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# Responding to Debunking Arguments

## *A Reply to Lari Launonen's Critique*

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### Abstract

In this response article, I argue that Launonen's criticisms either are beyond the scope of my argument in chapter 5 of *Arguing from Cognitive Science of Religion* or wrongfully presume that evolutionary explanations exhaustively explain religious beliefs. I also criticize Launonen's claim that arguments in terms of divine design are preferable to arguments in terms of truth-tracking cognitive mechanisms.

### Keywords

religious epistemology – debunking arguments – cognitive science of religion – justification of religious belief

### 1 Introduction

Commonsense discussions on religious belief often involve hand-waving claims that religious belief has been shown to be a mere fabrication of the brain or the result of psychological (mass) delusions. Many of those claims are without a proper basis in science or refer to discarded scientific theories. For example, some claims rely on Freudian ideas of existential fear or Feuerbachian ideas of wish fulfillment (e.g., Nola 2013). Some also refer to neuroscientific theories about microseizures in the brain (cf. Persinger 1983). All of these theories are either highly controversial or discarded by a majority of experts (see Van Eyghen 2020, chapter 6).

One of the great gifts of new cognitive and evolutionary theories of religious beliefs to philosophy of religion is that they have rekindled the academic debate on the epistemic import of theories that explain religious belief. According to defenders of debunking arguments, new theories provide a solid empirical basis to deny the justification or rationality of religious beliefs. Opponents argue that the new theories provide no such basis.

Like myself, Lari Launonen firmly considers himself part of the second camp. His overall gist is that new theories come nowhere near to debunking religious belief, and he suggests elsewhere that the odds of them ever being able to are bleak (see Launonen 2021). My position throughout *Arguing from Cognitive Science of Religion: Is Religious Belief Debunked?* is less firm. While I argue that current theories do not allow strong conclusions, new and improved theories could potentially have far-reaching ramifications for the epistemic status of religious belief (see below).

Though Launonen and I are generally critical of existing debunking arguments, Launonen finds the force of some of my counterarguments wanting. His criticisms focus on two arguments I made in chapter 5 of my book (Van Eyghen 2020). Below, I respond to these criticisms. But before I do so, I briefly revisit what I take to be the strongest debunking argument (the misattribution argument) and its connections to the arguments discussed by Launonen (the Milvian bridge argument and the argument from false beliefs).

## 2 Debunking and Information Processing

Before responding to Launonen's arguments, I begin with putting the arguments he discusses in the broader discussion on debunking arguments. In an important sense, cognitive science is the science of human information processing. Cognitive scientists study how human minds process sensory or other input and form beliefs accordingly.<sup>1</sup> Debunking arguments argue that information processing goes astray and evidence thereof renders some beliefs unjustified.<sup>2</sup>

1 Cognitive scientists also investigate how information processing manifests in behavior. Given how the discussion focuses on potential debunking of religious *beliefs*, this is less often discussed in the debate. A noteworthy exception is De Cruz (2018).

2 Not all debunking arguments or responses are framed in terms of justification. Some use other epistemic qualities, like rationality. For the remainder of this paper, I will use the term *justification*. The term can be replaced without loss of meaning.

Because of their shared focus on information processing, cognitive science is of obvious concern for debunking arguments. Although cognitive science is descriptive whereas debunking arguments are normative, ample examples are available to show the relevance of descriptive knowledge on information processing for normative conclusions. For example, studies strongly suggest that humans suffer from an in-group bias, making them more accepting of testimony from the in-group and reluctant to accept testimony from the out-group (e.g., Forgas and Baumeister 2019). Second, cognitive science has identified recurring situations where subjects are prone to misidentifying information. A famous example is experiments wherein subjects come to believe that a fake rubber hand is their own (Ehrsson, Holmes, and Passingham 2005).

Solid data that a class of beliefs was formed after misidentifying information strongly support the normative conclusion that these beliefs are epistemically deficient. A number of authors apply this line of reasoning to religious beliefs (most notably Nola 2013, 2018; Galen 2017; Law 2018). They argue that recent cognitive and evolutionary theories show that many religious beliefs stem from recurrent misidentifications of sensory input information in some situations. Because of species-wide biases, many humans would suffer from these misidentifications and end up with shared religious beliefs.

The key claim in misattribution arguments against religious belief is that human minds are prone to misidentifying natural phenomena as supernatural. Human minds are thus prone to making mistakes. Defenders of misattribution arguments draw support from cognitive theories. For example, Stewart Guthrie (1993) argues that (some) religious beliefs result from false positives in the detection of agents. Given that (some) religious beliefs result from a mistaken processing of information, they are not up to epistemic standards.

In *Arguing from Cognitive Science of Religion*, I argue that the case for misattribution is underdetermined, since most CSR theories focus on the internal processing of information within the human mind and less on the sensory input (Van Eyghen 2020, section 5.7). Although I argue that misattribution likely poses the greatest threat and could benefit more from advancements in cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion, Launonen focuses instead on two other arguments—the argument from false beliefs and the Milvian bridge argument. A strong case can be made that these boil down to misattribution arguments in an indirect way.

Defenders of the argument from false beliefs argue that the mechanisms responsible for religious belief are unreliable because they produce a vast array of beliefs many of which are clearly false (cf. Braddock 2016). Defenders of the Milvian bridge argument argue that the lack of connection between

evolutionary success and truth calls into doubt whether mechanisms for religious belief are reliable (Wilkins and Griffiths 2013). Both arguments can be construed as indirect misattribution arguments. The argument from false beliefs claims that religious mechanisms identify similar sensory input in widely diverging ways, most importantly as finite supernatural being and infinite supernatural being or as God and nontheistic supernatural being.<sup>3</sup> It thereby appears to argue that many of the attributions by cognitive mechanisms are false. Defenders of the Milvian bridge argument argue that the mechanisms producing religious beliefs probably did not evolve because they provide accurate representations of the environment. The dominant evolutionary theories state that a disposition for religious beliefs evolved to foster cooperation or other fitness-enhancing practices. The defenders thereby suggest that religious mechanisms probably do not provide accurate representations. Since they did not evolve for this purpose, chances are rather slim that they do provide accurate representations, and religious beliefs likely result from misattributions.<sup>4</sup>

Defenders of both arguments do not make specific connections to processing of sensory input. Instead, they focus on the more distal cause of misattribution (natural selection for other purposes) or the effects or signs of misattribution (divergent and clearly false outputs).

There thus appears to be a link between both kinds of arguments discussed by Launonen. Defenders of the argument from false beliefs argue that the mechanisms responsible for religious belief are error-prone because they have many false outputs. Defenders of the Milvian bridge argument claim that the mechanisms are very likely error-prone because they were selected for different purposes. Bearing in mind this connection, we now turn to my replies and Launonen's criticisms.

### 3 Replying to Launonen's Criticism

In his critique, Launonen zooms in on two debunking arguments and my replies. In this section, I explain why I find Launonen's criticisms unconvincing.

3 I argued that the mechanisms discussed by cognitive theories claim that the mechanisms merely produce vague beliefs in supernatural beings. Classifying them as finite or infinite requires moving beyond what cognitive mechanisms produce (Van Eyghen 2020, chapter 5).

4 The argument reminds one of Sharon Street's (2006) debunking argument against moral realism. She argues that, given that our moral dispositions were likely selected for other reasons than truth-tracking (kin selection, tit for that), chances are very low that they track true moral facts of the matter.

I also critically discuss Launonen's suggestion that defenses that refer to divine design are more convincing than defenses in terms of the inner workings of cognitive mechanisms.

Launonen distinguishes five responsive strategies to establish the reliability of any belief-forming process. His overview is apt and reflects various ways in which responses against debunking arguments have been formulated. These five strategies present ways in which any mechanism can be shown to identify sensory information in a correct way.

I discussed strategy (C), reliability based on independent reasons and evidence, at length in my book (Van Eyghen 2020, section 5.3). I argue that while the reply has merits, it is probably of a (very) limited scope and would not aid many believers in deflecting debunking arguments. This fact alone is sufficient reason to look for alternative replies.

As Launonen notes, my reply to the argument from false beliefs consists in pointing to other cognitive faculties or cultural factors—Launonen's strategy (B). He finds it strange that I do not provide a full-fledged argument for the reliability of cultural factors. I explicitly refrained from doing so. In chapter 5, I write:

Whereas factors like culture or upbringing can correct false god-beliefs, they can also lead people astray. The factors can thus be both a source of epistemic good and of epistemic bad. I certainly cannot shed light on when these factors are a benevolent influence and when they are malevolent in this chapter and I doubt whether sufficient and necessary conditions for doing so can be found at all. I merely note that in both cases extra input on top of the CSR mechanisms can defeat unreliability arguments and this suffices for now.

VAN EYGHEN 2020, 92

Launonen goes on to present his own defense of *Christian* testimony. The argument relies heavily on (externally available) evidence for the resurrection and the primacy of exclusively Christian sources of epistemic good. My overall focus in chapter 5 (and in the book more generally) is not so much a defense of specifically Christian religious belief as a general assessment of arguments that draw on recent cognitive explanations of religious belief. It is clear from both our discussions that the argument from false beliefs has very limited ramifications if some kind of cultural input is taken on board. Cultural input can help subjects avoid misattributions and identify sensory information in the right way.

A fully fleshed out defense of the reliability of cultural factors (whether general or Christian) is far beyond the scope of my book. As a result, Launonen's argument is compatible with my response to the argument from false beliefs and can serve as a useful addition in defense of specifically Christian beliefs. His argument presents a plausible way in which testimonial chains can help human information processing and thereby help humans to avoid false beliefs.

Against the Milvian bridge argument, I argued that religious mechanisms could have been selected for their accuracy because having true religious beliefs could very likely have led to better odds of survival. Considering that true religious beliefs contribute to flourishing, correct attributions of supernatural beings can increase fitness. As Launonen notes, I developed the argument in greater detail elsewhere after the book was published (see Van Eyghen and Bennett 2022). Launonen accurately summarizes my reply as follows: (1) belief in God causes one to seek engagement with God, (2) engagement with God causes sanctification, (3) sanctification produces flourishing, and (4) flourishing enhances evolutionary success.

Launonen goes on to raise problems against each step. Against (1), he argues that theistic belief might not have been available for our distant ancestors, preventing them from engaging with God. Against (2), he argues that prayer does not always increase moral behavior (assuming that engaging with God means prayer). Against (3), he argues that sanctification easily leads to less preoccupation with the satisfaction of desires for sensory gratification. This in turn leads to *lower* evolutionary success because it would lead to having less sex. Against (4), he argues that belief in God can indeed cause flourishing but such belief may also cause flourishing if it is not true.<sup>5</sup>

In voicing his argument against (4), Launonen accepts that religious belief can and indeed does increase flourishing in a significant number of cases. Though a link between flourishing or well-being and evolutionary success might not be necessary, it seems quite plausible that in most cases, increased flourishing has a beneficial impact on longevity and health.<sup>6</sup> Launonen's arguments against (1) to (3) may give reason to think that religious beliefs are a far from perfect guide toward increased flourishing or that their effects are easily stifled by other factors. This, however, need not prevent that their impact

5 This last point of criticism is also voiced by Christopher Bennett (Van Eyghen and Bennett 2022) and Halvor Kvandal (2021).

6 The link between sanctification and flourishing thus lies in an impact on longevity and health and not so much in the willingness to have sex, as Launonen argues. While willingness to have sex is a major factor on fitness, the large costs involved in raising children requires healthy caregivers that are around long enough to raise children into adulthood.

was sufficient to be selected for by natural selection. Given that Launonen acknowledges that his arguments against (1) to (3) do not undermine my core claim—true religious belief (often) leads to more evolutionary success—and that a full assessment of all claims would require more space than is available here, I will focus on Launonen's argument against (4) for the remainder of this section.

As a defense of (4), I begin by noting that many evolutionary explanations are not exhaustive. Often, a given trait can serve multiple fitness-enhancing functions. An evolutionary explanation for religious belief may show that religious beliefs serve increased cooperation (Johnson 2015), sexual attraction (Van Slyke and Szocik 2020), or some other evolutionary purpose, but this does not show that this is the *only* evolutionary purpose for which religious belief was selected. By way of comparison, Robert Dunbar (1993) suggests that human language evolved as an alternative to grooming, thereby increasing the number of individuals with which humans can enter social relations. This clearly does not imply that the social role of language is its only evolutionary use. Language obviously contributes to the exchange of (evolutionarily useful) information. While language may have evolved without this latter use (as Dunbar suggests), this use is clearly present. The additional evolutionary function of human language likely had an impact on various features of human language—especially its semantic content. One can therefore claim that Dunbar's evolutionary explanation of language is not exhaustive.

I argue for something similar concerning religious beliefs. While I do not deny that religious beliefs may have an evolutionary use unrelated to their truth, truth can give some religious beliefs an extra evolutionary benefit. Having true beliefs concerning supernatural beings allows humans to successfully engage with them.<sup>7</sup> Engagement may take the form of prayer but also of offerings or other means of interaction. Successful engagement with supernatural beings would increase flourishing more than illusory engagement, in much the same way as successful engagement with fellow humans leads to more flourishing. There are ample examples of humans engaging in illusory relations with other humans. Young children have imaginary friends, and people suffering from psychoses sometimes hear illusory voices. While some of these illusory

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7 Subjects do not need to conceptualize supernatural beings as creators to successfully engage with them, as Launonen suggests. This evades the charge that our distant ancestors did not have full-blown theistic belief. Vague concepts of supernatural beings could have sufficed. My argument is also not confined to theistic belief, since successfully engaging with nontheistic supernatural beings like demons, spirits, or angels could also have been beneficial.



relations are coping mechanisms that allow humans to deal with trauma, most of these are not nearly as beneficial as true human relations.<sup>8</sup>

Pointing to alternative fitness-enhancing reasons why religious belief was selected for only poses a problem if (i) the alternative evolutionary explanation exhaustively explains religious beliefs and their most salient features and (ii) the evolutionary explanation is preferable to an evolutionary explanation that refers to truth. Explaining (i) and (ii) in greater detail lies beyond the scope of this paper. As to (i), I merely note here that recent evolutionary explanations for religious belief focus on a few aspects of belief in God—namely, belief in God’s moralizing nature or God’s commandments concerning sexual behavior—that are rather limited and not present in all religious traditions. Both explanations explain why God is perceived as moral rule giver and enforcer (in the domain of sexuality or broader), but they don’t explain various other beliefs and practices. For example, they have a hard time accounting for why subjects find support in God.<sup>9</sup>

Like he did for the argument from false beliefs, Launonen advances his own alternative counterargument against the Milvian bridge argument. He argues—as do others in the debate (e.g., Jong 2012)—that a designing God could have made sure that humans develop the right cognitive faculties to engage with him. A reply like this denies that the genesis of religious mechanisms is due to random natural selection. If what I argue makes sense, there is no need for specific design. If there is a God (or any supernatural being) and engaging with God has some benefit for survival, the odds increase that natural selection will select for faculties that can successfully pick up signals from God and allow for continued interaction. An account that relies more on random mutation and natural selection can better account for why religious mechanisms do not always appear to be finely tuned and can sometimes lead people astray. It can also better explain why religious cognition appears to suffer from intrusions of anthropomorphism (Guthrie 2007) or anxiety (Jong and Halberstadt 2016).

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8 The comparison may also serve to deflect Launonen’s argument against (2). Not all true relations with humans produce flourishing, but most do. Similarly, not all true engagement with supernatural beings produces sanctification, but most often it will.

9 A possible rejoinder is that evolutionary explanations provide the raw material (belief in moralizing gods) the human psyche builds on and adds additional features to. On this line of reasoning, additional features—like finding support in God—are due to a general human tendency to confabulate. To my knowledge, no such explanation has been defended at length. Therefore, while such an account may explain religious beliefs more exhaustively, it is on far less solid empirical footing, and the problem of hand-waving returns (see section 1).

#### 4 Plausible versus Possible Milvian Bridges

In his concluding remarks, Launonen cedes that I have shown the possibility of there being a Milvian bridge for religious belief. However, he adds another point of criticism, arguing that the bridge is only solid if one accepts the existence of God.<sup>10</sup> My argument could suffice as a defense of showing a *possible* way in which religious faculties could be truth-tracking if there is a God—and not just any God, but a God with whom humans can engage.<sup>11</sup> My argument would not show a *plausible* way but merely a *possible* way.

I end with arguing that matters are not as straightforward as Launonen presents them. One could rightly argue that John Wilkins and Paul Griffiths's original Milvian bridge argument in favor of commonsense physical beliefs (Wilkins and Griffiths 2013) is only plausible if there is in fact a physical world that we navigate. If humans lived in a void, faculties that produce beliefs about a physical environment would not be evolutionarily beneficial.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, faculties that produce beliefs about fellow humans are not beneficial in a *Last Man on Earth* scenario because there are no fellow humans with whom to engage.

Since actual engagements with God are impossible if there is no God, religious beliefs obviously cannot increase fitness because they reflect truths in such a scenario. However, claiming that my Milvian bridge is presupposing the existence of God and therefore not solid is not apt. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2016) argues that one can come to know God through liturgy. By performing certain acts, one can enter into a reciprocal relation with God and thereby come to know God in a personal way. Similarly, one can come to know the physical environment and one's fellow humans by going out and performing certain actions that allow for contact with that environment or those humans. To do so, one need not have accepted their existence beforehand. It suffices to start out with a working hypothesis or vague idea that there might be something out there. Continued contact or engagement can foster justified beliefs about the physical environment or one's fellow humans.

Therefore, in some sense, *any* Milvian bridge argument presupposes that cognitive faculties are bridges to something on the other side—be it a

10 As Launonen notes, Christopher Bennett makes the same claim, though Bennett draws more-negative conclusions than Launonen (Van Eyghen and Bennett 2022).

11 I thank Launonen for this suggestion.

12 There could be an alternative evolutionary account that does not refer to the actual existence of the physical environment. For example, beliefs about a physical environment could provide people with a sense of meaning and purpose. Such an account would remain possible if humans lived in a void.

physical environment, fellow humans, or God. One need not, however, have clear beliefs—let alone justified beliefs—about what that other side is like from the outset. Cognitive faculties can be judged as reliable if contact with their presumed objects has certain practical effects. These effects can serve as evidence for the existence of those presumed objects. I can regard my beliefs about the physical environment as justified because my beliefs allow me to avoid objects and find resources. Similarly, I can regard my beliefs about God or other supernatural beings as justified because reciprocal engagement allows me to flourish.

Wilkins and Griffiths (and Launonen) could insist that there is a fundamental difference between beliefs about the environment and beliefs about supernatural beings. They could argue that there is ample independent evidence for the existence of the physical environment or that our perceptual faculties provide much better evidence for a physical environment than for supernatural beings. The existence of the physical environment (and various features thereof) is confirmed by scientific experimentation and, perhaps, philosophical arguments.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, erring in beliefs about the physical environment has far greater effects on our odds of survival, and therefore, our ability to successfully navigate our environments constitutes stronger evidence. To this, one can reply that arguments for an external world are usually not available to most people and not required for justified belief in an external world. One could also reply that evidence drawn from the practical effects of religious beliefs, though less strong, is still sufficient evidence.

Sensory input of both the physical environment and supernatural beings constitutes defeasible evidence that can justify beliefs. A true epistemic wedge between beliefs about the physical environment and beliefs about supernatural beings would need to look at the nature of the evidence. If the evidence is not accurately translated into beliefs (because of a misattribution), the evidence does not suffice as justification; if it is, it suffices.

Considering that the outputs of religious faculties are often rather vague and can be matched with various cultural conceptions of supernatural beings, the evidence does not support justification of specific religious beliefs such as Trinitarian belief. Wilkins and Griffiths, however, argue that the same holds for beliefs concerning the physical environment. Beliefs furnished by our physical faculties do not allow specific beliefs concerning elemental particles and their properties. Such beliefs are supported by scientific discoveries instead (Wilkins and Griffiths 2013). Therefore, the difference with culturally specific religious belief is not that great.

13 An example is René Descartes's argument based on God's goodness (Descartes 2012).

The crux of Wilkins and Griffiths's argument against the justification of religious beliefs is either (1) that religious beliefs have no evolutionarily beneficial practical effects or (2) that these practical effects can be explained without reference to the truth of religious beliefs (Wilkins and Griffiths 2013). My reply was that religious beliefs have evolutionarily beneficial practical effects—for example, increased flourishing through sanctity—and that these effects are probably not exhaustively explained by evolutionary theories of religious belief. My reply does not presuppose God's existence in the sense that Launonen argues it does, any more than Wilkins and Griffiths's original argument presupposes a physical environment.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Launonen presents some interesting points of critique regarding some of the arguments raised in my book. He argues that my replies do not explain (i) how cultural factors can convey reliability and (ii) that true religious beliefs have an extra edge over false ones. In this response article, I argued against (i) that it is beyond the scope of my argument. Against (ii), I clarified my argument, focusing on how evolutionary explanations for religious belief that do not refer to truth need to be of greater explanatory scope.

Against Launonen's argument that my defense of a Milvian bridge for religious beliefs presupposes the existence of God, I argued that a (provisional) acceptance of the purported objects of beliefs is required for any Milvian bridge argument.

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