

Explaining and Explaining Away Religious Belief: Van Till's Criticisms of Barrett

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Abstract *Justin Barrett's consideration of some challenges for religious belief raised by evolutionary and cognitive theories of religion was criticized by Howard Van Till for overstating tensions, mischaracterizing the most important epistemological issues, and proposing a solution that perpetuates war on evolution. We argue that each of these claims is untrue, and is not conducive to dialogue that constructively engages and attempts to resolve tensions between science and religion where they do exist.*

Key words: Cognitive science; Evolution; Religious belief; Theism; Warrant; Intelligent design

Emerging cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion have offered up some fascinating advances in an area long recalcitrant to scientific investigation. Moreover, insofar as these theories attempt to account fully for religious beliefs in terms of the proximal and ultimate causes that generate them, without consideration of the reasons purported to justify them, they also raise profound implications for (and in the view of many, challenges to) belief itself.¹ Recently, the journal *Theology and Science* published the first attempt to engage these issues by a leading figure in the cognitive science of religion, Justin Barrett,² as well as a thoughtful, critical reply by Howard Van Till.³ Because this heretofore under-attended topic is so crucial to the relationship between science and religion, and also so vulnerable to polarization, we think it is important—as the proverbial elephant pokes its trunk out of the closet—to clarify several issues of confusion that stand to influence further conversation.

First, at numerous points in his essay, Van Till accuses Barrett of arguing against “straw men” and overstating or even inflaming conflict when none need exist. However, the fact that conflict need not exist does not mean that none *does* exist. Van Till's criticism seems to blame the messenger, and misunderstand the message, which employed the rhetoric of irony. In his essay Barrett simply acknowledges, without endorsing, an important and widely perceived conflict—in order to mitigate it. As an example of Van Till's concern, in response to Barrett's locating recent issues on the broader landscape of undeniable if regrettable

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historical tensions between theism and Darwinism, Van Till confesses he has “grown extremely weary” of conflating Darwinism with atheism, as promoted by “religiously energized anti-evolution movements” that have “declared war” on biological evolution. We have all grown weary of the war; but ending it requires, first, recognizing the contributions of both false extremes rather than vilifying one, and second, distinguishing between perceived and real conflicts.⁴

More specifically, Van Till criticizes Barrett’s depiction of arguments that aim to discount the warrant for theism, based on the claim that evolved cognitive mechanisms render us credulous and error-prone, especially in the domain of religious belief:

[N]umerous word choices [by Barrett] ensure that it will elicit a hostile reaction from theists... Referring to theists as “credulous recipients” of theistic beliefs is clearly not designed to encourage a constructive conversation. Neither is the term “discounted” likely to evoke a sympathetic hearing or mutual respect.⁵

True indeed; such claims are not sympathetically intended. But these are not Barrett’s hyperbolic word choices. In fact, these depictions represent a generously attenuated version of numerous *actual* claims made by prominent figures in cognitive and evolutionary sciences, representing the major memetic, adaptationist, and spandrel approaches to religion.⁶ Richard Dawkins’ theory of religion as a “virus of the mind” explicitly posits uncritical credulity as the factor that allows infection by the faith disease against the defenses of evidence.⁷ David Wilson’s much more gracious, but no less challenging, adaptationist proposal is that religion may function as a useful fiction, involving the embodiment of practical value in a “symbolic belief system that departs from factual reality.”⁸ Jesse Bering claims “the data suggest that God is actually just a psychological blemish etched onto the core cognitive substrate of your brain,”⁹ and provocatively (if playfully) asserts: “We’ve got God by the throat, and I’m not going to stop until one of us is dead.”¹⁰ Nothing is gained by ignoring these claims; less is gained by criticizing one who, like Barrett, describes them in an effort to explain why they are either false or far from decisive. Indeed, the question that Bering raises deserves a response: should you “still believe if you knew God were a byproduct of your evolved mental architecture?”¹¹

Second, a major aspect of Van Till’s criticism fails to consider the epistemological warrant of some kinds of non-reflective beliefs which, at least in several prominent accounts,¹² constitute the foundational bedrock of justified belief. In Barrett’s essay, he discusses the following worry. If supernatural belief arises in large measure by the working of the cognitive tool aimed at agency detection (our so-called “hyper-sensitive agency detection device,” or HADD), and, as seems to be the case, this tool has a tendency to generate false positive beliefs, then religious belief springs from a cognitive tool that is unreliable. This would seem to undercut the justification for religious belief, since beliefs resulting from unreliable mechanisms should not, absent further evidence, be trusted.

In his reply, Van Till sets aside this worry, arguing that the more important issue is whether or not the reliability of HADD when it comes to detecting *natural*

agents confers justification on the beliefs it triggers concerning *supernatural agents*. Van Till puts the worry as follows:

But the more pertinent and difficult question on the table is this: When we do the deliberate reflection on and evaluation of our HADD-generated non-reflective belief in God, is there sufficient warrant to support our raising that intuition to the level of reflective belief? Knowing how our cognitive mental tools operate does not necessarily weaken belief in God, but it certainly ought to alert us to the need to warrant that belief with something far more convincing than a simple assertion or the unthinking adoption of one's tribal tradition.¹³

Van Till seems here to assume that in order for us to justifiably elevate an unreflectively generated belief (that there is an agent present, for example) to full-fledged reflective belief, we must have some sort of *additional* evidence or argument that licenses the move. But this is mistaken, at least on a number of widely adopted epistemological accounts. One thing that foundationalists emphasize is that not every belief can be justified by appeal to other beliefs. As a result, some beliefs are bedrock in the sense that we are justified in holding them even in the absence of supporting arguments or evidence. The beliefs that there are other minds, or that there is a mind-independent material world, serve as good examples. Given all the empirical data available to us, there is no better reason to believe these claims than to believe their denials. And yet we do believe them, believing them is justified, and those justified beliefs provide the foundation for our other justified beliefs.

This is important (and relevant here) because it shows how, in many cases at least, there is neither need for nor availability of additional evidence or argument (which Van Till calls for) to reflectively endorse beliefs that start out their epistemological life as non-reflective beliefs. As with belief in a material world and belief in other minds, belief in supernatural agency *might* well count as a properly basic belief—one we are entitled to hold simply in virtue of its having arisen in us spontaneously.

But it is also worth noting that, while the worry Van Till raises need not be a serious concern for some religious epistemologies, the one that Barrett raises (but that Van Till bypasses) *is* a concern that demands further discussion. That worry is the one which arises in light of the claim that religious belief is generated at least in part through the workings of the (false positive-generating) HADD. Does the unreliability of the mechanism impugn the religious beliefs it spawns? If not, why not? There are a number of possible avenues of reply available here: perhaps HADD is not as deeply implicated in the formation of religious belief as some suppose; perhaps it is only unreliable in certain domains not associated with religious belief formation; etc.¹⁴ In any case, the issue Barrett raises is worth attending to.

Finally, Van Till takes vigorous issue with Barrett's own reply to this concern and with his attempt to reconcile a naturalistic causal account of religious belief-forming mechanisms with their epistemic reliability—making the strong claim that it is “straight from the rhetoric of the Intelligent Design movement.”¹⁵ What exactly is the source of Van Till's worry? Barrett claims (contra Bering, cited

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above) that cognitive mechanisms rooted in innate biological dispositions could be truth-tracking if:

- (1) The initial conditions that gave rise to these cognitive mechanisms were fine-tuned in a way so as to insure their reliability, and/or
- (2) God subsequently influenced the processes of mutation or selection that generated these cognitive mechanisms to insure their reliability.

Van Till raises three objections to this conjunctive proposal, each of which entails problems. His first claim is that options 1 and 2 are inconsonant because fine-tuning—his (and our) preferred option—involves “the provision, at time zero, of whatever would eventually be required for the evolution of cosmic structures without need for irruptive, form-conferring interventions in the course of time. That’s what cosmic fine-tuning accomplishes.”¹⁶

But that is not what fine-tuning accomplishes. Although there is some ambiguity in how the concept has been employed,¹⁷ the most widely held understanding of fine-tuning merely refers to the remarkable but empirically demonstrable precision of necessary (as distinct from hypothetically sufficient) conditions for a life-hospitable cosmos. If the various cosmic constants were any different, life would be impossible. But the constants being what they are does not constitute conditions or provide an explanation sufficient either for life’s emergence or for its trajectory. This does not mean that no such explanation will be forthcoming. But confidence that it will be is not underwritten by current evidence of fine-tuning. Van Till here conflates empirical observations of fine-tuning with his own widely discussed metaphysical proposal for the “robust formational economy” of the cosmos.¹⁸ Either option purchases Barrett the epistemic warrant he seeks.

Second, Van Till claims that Barrett’s “references to supernaturally generated mutations . . . imply that certain episodes of supernatural intervention may have been essential to the formation of humans.”¹⁹ This is an important point because “it is episodic creationism—with its inclination to reduce the concept of divine creative action to episodes of irruptive, form-imposing, supernatural intervention—that has declared war on the acceptability and/or adequacy of biological evolution.”²⁰ But this is not at all what Barrett proposes. In fact, Barrett does not specify *any* mode of supernatural influence or divine action at work here, and explicitly indicates he must “leave the details and the coherence of such a theology up the individual theist.” While we ourselves have argued against a range of such proposals,²¹ the fact is that there are many accounts of divine influence that do not involve miraculous intervention in or supernatural abridgements of laws.²² Indeed, the founding editor of this journal has specifically proposed an account for divine influence on genetic mutations²³ that both fully respects the integrity of natural regularities, and is concordant with the second option described by Barrett.

Third, Van Till claims that Barrett’s “hybrid mechanism” of natural processes “episodically punctuated by a series of conjectured but empirically invisible supernatural interventions is straight from the rhetoric of the Intelligent Design movement, a movement whose claims I have evaluated for more than fifteen

years."²⁴ This is a regrettable criticism. For one thing, it utilizes the very kind of inflammatory *ad hominem* that Van Till (mistakenly) ascribes to Barrett, and is not likely to foster the constructive conversation he claims to seek. But beyond this, Van Till's point is actually incorrect. Intelligent Design (ID) emphatically *rejects* the empirically invisible, in favor of the crucial claim that the world has "clear, empirically detectable marks of being intelligently caused."²⁵ ID's central emphasis on the empirical detectability of God's agency involves asserting the demonstrable incongruity of merely natural processes and the observed features of nature, eschewing the alternative as "God [being] a master stealth who constantly eludes our best efforts to detect him empirically."²⁶ This pitting of theistic belief against naturalistic explanations is nothing like what Barrett proposes in his technical work or in this essay. If we are to cultivate the mutual respect that Van Till is concerned about Barrett subverting, it will be necessary to avoid both the *ad hominem* ascription of views to others that they do not advocate and the polarizing claim that any notion of divine influence on or interaction with the world is irreconcilable with the enterprise of science and is at war with the empirically funded truths of evolution.

Endnotes

- 1 Reviewed in Jeffrey P. Schloss, "Evolutionary Theories of Religion: Science Set Free or Naturalism Run Wild?," in *The Praying Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives on the Origin of Religion*, eds. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–25.
- 2 Justin L. Barrett, "Is the Spell Really Broken?," *Theology and Science* 5:1 (2007): 57–72.
- 3 Howard J. Van Till, "How Firm a Foundation? A Response to Justin L. Barrett's 'Is the Spell Really Broken?'," *Theology and Science* 6:3 (2008): 341–349.
- 4 Attributing primarily to creationists, the conflation of Darwinism with atheism, along with the conflict that ensues from this conflation, not only exacerbates their defensiveness but also is simply untrue. Daniel Dennett claims that "evolutionists who see no conflict between evolution and their religious beliefs have been careful not to look as closely as we have been looking" (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996], 310). Andrew Whiten asserts that "once you have grasped the contemporary understanding of evolutionary biology at its deepest, it seems religious belief is virtually impossible" ("Still Chewing On Live Caterpillars," *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 1617 [2003]: 27). Jerry Coyne claims that suggesting evolution is compatible with theism "is like saying that marriage and adultery are compatible because some married people are adulterers" and compares claims of intellectual compatibility to "the logic of an argument touting the compatibility of smoking with a healthy lifestyle" ("Science vs. Theism: a debate with Kenneth Miller. Part II: Out of context," *Why Evolution is True*, blog, available from <http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2009/06/17/science-vs-theism-a-debate-with-kenneth-miller-part-ii-out-of-context/>, accessed July 2, 2009). The fact that there is no end of such assertions—not by paranoid creationists, but by prominent philosophers and evolutionary biologists—does not make the claim credible, but it does make it influential and if not deserving, at least needful, of thoughtful engagement. Moreover, some claims of tension that Barrett identifies are credible.
- 5 Van Till, "Firm a Foundation," 344.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 1.

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- 7 Richard Dawkins, "Viruses of the Mind," in *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, ed. Bo Dalhborn (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 13–27.
- 8 David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 229.
- 9 Jesse Bering, "Is Religion Adaptive? It's Complicated," *Bering in Mind*, January 19, 2009, *Scientific American* blog, available from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=is-religion-adaptive>, accessed February 15, 2009.
- 10 Jesse Bering, quoted in Julia Reischel, "The God Fossil," *New Times News*, March 9, 2006, (available from <http://www.browardpalmbeach.com/2006-03-09/news/the-god-fossil/full>, accessed September 17, 2009): "Most Americans who accept evolution think God created it. These scientists think they can prove the opposite."
- 11 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 12 William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000).
- 13 Van Till, "Firm a Foundation," 346.
- 14 Michael J. Murray, "Four Arguments that the Cognitive Psychology of Religion Undermines the Justification of Religious Belief," in *Evolution of Religion: Studies, Theories, and Critiques*, eds. Richard Sosis and Joseph Bubulia (Santa Margarita: Collins Foundation, 2007), 394–398; Michael J. Murray, "Scientific Explanations of Religion and the Justification of Religions Belief," in *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on Evolutionary Explanations of Religion*, eds. Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168–178.
- 15 Van Till, "Firm a Foundation," 348.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 347.
- 17 Neil Manson, "There Is No Adequate Definition of 'Fine-Tuned for Life,'" *Inquiry* 43 (2000): 341–352.
- 18 Howard J. Van Till, "The Creation: Intelligently Designed or Optimally Equipped," in *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Robert Pennock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 487–512.
- 19 Van Till, "Firm a Foundation," 347.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 341.
- 21 Michael J. Murray, "Natural Providence (or Design Trouble)," *Faith and Philosophy* 20:2 (2003): 307–327; Michael J. Murray, "Natural Providence: Reply to Dembski," *Faith and Philosophy*, 23:3 (2006): 337–41; Jeffrey P. Schloss, "Evolutionary Theory and Religious Belief," in *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 187–206; Jeffrey P. Schloss, "Divine Providence and the Question of Evolutionary Directionality," in *Back to Darwin: A Richer Account of Evolution*, ed. John Cobb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 330–350.
- 22 John C. Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2005); Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and William R. Stoeger S.J., eds., *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications and Berkeley: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, distributed in the U.S. by University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).
- 23 Robert John Russell. "Special Providence and Genetic Mutation: A New Defense of Theistic Evolution," in *Evolution and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger S.J. and Francisco J. Ayala (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications and Berkeley: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, distributed in the U.S. by University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).
- 24 Van Till, "Firm a Foundation," 348.
- 25 William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 110.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 110.

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