




Theism And Cognitive Science of Religion: Compatibility or Incompatibility

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Abstract



From the beginning of the 21st century, a new field of cognitive science called "cognitive science of religion" (CSR) has attracted the attention of many scholars. Researchers in this branch seek to explore cognitive mechanisms that produce or reinforce religious beliefs in man. Theories and empirical evidence of CSR have led to many philosophical and theological questions. One of the most important questions is whether these findings show that belief in the existence of God is unjustified. Some philosophers respond positively to this question. They believe that the cognitive mechanisms studied in this area are a threat to the belief in God. Their reasons for this are largely based on the fact that these mechanisms are prone to substantial error, and the insensitivity of these mechanisms in relation to truth. Our aim in this paper is to show that none of the above reasons can show that religious beliefs are unjustified, especially belief in God. Our argument in this regard is based on the fact that natural and supernatural explanations are not mutually exclusive, and the fundamental limitation of cognitive mechanisms.

Keywords

Cognitive Science of Religion, Theism, Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device, Natural, Supernatural.

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1. Introduction

CSR has led many philosophical and theological questions. One of the most important questions is: "Are the CSR's theories and evidences in conflict with the belief in God's existence?" This is a question that we are going to examine in this paper. Accordingly, we first introduce the main cognitive mechanisms that contribute to the formation or strengthening of belief in God. Then we formulate arguments that claim theism is unwarranted, and analyze and critique them.

2. Belief In God

There are various suggestions for explaining different aspects of religion as cognitive desires. But in terms of belief in God, the approach that has attracted the most attention is that belief in supernatural entities comes from a mental tool that is known as "Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device" (HADD). HADD allows us to consider the presence of agents in our environment, even if we do not observe those agents. From CSR's point of view, HADD has a fundamental role in our belief in supernatural essences (especially God).

3. Do Csr Findings Threaten Theism?

Some philosophers attempt to perceive CSR theories and evidence as arguments against theism. We categorize such arguments against theism in two groups, and examine each one separately.

3. 1. Debunking arguments against theism

These forms of arguments are based on HADD's error prone. The form of argument is:

- a) HADD plays an essential role in the formation of belief in God.
- b) HADD is susceptible to fundamental errors.
- c) Belief in God is unwarranted.

This form of argument faces two fundamental challenges:

1. Premise (a) is based on the assumption that HADD and other mental tools can explain the natural causes of the formation of religious beliefs, including the belief in God's existence in us. But in this hypothesis, there is a significant skepticism. What HADD proposes is that humans are prone to believe in supernatural agents. This mechanism cannot explain why a person has a certain religious belief.

2. In addition, CSR researchers have always emphasized that their attempt to find the natural causes of religious beliefs is not a "monopolistic" position on the originality of such beliefs. In other words, it is not that religious beliefs are formed solely on the basis of natural causes and there is no another cause that is instrumental in the formation of religious beliefs.

3. 2. Attenuating arguments against theism

These categories of arguments can be formulated as follows:

- a) The CSR shows that the cognitive mechanisms of our evolved minds give us the greatest tendency to believe in God.
- b) These mechanisms are prone to error, and therefore we cannot trust them in helping us reach the truth.
- c) Since we cannot rely on these mental tools to reach the truth, we also cannot rely on our motives for believing in God.
- d) As a result, the CSR attenuates belief in God.

Regarding this argument, in addition to the preceding points, there are two fundamental points that the defenders of this argument have not paid attention to:

1. From the CSR perspective, HADD is also responsible for some of our other beliefs. Now, if this mental tool does not produce any reliable beliefs due to its unreliability, it will include all its output beliefs.
2. The defenders of the above argument have neglected the role of other mental tools in formation of our beliefs. In the process of forming, reinforcing and spreading of a belief, various cognitive mechanisms and tools are involved. These tools can reveal HADD errors to us.

Conclusion

CSR researchers seek to discover cognitive mechanisms that produce or reinforce religious beliefs in man. From their point of view, HADD has the greatest role in shaping and strengthening our belief in God. The defenders of the debunking and attenuating arguments believe that the cognitive mechanisms studied in this area are a threat to belief in God. In this paper, we show that their arguments face fundamental challenges.

Main References

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