here, it becomes clear that, for Thomas, our natural (and general and confused) knowledge of God is as the final object of our natural yearning for happiness. Furthermore, insofar as Thomas makes claims about religious epistemology here, he explicitly denies that the existence of God is self-evident, either in itself or to us.

32 Alvin PLANTINGA, Warrant and Proper Function (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 212.
33 Alvin PLANTINGA, "Reason and belief in God", in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga & Nicholas Wolterstorff. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 66.
34 CLARK & BARRETT, Reformed Epistemology (see above, n. 5), 176.
35 Thomas AQUINAS, Summa Theologiae, 1.2.1.

Calvin's position is somewhat more complicated, and famously includes speculations about the noetic effects of sin. He writes, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy"[36]. However, this natural instinct only leads us to "the primal and simple knowledge" of God "if Adam had remained upright"[37]. As things are, however, it is "in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author"[38] and thus "we are deficient in natural powers which might enable us to rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God"[39]. Indeed, far from possessing a *reliable* faculty for producing the belief in God, Calvin's assessment of the results of the *sensus divinitatis* in our fallen state is harsh. At best, according to Calvin, we have a vague and inchoate sense of the divine – "nothing certain or solid or clearcut"[40] – that is inevitably corrupted by our "presumption and wantonness, and hence there is scarcely an individual to be found without some idol or phantom as a substitute for Deity". Calvin is thus even more pessimistic than Aquinas about the deliverances of our *sensus divinitatis:* for him, the natural deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* are almost certainly false, given our current moral and epistemic situation. Human beings do not, by nature, have direct and reliable access to God; rather, "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols"[41]. In summary, at best, Reformed Epistemology is inspired by and tenuously owes itself to the work of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, but to call it the Aquinas/Calvin model is almost certainly a misnomer.[42]

---

36 Jean Calvin, Institutes, 1.3.1.

37 Ibid., 1.2.1.

38 Ibid., 1.5.14.

39 Ibid., 1.5.15.

40 Ibid., 1.5.12.

41 Ibid., 1.11.8.

42 Clark and Barrett's reading of Calvin seems somewhat confused. According to them, Calvin thinks that the "knowledge of God's existence and basic attributes is present from birth and not experience-dependent", while bizarrely maintaining that "humans acquire the true belief that there is a majestic creator" (CLARK & BARRETT, Reformed Epistemology, 175; emphasis ours). It is unclear what their account of belief acquisition consists in if the belief that God exists is present at birth. In any case, they distinguish between this sensus divinitatis with "an additional, external source of knowledge of God ... the manifestation of the divine in nature". This seems an unusual way to read the text. Furthermore, according to Clark and Barrett (Reformed Epistemology), Alvin Plantinga's sensus divinitatis differs from Calvin's in that for Plantinga but not Calvin, the sensus divinitatis is activated by human experience. Besides disagreeing with their reading of Calvin, I also contend that this is certainly not the main difference between Calvin and Plantinga. Surely a bigger difference is that while Plantinga thinks that our sensus divinitatis is gained by sin, Calvin takes the noetic effects of sin much more seriously.

Given the standard model posited by CSR outlined earlier, it seems that if CSR supports any view of the *sensus divinitatis*, it is Calvin's and perhaps Thomas's. The gods naturally – whatever "naturally" amounts to[43] – produced (or, if you like, detected) by our perceptual and cognitive faculties are not God. At best, the "god faculty" provides a vague sense that some things in the world violate our intuitive expectations; at worst, it is perniciously theologically misleading, leading to persistent idolatrous ideas about God. That is to say, CSR seems far from congenial to being added to Reformed Epistemology's evidential armoury. Not that Reformed Epistemologists would mind; empirical evidence has never been an essential element of their arsenal[44]. This being so, it might come as a surprise that in their paper on CSR and Reformed Epistemology, Clark and Barrett[45] try to find consilience between at least one expanded version of CSR's standard model and Alvin Plantinga's views on the *sensus divinitatis*. They review three accounts of the "god faculty" that they find in the CSR literature: the Attribution account, the Dispositional account, and the Preparedness account. The first two need not detain us for long. Both the Attribution and Dispositional accounts assert that the relevant perceptual and cognitive mechanisms produce religious beliefs that are either rather vague or significantly context sensitive. That is, they do not reliably produce belief in "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Bible"; they certainly do not produce classical theistic belief. In contrast, Clark and Barrett argue that the Preparedness account "suggests the level of detail, drawing closer to a *sensus dei* than the other two"; this account, they allege, postulates that children are predisposed to "see the natural world as designed by a superpowerful being, one that is also likely to be superperceiving, superknowing and (perhaps) immortal"[46]. In support of this view, they cite empirical research by Deborah Kelemen, Justin Barrett, and others. However, a closer look at this research reveals significant inferential gaps in Clark and Barrett's suggestion, that is, unless they are accus-

---

For Calvin, but not Plantinga, the sensus divinitatis is not a reliable means by which to arrive at the belief in God. See also Paul HELM, "John Calvin, the 'Sensus Divinitatis', and the noetic effects of sin", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998), 87–107.

43 See Jonathan JONG & Aku VISALA, "Three quests for human nature: some philosophical reflections", in *Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences* 1 (2014), 146–171 for a critique of recent philosophical and theological attempts to discuss human nature in biological terms.

44 However, see Dawes and Jong (2012) for an attempt to argue against Reformed Epistemology's contention that the only valid objections to theism are de facto ones. Indeed, Dawes and Jong argue that CSR – or some similar explanatory project – potentially spells bad news for Reformed Epistemology's reliabilist claims.

45 CLARK & BARRETT, Reformed Epistemology (see above, n. 5).

46 Ibid., (see above, n. 5), 182.

ing Plantinga of holding an idolatrous notion of God. Take Deborah Kelemen's now famous study[47], for example. On Clark and Barrett's own account:

> Research by Kelemen and her collaborators has shown that young American and British children (at least) have a tendency to see animals, other living things, and natural non-living objects (such as rocks) as purposefully designed – a phenomenon she has labeled 'promiscuous teleology.' Importantly, children offer and endorse teleological explanations for features of natural objects (e.g., a rock is pointy so that animals will not sit on it and crush it) that cannot simply be explained by appeal to adult instruction.[48]

The accuracy of Clark and Barrett's account is not disputed here, but it is clear that their interpretation is unwarranted. Kelemen's findings – that children readily assign functions to things in the world – is consistent with a myriad of theological views, and it is not at all clear that classical theism can be counted among these. Given these results, we might say that children are intuitive *intelligent design theorists* or intuitive believers in *the universal acid of natural selection*[49] or intuitive *believers in artisanal faeries*[50]. Or, from a different viewpoint, we may say none of these things, as the intuitive belief that natural objects or features thereof are "for" something is only a small part of each other these systems of belief. Indeed, the belief that particular features of natural objects are functional is just empirical adaptationism[51], though the example about the pointy rocks is an extreme example. Not only is this teleological bias only one part of multiple metaphysical views, religious or otherwise, it is arguably *not* a feature of classical theism, or at least not a necessary one. Insofar as classical theism is indebted to Aristotelianism – as it undoubtedly is in Islam and Western Christianity – the purpose of a creature is to flourish in a manner proper to its kind. Certainly, few classical theists would claim that creatures are intended as means to other creatures' ends. While Clark and Barrett only report children's tendency to report "self-survival" functions to natural objects, Kelemen also found that they treated natural objects like artefacts.[52] For example, children said that rocks were pointy "so that animals could scratch them when they got

---

47 Deborah KELEMEN, "Are children intuitive theists? Reasoning about purpose and design in nature", in *Psychological Science* 15 (2004), 295–301.
48 CLARK & BARRETT, Reformed Epistemology (see above, n. 5). 182–183.
49 Perhaps pointy rocks are pointy because all the unpointy rocks have been crushed. There would then be more pointy rocks than unpointy ones, in which case it is not so surprising that any particular rock is pointy.
50 Perhaps faeries like uncrushed rocks, and therefore fashioned some of them to be pointy to avoid them being crushed by animals.
51 Peter GODFREY-SMITH, "Three kinds of adaptationism", in *Adaptationism and Optimality*, ed. by Steven ORZACK & Eliot SOBER (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 335–357.
52 KELEMEN (see above, n. 47), 296.

itchy". This view, of creatures (albeit, in this case, a non-agentic creature) as means to other creatures' ends, would likely make most classical theists morally queasy.

Perhaps more congenial to classical theists is Olivera Petrovich's research, cited in Barrett and Richert's review of the evidence for the Preparedness account.[53] In her 1997 study, Petrovich found that British preschoolers (mean age = 4.3 years) attribute the origins of the natural world (e.g., plant life, animal life, rocks) to God, rather than to people or to an "unknown power"[54]. *Prima facie*, this provides evidence that children intuitively believe in God as creator, much as classical theists do. However, in a later study, Petrovich also found that children of that age already know that people are incapable of creating the natural world; thus, the only two substantive options in her 1997 study are God and an "unknown power".[55] It is thus difficult to rule out the alternative explanation that the children wanted to avoid the "unknown power" option, which is tantamount of saying that they did not know the answer: given children's inclinations to provide answers to questions, the fact that children tended to choose "God" as the correct answer might well be an artefact of a leading question. In any case, we should avoid inferring from this result that four-year-old children are more theologically discerning than the Athenians to whom St Paul spoke on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31), with their altar dedicated to an unknown god.

The other main source of evidence for the Preparedness Account is a body of research on children's intuitions about divine knowledge[56]. For example, Barrett, Richert, and Driesenga found that children who attributed false beliefs to their mothers did not attribute false beliefs to God: rather, they claimed that God, but not their mothers, knew what they themselves knew to be true.[57] This may be taken as evidence for an intuitive belief in divine omniscience (or super-knowledge, which is not quite the same thing), as Barrett and Richert argue.[58] However, such findings can also be taken as evidence for the egocentrism of

---

53 Barrett & Richert (see above, n. 17.)

54 Olivera Petrovich, "Children's understanding of non-natural causality: A case against artificialism," in *Psyche en Geloof* 8 (1997), 151–165.

55 Olivera Petrovich, "Preschool children's understanding of the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial," in *Psychological Reports* 64 (1999), 3–27.

56 There is also some research on children's beliefs about God's immortality, but even advocates of the Preparedness account admit that the evidential value of that research is weak.

57 Justin Barrett & Rebekah Richert & Amanda Driesenga, "God's beliefs versus mother's: The development of nonhuman agent concepts", in *Child Development* 72 (2001), 50–65. For more, see, Nicola Knight & Paulo Sousa & Justin Barrett & Scott Atran, "Children's attributions of belief to humans and God: cross-cultural evidence", in *Cognitive Science* 28 (2004), 117–126.

58 BArrett & Richert (see above, n. 17).

our god-concepts. One reason for preferring this latter interpretation is that at least adults' beliefs about God's psychological states are demonstrably egocentric. Across seven studies, Epley, Converse, Delbosc, Monteleone, and Cacioppo recently found psychological and neuroscientific evidence that people's estimates of God's beliefs are more egocentric than even their estimates of other peoples' beliefs.[59] Far from providing evidence that childrens' conceptions of God are non-anthropomorphic, as Barrett and Richert claim, these findings might suggest that children's conceptions of God are anthropomorphic in a specifically egocentric direction. In response to this criticism, Richert and Barrett have run further studies showing that children attribute true perceptual beliefs to God and to "special agents" (e.g., a fox whom children are told have special hearing powers), even when they themselves are unable to see, hear, or smell the stimuli in question. This, they argue, is evidence against children's theological egocentrism.[60] However, these results can also simply be taken as evidence that children are able to apply culturally transmitted information. When told that a fox can hear better than humans can, children report that the fox can hear what they themselves cannot; *mutatis mutandis*, God. In short, to demonstrate that children's beliefs about God are not hopelessly and incorrigibly egocentric is *not* to show that children are predisposed to believe in an omniscient God. Furthermore, even granting that children are predisposed to attribute true beliefs (and not just *their* beliefs) to God even when they attribute false beliefs to other human beings (e.g., their mothers), such "superknowledge" is not divine omniscience. God is not, in classical theist terms, a being that knows more than our mothers do; God is a being who knows all that is logically possible to know. It is unwarranted to suppose, from these findings, that children are prepared (or even able to) believe in this kind of God. At best, as Calvin opined, children would appear to be natural idolators, whose conceptions of God are pale facsimiles of the real deal, according to classical theists.

As we have seen, the evidence taken in support for the Preparedness account is multiply interpretable. Petrovich's findings might be a product of a methodological artefact and the research reviewed by Kelemen[61] is consistent with a wide variety of religious and quasi-scientific beliefs. While, the research

---

59 Nicholas Epley & Benjamin Converse, et al. "Believers' estimates of God's beliefs are more egocentric than estimates of other people's beliefs", in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106 (2009), 21533–21538.

60 Rebekah Richert & Justin Barrett, "Do you see what I see? Young children's assumptions about God's perceptual abilities", in *International Journal for Psychology of Religion* 15 (2005), 283–295.

61 Kelemen (see above, n. 47).

by Barrett et al. and Knight et al. may suggest theological egocentrism rather than theological correctness among children. If Clark and Barrett[62] are trying to argue that CSR provides evidence that human beings are biased toward having theologically correct beliefs *about* God, they are obviously mistaken. But perhaps a weaker version of their claim can be salvaged. They might say instead that we are biased toward believing that God exists, and not necessarily that we have any other intuitive beliefs about God (e.g., that God's knowledge is infallible, that God is immortal). After all, there is an important distinction between knowing that God exists and knowing what God is, long maintained by classical theists. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas famously thought that while we can know that God exists, "we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not"[63] (ST 2.23). What is it, then, to believe that God exists? For the classical theist, to believe that God exists is to believe that there is an answer, albeit mysterious, to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" And that answer, Thomas Aquinas is fond of saying, is what everyone calls "God". The work reported by Kelemen and Petrovich is thus most relevant to the classical theist stance. But to attribute the origin of the world to "God" as opposed to some human being or an "unknown power" is not quite to believe that the world has a source that may not be counted as part of it; after all, in Petrovich's study, other human beings are viable explanatory alternatives to God. This is not what classical theists mean, when they say that God is the cause of all things. Nor is Kelemen's work really germane to this question; to ask why there is something rather than nothing is not to ask for a functional analysis. "Because God" is the wrong answer to questions about why some rocks are pointy rather than flat. Indeed, if there is child developmental evidence for the naturalness of theistic belief, it would be – as Denys Turner (2002, 35) recognised – in the child's game of *incessantly* asking "why?": "[T]hat for Thomas, is where theology begins, with a question so childish that now it is adult answers which are irrelevant and an impertinence".[64]

VI The tragedy of the classical theist

Cognitive scientists of religion are well aware that the god concepts they study are "theologically incorrect". Despite his work on the alleged naturalness of

---

62 Clark & Barrett, Reformed Epistemology (see above, n. 5)

63 Thomas Aquinas, ST 2.23.

64 Denys Turner, How to be an atheist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

non-anthropomorphic religious beliefs among children, Barrett has elsewhere also shown that adults' intuitive religious beliefs are anthropomorphic, even among those who are explicitly committed to non-anthropomorphic views of God.[65] Likewise, D. Jason Slone's book-length survey catalogues multiple instances of theologically incorrect beliefs and behaviours among even religious experts in multiple traditions.[66] More recently, Robert MacCauley has likened the relationship between folk religious belief and official theologies with that between folk physical, biological, and psychological beliefs and academic scientific theories.[67] In both cases, the latter is more cognitively effortful and requires institutional or cultural support for its maintenance and propagation. Our brains – and thus our minds – did not evolve to cope with the theory of relativity and quantum field theory and superstring theory, but with medium-sized objects for which Newtonian physics are more or less adequate. Similarly, our brains, and thus our minds, did not evolve to interact with a being 'beyond being' who is *ipsum esse subsistens* – a self-subsistent being – but with finite things and finite people, with minds more or less like ours. But to liken God to other agents with which we are more familiar, and to do so *univocally* is, by the lights of the classical theist, nothing short of idolatry.

The tragedy of the classical theologian is precisely that idolatry is easier on the mind than orthodoxy. Powerful humanoid figures that can be appeased or appealed to for this or that practical reason – gods – make much more sense to most people than the God of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim classical theist theological traditions, who cannot be counted among existing things and yet is in all existing things causing them to exist. There is a sense in which we did not need cognitive scientists to tell us this; certainly, theologians have been complaining about idolatry for centuries. But cognitive science has helped to explain why – in cognitive and evolutionary terms – anthropomorphic, egocentric, and teleofunctional beliefs are so appealing to people. The question for theologians is now whether or not these cognitive and evolutionary accounts are consistent with particular religious narratives about human beings' cognitive limitations. Do – as De Cruz and Smedt explore – evolutionary explanations of religious cognition challenge accounts of the noetic effects of sin that include positing a fall from a more epidemically pristine state?[68] Such questions seem

---

65 E.g., Justin Barrett, "Cognitive constraints on Hindu concepts of the divine", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1998), 608–619;

66 Slone (see above, n. 16).

67 McCauley (see above, n. 15).

68 Helen De Cruz & Johann De Smedt, A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

more interesting and fruitful than questions about whether naturalistic explanations of religious belief debunk classical theistic belief or whether recent findings in the cognitive science of religion support the thesis that human beings are predisposed to believe in the God of classical theism? Since, as we have detailed above, the answer in both cases is: they don't.