Is Atheism Unnatural?

A Critical Approach to the 'Atheism-is-Unnatural' Discussion from the Cognitive Science of Religion

Master Thesis Religious Studies

Inge Weustink
i.weustink@umail.leidenuniv.nl
Thesis Supervisor: Dr. M.A. Davidsen
Second Reader: Prof. Dr. A.F. de Jong
Date: 17-04-2020

Contents

Introduction

For about two decades now, scholars have been focusing on human cognition in an attempt to explain the prevalence and persistence of human ideas and behaviours that have been labelled 'religious'. This field of research has come to be known as the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR).[1] The focus of this paper is one of the most prominent theories in this field, the naturalness-of-religion hypothesis. This claim states that religion is all around us, because human minds have a preference for religious ideas. Scholars such as Scott Atran, Justin Barrett, Jesse Bering, Paul Bloom, Pascal Boyer, Robert McCauley, along with other CSR writers, have put this concept of cognitive naturalness forward. In the literature several cognitive mechanisms have been presented that would have led to religious thoughts and behaviours across cultures. CSR scholars propose that religion is universal because it is the product of the normal functioning of these human cognitive processes. This claim about religion being natural has led scholars to pose the question "if religion is so 'natural' what accounts for the presence of widespread atheism?"[2] A serious discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism from a cognitive perspective has followed and this discussion is far from over. Several different theories have been presented stating either that atheism is indeed less natural than religion, or that atheism is just as natural as religion. What theorists in both camps have in common is their limited view on the concept of atheism. Even though CSR scholars have avoided giving strict definitions of the concepts they use, it is evident that within the discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism scholars have used atheism as a homogenous category that presents a mirror image of religion. In the literature, religion is characterized by the belief in supernatural entities and related beliefs; atheism in turn is defined by a lack of these religious beliefs.

In this paper it will be argued that it is not sufficient to treat atheism simply as the opposite of religion when it comes to valuating its naturalness. For a long time, atheism has been regarded as presenting a score of zero on a continuous scale of religiosity. However this view has completely obliterated all the varieties of atheism. The nihilistic form of atheism that has been presented in the CSR literature so far is a

[1] For more information on what exactly entails the field of CSR see White, 2017

[2] Barrett, 2010, p169

very faulty representation of what atheism is like in the real world. Today, many people who claim to be atheist do hold certain other beliefs that could be deemed 'religious'. Recently it has been argued that it is no longer sufficient to solely define atheism by what it is not and attempts have been made to study atheism in its own right. Several studies have been conducted that have searched for religious beliefs among atheists. In addition, a number of typologies have been provided that define different kinds of atheism in positive terms. It would be very useful look at these theories to see what the cognitive science could learn in their discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism.

Within CSR several religious concepts and ideas have been argued to be cognitively natural. The most prominent idea has been the naturalness of beliefs in supernatural agents. In addition, several other beliefs have also been offered; among these are beliefs in something like a soul, a form of afterlife, a purpose of life, underlying meanings in life events, and the morality of the universe. Using nuanced descriptions of different kinds of atheism, this paper claims that these beliefs can inhabit an atheist worldview. If naturalness can be conceptualized as a scale, atheism has been seen as a unified category that presents the lowest point on this scale. Here it is argued that there are many kinds of atheism that can present different levels of naturalness. Thus, the main argument of this paper is that atheism has been presented in a very limited way in the CSR discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism and that a more nuanced vision is necessary in the future.

In the first chapter of this thesis, the naturalness-of-religion hypothesis will be discussed, and some of the most prominent theories in the field will be presented. A focus is put on how religion has been defined by CSR and what exactly is meant when something is argued to be 'natural'. In the second chapter, an account of the discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism will be given. The main arguments of both sides of the discussion will be presented, and it will be argued that the use of the term 'atheism' causes some difficulties. This is because the discussion has used 'atheism' to refer to a disbelief in all religious concepts, while actually 'atheism' solely refers to a disbelief in gods. The third chapter will discuss the religious concepts that have been labelled to be cognitively natural by CSR. Then, in the fourth chapter, contemporary forms of atheism will be discussed and it is argued that there are many different kinds of atheists in the world that hold beliefs in these religious concepts. In the fifth chapter, the implications

of these findings for the CSR discussion will be discussed. It will be argued that the discussion is mainly in need of a new terminology, and that the discussion should be more sensitive to the varieties of atheism.

Chapter 1: The Naturalness of Religion

Defining Religion in the Cognitive Science of Religion

Within CSR, scholars have often resisted giving precise definitions of religion. The idea behind this is that there is no singular naturally occurring phenomenon that constitutes religion. That is to say, there is no single coherent category of thoughts and behaviours around the world, that scholars can point to and say that *this* is what defines religion. Rather, the term religion has been used as an overarching term that serves as a starting point to identify certain patterns of human thought and behaviour that could be considered 'religious'.[3] This 'piecemeal approach' focuses on identifying these patterns and then explaining why they occur all around the world.[4] In their search for beliefs and practices that could be deemed 'religious', CSR scholars have found a number of recurring patterns. The most prominent has been the occurrence of supernatural agents. Especially in the early works of CSR the focus has been on supernatural agents as the main identifier of religion. Cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer was the first to frame the naturalness-of-religion hypothesis. In his famous *Religion explained* he has defined religion as a 'label that we use to put together all the ideas, actions, rules, and objects that have to do with the existence and properties of superhuman agents such as gods'.[5] Boyer has argued that religious ideas have been so successful because the human mind is prepared for concepts of super human agency.[6] This emphasis on the supernatural can also be found Scot Atran's *In Gods we Trust,* in which he identifies supernatural agency as the most 'culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionary compelling concept in religion'[7]

As CSR developed with time, we find that the concept of religion has expanded. In his early work *Why Would Anyone Believe in God*, Justin Barrett has attempted to explain why people believe in supernatural beings, and especially gods. However in his later works, he defines religion as 'belief in gods among other religious ideas'.[8] Paul Bloom stated in his article 'Religion is Natural', that in addition to beliefs in divine beings, body-

[3] White, 2017, pp98-99
[4] Launonen, 2018 p88
[5] Boyer, 2001, p9
[6] Idem.
[7] Atran, 2002, p57
[8] Barrett, 2010, p169 & Barrett, 2013, p312

soul dualism also comes natural to people.[9] Jesse Bering has focussed on a whole body of religious phenomena related to supernaturalism that would be natural, such as beliefs about a purpose of life, beliefs about souls and afterlife's, and beliefs about transcendental meanings in certain events.[10] The body of religious beliefs studied in the CSR are an important focus of this paper and they will be discussed extensively in the third chapter. What is relevant for now is to note that there has been somewhat of a shift within the CSR body on the naturalness of religion. In the early literature, religion is mostly researched as the belief in supernatural beings, while in later literature attempts are made to explain a whole range of other religious ideas as well.

What is natural?

Robert McCauley has described naturalness as thought processes or behaviours that are characterized by ease, automacity, and fluency.[11] McCauley has distinguished two kinds of naturalness that should be considered as existing along a continuum. Maturational *naturalness* refers to those properties of human cognition that arise early in development and without explicit instructions. Speaking ones native language, walking and chewing are examples of tasks that are 'natural' in this sense. *Practiced naturalness* refers to skills that have become a second nature due to diligent practice. Examples of these skills are speaking a new language, playing a music instrument and doing advanced math. In this sense, speaking ones native language is more natural than playing a music instrument. McCauley also claims that there is no strict line between what can be considered 'natural' and 'unnatural'. He states that 'Religion is natural' is to be taken as a comparative claim (more/less rather than is/is not). Thus the claim 'religion is natural' actually translates to 'religion is more maturational natural then something else'. For instance, McCauley has opposed religion to science, stating that religion is on the maturational side of the continuum and science on the practiced side.[12] Justin Barrett has opposed religion to theology, the former being more natural than the latter.[13] In this paper the focus is on the relative naturalness of religion as opposed to

[9] Bloom, 2007, pp149-150
[10] Bering, 2011
[11] McCauley, 2011
[12] Idem.
[13] Barrett, 2011

atheism. In short, naturalness in the cognitive sciences generally means that a certain skill takes little cognitive effort.

In what sense is religion natural? Some central theories in the religion-is-natural hypothesis

The human mind as a toolbox

A first general theory within the CSR field is that of the human mind as a 'toolbox'. In the past, scholars have often assumed that people's minds are blank slates with vast empty space ready to be filled with any ideas and skills that education, culture and personal experience provide.[14] CSR scholars now claim that humans are equipped with an evolved specialized 'cognitive toolbox' containing specialized mental tools that help them deal with distinct cognitive tasks, such as finding food, communicating with other people, and predicting movements of objects.[15] Due to these specialized mental tools human minds are not equally attentive to all information that is available, our minds select certain inputs with a higher frequency than others. Because of these biases in our brains, some ideas are encoded, stored and recalled better than others. Thus, to account for the persistence and prevalence of widespread religious ideas, CSR has focussed on panhuman cognitive predispositions. For a closer look at the cognitive naturalness of religion it is useful to consider some central theories in the CSR literature. In the following pages three key authors for the naturalness hypothesis, Pascal Boyer, Justin Barrett, and Jesse Bering will be discussed.

Pascal Boyer

Boyer, a cognitive anthropologist, was the first to frame the naturalness-of-religion hypothesis. As mentioned previously, Boyer has focussed mainly on explaining religion as the occurrence of supernatural agents. In his book *Religion Explained* Boyer has sought to explain why ideas of supernatural agents are so widespread in the world.[16] According to Boyer, supernatural representations are easy to acquire, entertain and transmit, because they are *minimally counterintuitive*. For an understanding of what this means, we need to consider two ways in which humans form beliefs: by intuition and

[14] Boyer, 2001, p3
[15] De Cruz & de Smedt, 2014, pp19-20
[16] Boyer, 2001

reflection.[17] When we speak about a belief we hold, we usually refer to a reflective belief. The more a belief is the result of conscious deliberation and careful thinking, the more reflective it is. Examples of these beliefs are: the idea that airplanes need gasoline to fly, that 14+16=30, and that Mark Rutte is the prime minister of the Netherlands. Intuitive beliefs, on the other hand, come automatically. They are fast and effortless, and they require no deliberation or cognitive reflection. Statements as "when I am hungry I should eat" and "I cannot walk through solid walls" are intuitive. Usually we are not even aware of these beliefs. Our minds possess a great deal of unrecognized, tacit beliefs about objects in our environment. Boyer draws attention to intuitive beliefs that apply to the way we view the world around us in terms of *ontological categories*, such as objects, plants, animals, and persons.[18] These ontological theories can be seen as having 'minitheories' of certain things in the world. Counterintuitive ideas are ones that violate this automatic way of thinking. For example, we intuitively attribute biological and material properties to all things in our category of 'persons'. However, gods, ghosts, and ancestor spirits do not have material bodies. Thus these supernatural agents violate out intuitive ontology. According to Boyer, this violation of intuitions is the reason why religious ideas are so widespread. This is because the violations make them attention-grabbing and interesting. However, he also states that successful religious concepts violate certain expectations, they preserve all the other expectations from the ontology.[19] A minimal violation makes an idea interesting, but many violations would make it confusing and hard to imagine and remember. Popular religious ideas, according to Boyer, typically include one or two violations. This makes them interesting and exciting, but also easy to recall and communicate, more so than simply intuitive or maximally intuitive concepts.

Justin Barrett

Memory and relevance however, are not the only requirements for the success of a religious idea. After all Mickey Mouse is a minimally counterintuitive character, but people do not really believe in his existence. To actually belief in these concepts, Barrett argues, we have additional cognitive mechanisms. One of these mechanisms is called the

[17] Boyer, 2001, pp51-91 & Barrett, 2004, pp2-16
[18] Boyer, 2001, pp57-61
[19] idem. pp61-66

Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD).[20] Because of the importance of other agents (animals or other humans) to the survival of individuals, most species have an evolved agency detection device. This mechanism picks out stimuli in the environment that may indicate the presence of another agent. A rustling bush, a creaking floor, or traces in the sand cause us to look around to see if we can detect an agent that caused this. Spotting other animals and humans has been extremely vital to the survival of our ancestors. Therefore, our HADD is 'hyperactive' in the sense that it often causes a false alarm when the evidence from the environment is ambiguous. The benefit of this is that in the case of a false positive (we think we see a crocodile, but it turns out to be a twig) we do not lose much, but failing to spot a crocodile could be lethal. As a result of this, we frequently detect an agent, even when no agent is present. While many of these intuitions can easily be dismissed with sufficient evidence (it was not a crocodile, it was a rabbit that caused the rustling bush), others cannot. When we cannot dismiss the intuition of agency, we quickly evaluate the possible agents that might have caused it. Because of their counter intuitiveness (they can be invisible), supernatural agents can be invoked as plausible explanations for these agency intuitions. If a detected agent or agency is attributed to a known god, such HADD activity encourages the belief and spread of the god concept. In rare cases, HADD could also encourage the postulation of a new god.[21] In Barrett's theory, HADD is closely connected to another mechanism called *Theory of Mind* (ToM). This 'mindreading' tool generates descriptions and makes predictions about the mental activities, including beliefs, desires, and emotions of other agents. ToM operates on agents that have been detected by HADD.[22] This tool helps to navigate us through our social environment. It can reveal a lot about someone's intentions, emotions, and desires and due to this we can choose the right responses to deal with certain circumstances. These two cognitive mechanisms are thus very easily triggered and they not only produce information about the presence and mental states of other people and agents, but they are also sensitive when it comes to possible non-physical agents. These cognitive tools thus reinforce and support ideas of supernatural agents.

[20] Barrett, 2004, pp31-44
[21] Barrett, 2004, pp31-44
[22] Idem, pp32-34

By-product versus adaptationist views

With their theories, Boyer and Barrett have offered by-product explanations of religion. Cognitive capacities are often subdivided in two categories: *adaptations*, which develop for a specific purpose, and *by-products*, which do not fulfil any direct functions but arise as by-products from adaptations.[23] According to the by-product theory offered by Boyer and Barrett, religious beliefs are not directly adaptive, but they are the result of the normal working of human cognitive mechanisms. Adaptationist explanations of religion propose that religious beliefs and practices have served a direct purpose in humans' evolutionary past. Theories for what the adaptive advantages of religion might be have included health benefits and social benefits (such as cooperation, collective action, and the enforcement of a dominant hierarchy).[24] Jesse Bering has been one of the most influential proponents of this adaptationist stance, claiming that religion serves for the avoidance of social transgressions. In his book *The Belief Instinct*, Jesse Bering has explored the 'innateness' of God beliefs, in addition to related beliefs such as souls, afterlife, destiny and meaning.

Jesse Bering

In contrast to Boyer and Barrett, Bering's intention is not to explain the occurrence of all supernatural beings. His focus is on explaining the belief in moral gods, especially the Abrahamic God.[25] Bering sees the belief in God as an "adaptive illusion" that "directly helped our ancestors solve the unique problem of human gossip".[26] He argues that humans have an 'instinct' to believe in God, and he points at Theory of Mind as the main cognitive mechanism that has led to this belief. He states that being able to predict other people's thoughts and behaviours was so important for our ancestors, that ToM has completely flooded our minds. Inspired by Barrett, Bering claims that ToM has caused people to attribute intentions even "to things that are in reality completely mindless".[27] Further, in Bering's view, the belief in God is caused by what he has called *building-block*

[23] de Smedt & de Cruz, 2014, p22

[24] Johnson, 2012, p49

[25] Bering states that the belief in moral Gods, in addition to the other beliefs he discusses, are found in every society worldwide. However, Berings argument mainly focuses on the naturalness of The Abrahamic God, and it hardly touches upon other supernatural entities that might be found in the world.

[26] Bering, 2011, p8

[27] Idem. p37

illusions.[28] These are beliefs that Bering claims all humans intuitively have. Our evolved cognition, – in particular theory of mind – is responsible for these beliefs of purpose and destiny, of human souls and afterlife, and of otherworldly meanings imbedded in worldly events. According to Bering, these 'illusions' that everyone shares, lead to a belief in God. Bering's building-block illusions will be dealt with more extensively in the third chapter, but for now it is useful to consider briefly what the intuitive illusions entail.

First, Bering states that people are inclined to reason about the 'purpose' of humanity, and the 'purpose' of individuals.[29] We ask questions such as "why am I here?" and "what is my purpose?" In Bering's view, asking these questions implies the belief in a mental agent who created humans for a specific purpose and we use our ToM to make representations of what these purposes might be. Second, Bering claims, people also have a general cognitive bias to see hidden messages in natural events.[30] By this he means that people have a tendency to believe that certain events can be 'about something' even when no human has caused this event and again, we use our ToM to think about underlying messages in these natural events. This is caused by what he calls an 'innate explanatory drive' that strongly drives us to search for causal explanations. A third fundamental illusion is the belief in a soul and an afterlife.[31] Bering claims that humans have a tendency to belief in a separation between the body and the mind, and this has resulted in the belief that our mind can survive our physical death. By using our ToM, he states, we can imagine our own minds, and the minds of people around us as existing without their metaphysical bodies. In addition to these 'fundamental illusions' Bering goes on to explain a few other intuitive presumptions that people have about the world. For one, people generally have expectations of the world being a just place and that people feel like they are part of a 'moralistic universe'.[32] Second, people have the feeling that life (may that be of humanity in general or of individuals in particular) should lead up to something. We view our lives often as a sort of preauthored

[28] Idem. p195
[29] Idem. pp39-75
[30] Idem. pp77-109
[31] Idem. pp111-130
[32] Idem. pp147-149

screenplay, one with the promise of an intelligent narrative climax.[33] Bering claims that due to all these intuitions of justice, purpose and meaning, we tent to feel like we are watched and like someone is keeping tabs on everything we do and everything that happens, in order to make sure that the just ending will be realized. When something bad happens to us, even when there is no one to blame, we search for a guilty party. We do this, because there is the presumption that "meaning *should* be there, that it all *should* work out in the end, and that everything *should* make sense."[34]

Finally, Bering states that all these 'illusory beliefs' would have given rise to the belief in a moral high God that has created everything and still keeps tabs on everything that happens. But he goes a step further in claiming that these illusory religious beliefs served a functional purpose in the human mind and that they came with evolutionary benefits. This purpose was to make sure that individuals would behave in proper ways, even when they thought no other human was present to observe them. So that even when they thought they were alone, they would still not engage in behaviour that was considered unfavourable. This would reduce the risk of doing something that might be seen and talked about, and ruining someone's changes of reproducing.

Bering's building-block illusions will be discussed more extensively throughout this essay because Bering has quite accurately brought together a number of religious intuitions that people tend to have all over the world. However, this paper opposes the view that these intuitions always lead to a belief in God. In this essay, it will be argued that these beliefs can also occur distinctively from belief in God. God is one possible outcome of these religious intuitions, but there are many more ways in which these intuitions could be combined and developed. It will be argued further in this paper that these religious building blocks can also be present in atheists belief systems.

Comparing the theories

The three scholars discussed agree on the idea that religious beliefs and practices are cognitively natural. However, their views differ on a few fundamental aspects. First, not all writers use the same scope of 'religious ideas' that they consider natural. While Boyer and Barrett have focussed on explaining the naturalness of God concepts and other

[33] Idem. pp158-159
[34] Idem. p155

supernatural beings, Bering's theory has also involved other religious ideas that he considers natural, such as beliefs about souls, afterlife beliefs and beliefs in a purpose of life. As mentioned previously, the early theories in CSR mainly focussed on explaining the occurrence of supernatural entities, while in later theories, many more concepts came to be incorporated in the body of ideas that could be considered 'religious'. A second difference, also mentioned previously, is that Boyer and Barrett have argued for religion as a natural by-product of our evolved cognitive mechanisms, while Bering has claimed that religion is an adaptation in its own right that provided evolutionary benefits. A final difference is that the authors have different views on exactly how natural religion is.[35] Boyer has presented his case in relatively modest terms. To him, naturalness means that religious ideas are *easily acquired* in relation to many other types of ideas because they match early-developed cognitive biases. He does not think that people are born with implanted notions of supernatural agents in their heads; rather "they get those from other people, from hearing what they say and observing how they behave."[36] A stronger version of the naturalness thesis can be found in the theory of Barrett, he holds that humans are *predisposed* to believe in religious entities. In his theory, religiosity is a mode of thinking that emerges spontaneously as a result of the interaction between our cognitive processes and the external world. "Believing in God is a natural, almost inevitable consequence of the types of minds we have, living in the sort of world we inhabit".[37] The strongest version of the naturalness hypothesis is ascribed to Bering. In his theory, religious beliefs are *native* and they emerge spontaneously from the innate structure of our minds and such concepts require only modest, if any, cultural input.[38] What is evident from these observations is that there is no consensus about the amount of cultural input that is needed for religious belief. The influence of culture on explaining religious beliefs is also one of the main discussion points when it comes to atheism. In the following chapter, an account of this discussion will be presented.

[35] de Cruz & de Smedt, 2014, p31
[36] Boyer, 2001, p237
[37] Barrett, 2004, p108
[38] Bering, 2011, pp194-196

Chapter 2: The Unnaturalness of Atheism

Phil Zuckerman has argued that contemporary statistics on atheism deliver a 'heavy blow' to the claims on the naturalness of religion.[39] He states that there are between 500 and 750 million atheists worldwide. In respect to this, he claims that any suggestion that belief in gods is natural becomes difficult to sustain. Many CSR scholars have responded to this claim, resulting in a complicated discussion considering the relative unnaturalness of atheism. In the following pages it will be argued that this discussion is rather flawed and in need of some more nuances and a clearer conceptual framework. In order to do this an account of both sides of the discussion will be presented and thereafter some difficulties and errors in the discussion will be pointed out.

Arguments for the unnaturalness of atheism

While Boyer has been rather silent on the subject of atheism, both Barrett and Bering have implemented atheism in their theories. Both have claimed that atheism is unnatural, although their perspectives differ. In Barrett's view, something is natural when the activity in question "arises through the course of ordinary development without special cultural support."[40] He has argued that atheism, as the disbelief in supernatural agents, only arises as a shared worldview under special conditions and that it is the exception to the rule. Compared to theism, he states, "atheism is relatively unnatural and, unsurprisingly, a very uncommon worldview."[41] For Barrett, the implication of the naturalness hypotheses is one of probability; religiosity is more likely than atheism. Atheism, he states, is certainly possible, but it requires the right environmental and cultural niche. Barrett finds the reason of why large groups of people turn to atheism in the conducive frameworks of western, urbanized societies, which, he argues, are the exception in human history. He states that in these circumstances it is possible to quiet the unconscious, cognitive mechanisms that normally lead to beliefs in supernatural agents and he argues that the special conditions of modern urban life have helped "the struggle against theism" in several ways.[42] As mentioned previously,

[39] Zuckerman, 2007, pp60-61
[40] Barrett, 2011, p169
[41] Barrett, 2004, p108
[42] Idem. p112

Barrett's theory states that the mental tools HADD and ToM help strengthen the reflective believes in supernatural agents. However, in contemporary urban societies, these tools are a lot less sensitive because of several reasons. For once, HADD becomes especially prone to detect agency in urgent, threatening situations. The relatively save and wealthy existence we find in large cities would limit the urgency for HADD. Also, in urban settings, the environment is to a large extent man-made and thus the agency all around is obviously human. This leaves little room for the detection of ambiguous agency that might be attributed to supernatural agents. Finally, ample opportunities for overriding the nonreflective beliefs caused by HADD and ToM can serve as a defence against theism. According to Barrett, Modern urban settings can be considered as 'reflective environments', and in these environments "events and phenomena that might encourage theism may be handled with cool consideration and alternative frames of reasoning may be developed".[43] As mentioned before, McCauley has referred to naturalness as maturational naturalness in contrast to practiced naturalness. Barrett has stated that beliefs about supernatural agents are found on the maturational side of the scale. Atheism, he argues, is definitely a possibility, but it requires special cultural circumstances, thus it is less maturationally natural than theism. Within these right environments, atheism can become rather likely and effortless. In these cases atheism can be put on the side of practiced naturalness.

Bering's view on atheism is a bit more extreme than Barrett's. While Barrett assumes that atheism can be achieved with practice in a particular environment, Bering claims that even very committed atheists continually have to fight 'religious' intuitions. Previously, Bering's theory of 'building-block illusions' was discussed. In his view, fundamental cognitive biases such as beliefs in purpose, meaning, and an afterlife, can only be understood as connected to beliefs in gods. For example, he has stated that "to see an inherent purpose in life is to see an intentional, creative mind, that had a reason for designing it this way".[44] Further, in seeing hidden messages as being embedded in natural events, we are trying to "understand God's behaviours", "or otherwise the

[43] Idem. p114
[44] Bering, 2011, p74

universe acting as if it were some vague, intentional agent".[45] In Bering's view all these beliefs indicate a belief in God, and Bering goes on to state that atheists are still very vulnerable to these intuitions and thus they are still vulnerable to believing in god. "One can still enjoy the illusion of God without believing Him to be real."[46] According to Bering, many atheists explicitly hold the belief that there is no God, however, they often hold a lot of implicit beliefs concerning God. He provides a number of examples to illustrate this. For one, he has stated that many people do not believe in god, yet they still ask themselves about the purpose of life. As mentioned previously, Bering has stated that humans have a cognitive bias towards thinking about their lives as a sort of preauthored screenplay that moves towards something meaningful. He states that for religious people, the identity of the enigmatic author is obviously God. But atheist often lapse unconsciously into this overt pattern of thinking as well. For instance, in one of Bering's researches he interviewed a college student who considered herself an "unflinching nonbeliever". When she was asked about why a major life event had happened to her she answered, "So that I could see that even if I failed a course, my life wouldn't actually end".[47] Bering concludes that the students tendency to see intrinsic meaning in her personal life events "hinges squarely on the assumption that an epistemologically, privileged, numinous, intelligent agent wants and intends for her to learn something from the event."[48] Another example of how atheists find it hard to put aside their intuitive beliefs comes from a study of people's beliefs about the mental functioning of dead people. In the study he asked self-described 'extinctivists' (who believe that the soul or personality of a person ceases to exist after death) if a man who had just died instantaneously in a car accident would 'know that he was dead'. Many of these participants answered in the affirmative, stating that the man knew that he was dead; while this directly contradicted the beliefs they claimed to have.[49] Thus according to Bering, even though people might explicitly express a disbelief in God, these studies indicate that implicitly they do tent to lapse back into god beliefs.

[45] Idem. p80
[46] Idem. p8
[47] Bering, 2010, p167
[48] idem.
[49] Bering, 2011, p117-118

In regard to culture, Bering claims that it matters, but only to the extent that it gives the naked intuitions discussed above a "personality and a name".[50] Culture, in Bering's view shapes the specific content of belief, not what drives belief itself.[51] Bering refutes the claim that current statistics on atheism deliver a 'heavy blow' to the naturalness hypothesis, because these numbers are based on surveys and on how people have defined themselves. This is in Bering's view not reliable since, as discussed above, people can hold many implicit beliefs that they do not express. He claims that it is not impossible to be an atheist, but it is cognitively extremely effortful, even with the right upbringing in the right cultural niche, and it is in this sense that atheism is unnatural. According to Bering's theory, God is an inherent part of our natural cognitive systems. And he states that 'ridding ourselves from Him – really thoroughly, permanently, removing Him from our heads – would require a neurosurgeon"[52] further he claims that "even for the committed atheist, the voice of God is still annoyingly there, though perhaps reduced to no more than a whisper."[53]

In Bering's theory, beliefs about purpose, meaning and afterlife thus always come down to a belief in God. As it has been mentioned before, Bering has pointed out some very accurate human intuitions in his 'building-block illusions'. However, this paper opposes the notion that all these intuitions lead to, or come down to, a belief in God. In this paper, it will be proposed that these religious intuitions are cognitively natural, but the belief in a moral high god that has created everything and still keeps tabs on everything that happens is just one outcome of how humans have dealt with these intuitions. In the chapters to come, it will be argued that these intuitions can actually be found as reflective beliefs among people that do not belief in God.

Arguments for the naturalness of atheism

Sociological perspective

Opposition to the atheism-is-unnatural hypothesis mainly comes from scholars with a sociological perspective; they have argued that neither religion, nor atheism is seen as natural or unnatural in their own rights. Instead both religion and atheism are

[50] idem. p167
[51] Idem. p195
[52] Bering, 2011, p200
[53] Bering 2011, p46-47

predictable consequences of the social environments that humans live in. Gervais et al. have advocated that cultural learning processes play a much larger role in shaping and sustaining religious beliefs than has been assumed in the religion-is-natural hypothesis.[54] They state that CSR has so far mainly focused on content biases, but that it is necessary to implement theories on context biases into the discussion as well. They do agree with the previously discussed scholars that the transmission of religious concepts is dependent on the cognitive biases that make some concepts inherently more interesting, memorable and transmittable. However, they state that these concepts also depend on cultural learning biases that push individuals to selectively acquire both concepts and degrees of commitment or belief from those around them. Gervais et al. contradict the claim that atheism is by definition cognitively effortful and they state that while some forms of disbelief may involve effortful overriding of intuitive theistic beliefs, other forms of atheism may arise as a result of cultural learning biases. They state that atheism can be the result of growing up in the absence of context-based cues supporting religious beliefs. They argue that humans depend greatly on others for information and therefore they must be sensitive to the quality of the information they acquire from different sources. People preferentially imitate beliefs and behaviours that are perceived to be normative or common and people are also more sensitive to thought and behaviour that are displayed by prestigious members of one's group.[55] Further, cultural learners preferentially imitate cultural models whose expressed beliefs are backed up by *credibility-enhancing displays* (CREDs). The idea is that 'actions speak louder that words'. Therefore, religious beliefs that are backed up by displays (religious attendance, praying, rituals, etc) are more likely to be imitated than those that are not. Gervais et al. argue that some forms of atheism may arise because people simply did not have cultural support for theistic belief, and subsequently never developed belief in the first place. The relative comfort and predictability in developed democracies has also been pointed at as a cultural reason for atheism. It has been argued that people have been less motivated to care about supernatural agents. The term *apatheism* has been used to characterize this stance of indifference towards religion that arises from

[54] Gervais et al. 2011

[55] Gervais et al. 2011, p392

conditions of existential security.[56] Geertz and Markusson have provided an argument similar to Gervais et al. and they argue for the implementation of culture in the cognitive study of religion. They note that "in redirecting the fact that human cognition is always situated within a natural habitat of cultural systems, we find that atheism is no less natural than religiosity is".[57]

Individual differences and evolutionary origins

It is hard to argue with the facts that certain cultural circumstances lead to growing numbers of atheism, but the explanatory gap that remains is to understand individual differences in belief and non-belief for people living in the same environment. Catherine Caldwell-Harris has argued that the accounts of the cognitive naturalness of religion are in need of a complementary explanation that the degree of religious belief (including zero belief) is an expected individual-differences variable. She claims that understanding the personalities and cognitive characters of atheists is a necessary foundation for moving forward with the question whether atheism is unnatural or whether it is the consequence of social conditions. She comes to the conclusion that atheists can be broadly characterized as "somewhat low in sociality and high in individualism and conformity."[58] "Atheists are over-represented among scientists and academics, and they lack interest in a reality beyond this world, and focus their moral concerns on the here-and-now".[59] Many of these individual characteristics might be influenced by context in part. However, it has also been argued that, like many other personality traits, degree of religiosity is genetically heritable, over and above environment, education, and experience.[60] Thus, to some people, atheism might be more natural than to others, due to their genetics. A very concrete example of how genetics might influence religiosity is provided by Norenzayan and Gervais, who state that people with poor mentalizing abilities can exhibit *mind-blind atheism*.[61] They argue that metalizing supports mental representations of supernatural beings, thus people with weaker metalizing tendencies,

[56] Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013, p21-22
[57] Geertz & Markusson, 2010, p163
[58] Caldwell-Harris, 2012, p9
[59] Idem. p20
[60] Johnson, 2012, p53
[61] Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013, p21

(for example associated with the autistic spectrum) have less intuitive tendencies towards belief in supernatural beings.

Dominic Johnson has argued that these findings on the genetically heritable aspects of religion are important, because they increase the possibility that religious and non-religious beliefs are variable in the population, can be differentially acted upon by natural selection, and thus are subject to evolutionary processes.[62] This claim can also be found in the theory of Bering, who has claimed that religiosity would be favourable for reproduction and thus evolutionary processes would have led to more religiosity. However, Johnson has pointed out that it is conceivable that atheism may also have significant functions in the long span of human evolution. In his account he does not advocate any particular evolutionary theory of atheism. Rather, the aim of his research was to present a number of plausible hypotheses for why atheism might actually be an adaptive evolution in its own right. Johnson himself is sceptical of most of the adaptive hypotheses he provides, and he favours his null hypothesis which claims that "all human brains have mechanisms that make us susceptible to supernatural concepts, there is variation in individuals' propensities to hold religious beliefs, due to variation in, and interactions among, genes, physiology, cognition, and environment. Atheists simply occupy one end of the distribution of belief".[63]

Difficulties concerning the discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism

In sum, the scholars discussed in this section seem to agree on the fact that cognition, genes, and context all play important roles in shaping religious beliefs in individuals. It is the degree of cultural and genetic influence that seems to invoke the most discussion. On the one side we find scholars such as Barrett and Bering who claim that atheism is always less natural than religion, due to the way human brains work. On the other side we find scholars that claim that atheism can be just as natural as religion due to the context people live in or their individual differences. In the discussion, some very interesting and relevant points are raised concerning the extent of influence that certain factors have on the religiosity of individuals. However, the discussion is also very flawed and the difficulties that surround the discussion are mainly caused by the ambiguity of

[62] Johnson, 2012, p53
[63] Johnson, 2012, p57

the basic terminology. All of the scholars discussed in this section have used the term atheism to indicate a homogenous category that presents a position opposite of religion. This image of atheism is very short sighted and the discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism is in need of a more nuanced vision of atheism.

"Atheism" is a combination between the Greek word *theos*, which means 'god', and the negative particle in Greek (a-). Thus in a literal sense atheism means "no-god" and it connotes the belief that there are no divine beings.[64] The term first came to be used by ancient philosophers regarding an attitude towards the gods of Greek mythology. Later in the West it has come to mean especially the refusal to believe in the existence of the god of the Abrahamic religions.[65] Usage of the term 'atheism' to express a rejection of the existence of gods seems quite straightforward, however this is not how the term has been used within the CSR literature. The use of the word atheism in the discussion is quite tangled from two points of view.

First, within CSR, scholars have often meant 'anti-supernaturalism' when they wrote about 'atheism'. As described in the theories of Boyer and Barrett, our cognitive mechanisms have given rise to many kinds of supernatural beings; in addition to gods, these include ancestors, ghosts, jinn, angels, etc. The word 'atheism' has often been used in CSR literature to describe the rejection of all of these types of entities. For example Barrett has noted that: "Being an atheist is not easy… it isn't natural to reject all supernatural agents."[66] As it was mentioned in the first chapter, the early literature of CSR mainly focused on explaining supernatural beliefs. It was argued that belief in supernatural agents is cognitively natural, and thus it would follow that the unbelief in these supernatural agents was unnatural. However, the use of the term 'atheism' for this position is rather inconvenient, since the word can also be understood to refer more narrowly to the rejection of the gods of theistic religions.

A second difficulty that surrounds the CSR study of atheism is the persistent misconception that atheism can be regarded as a mirror image of religion. In the previous chapter it was mentioned that the 'religion-is-natural' hypothesis came to incorporate more religious ideas as the field of CSR developed. Over time, scholars have identified a whole body of different kinds of 'religious' beliefs that would be cognitively

[64] Bullivant, 2013, pp13-20
[65] Wildman, Sosis, McNamara, 2012, p1
[66] Barrett, 2004, p108

natural. These beliefs will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter and among them are beliefs about souls, afterlives or a purpose of life. As the naturalness hypothesis evolved, the discussion about the relative unnaturalness of atheism continued. In this discussion, atheism was seen as the opposite of religion. Religion, as the belief in all kinds of religious concepts, was argued to be natural, and the discussion was about whether atheism, as the disbelief in these concepts, could be considered unnatural. In the discussion it is thus implied that atheism signifies a lack of all the religious beliefs that have been identified by CSR. This idea of atheism as a mirror image of religion has been used implicitly in a lot of scholarly literature on atheism and it has been put forward explicitly by Beit-Hallahmi, who regards religiosity as a continuous scale from 1 to 100.[67] In his theory each individual's level of religiosity could be measured on this imaginary scale and atheists present a score of zero. This perception of atheism is very tricky, since it assumes that atheism is a homogenous category and it completely obliterates any varieties among atheists. In reality however, there are actually many kinds of atheists in the world and the fact that atheists do not belief in gods does not necessarily implicate that they reject the other beliefs identified in CSR.

When belief in gods is labelled natural, it makes sense to oppose it to atheism and argue that this is then unnatural. However, the naturalness hypothesis includes many other 'religious ideas', such as other supernatural agents, afterlives, a purpose of life, etc. these beliefs are not necessarily excluded by atheism. Therefore it is not accurate to place atheism in complete opposition of religion and to regard atheism as a homogenous category that presents a zero on a scale of religiosity. There are many different kinds of atheists and they do hold meaningful beliefs, which in many cases might overlap with those of religious people.

A conceptual framework

The problems surrounding the discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism are the results of the ambiguity of the basic terminology and I propose that the discussion is in need of more conceptual clarity.

First, it is necessary to have a more focused definition of religion. As it was mentioned previously, CSR scholars have often resisted giving precise definitions of

[67] Beit-Hallahmi, 2007, p301

religion. Instead, CSR researchers have mainly used the term religion as an overarching term to identify certain patterns of human thought or behaviour that could be deemed 'religious'. In the early years of CSR the focus has been on supernatural agents as the main identifier of religion. So at that point it was quite straightforward that the notion 'religion is natural' referred to 'beliefs in supernatural agents is natural'. However, as CSR evolved, the concept of religion has expanded and the hypothesis 'religion is natural' now refers to a whole body of ideas. This paper argues that it is important to have a clear conception of what exactly constitutes religion when making the statement that 'religion is natural'. In order to achieve more clarity the following definition of religion is proposed: "all those beliefs, practices, experiences, narratives, and discourses that assume the existence of supernatural/transempirical agents, worlds, and/or processes".[68] This definition has been put forward by Markus Davidsen and it covers the subjects and theories in CSR very well.

From the problems that have been identified in the previous section it also follows that CSR researchers should be more careful to indicate precisely what they mean by 'atheism'. It was previously argued that the CSR discussion has wrongfully assumed that atheism is a homogenous category and this paper proposes that there are many different kinds of atheisms. In the fourth chapter, attention will be paid to different kinds of atheism. For now it is useful to distinguish between two types. These will be referred to as *open*- and *closed-atheism*. The philosopher Charles Taylor has noted that there seemed to be two broad types of atheism: the first type rejects every notion of a "beyond" or "transcendental", while the second type of atheism does accept the idea that there is something "more".[69] The first type of atheism, closed-atheism, is also often referred to as reductive materialism or nihilism and it is this type of atheism that has figured prominently in the CSR discussion. Closed-atheism implies a disbelief in the religious ideas that CSR has put forward. Having defined religion more precisely, closed-atheism can also be referred to as *nonreligion,* which would signify a disbelief in supernatural/transempirical agents, worlds, and processes. The discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism has thus actually been about the relative unnaturalness of closed-atheism or nonreligion. In addition to this type of atheism, there are many kinds

[68] This definition is adopted from Davidsen, 2020

[69] Smedes, 2016, pp.65-66

of atheists in the world for whom this nihilistic worldview is rather unsatisfying. The second type of atheism, open-atheism, solely implies a disbelief in Gods, and it leaves open other religious beliefs.

In this chapter it has been argued that within the CSR discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism, scholars have assumed the absence of religious beliefs among atheists. However, This paper proposes that this is a faulty representation of atheism and that there are in fact many kinds of 'open-atheisms' that actually hold beliefs that have been labelled 'natural' by CSR. This would imply that not 'atheism' is unnatural, but that there are many different kinds of atheism that could present different levels of naturalness. In the following chapter, the religious concepts that have been claimed to be natural by CSR will be discussed and in the fourth chapter it will be argued that these concepts can be found in the worldviews of open-atheists.

Chapter 3: Religious Building-blocks from the CSR literature

This chapter will discuss the religious ideas that CSR has deemed to be cognitively natural. The most prominent religious idea figuring in the CSR literature has been the belief in supernatural agents. In addition, several other religious ideas have also been identified as universal and natural. These are: a belief in a soul, in an afterlife, in a purpose of life, in meaning in life events, and in the morality of the universe. In the following pages an account will be given of these religious 'building blocks' and of the cognitive mechanisms that have been identified as underlying these beliefs. A wide range of authors has claimed the naturalness of these beliefs and both by-product and adaptationist arguments have been used to account for the naturalness of these beliefs. These building-block beliefs are by no means defined by strict boarders, they are very much interconnected, and often caused by the same cognitive mechanisms. The belief in supernatural agents will not be discussed in the following pages since chapter one has already dealt extensively with the arguments for the naturalness of this building block.

It should be noted that the religious building blocks that will be discussed in this chapter, greatly overlap with the 'building block illusions' that have been provided by Bering, which have been discussed in the first chapter. Bering has brought together many theories in the CSR literature and he has very accurately identified a body of intuitive beliefs that humans share. However, in Bering's theory, all of these beliefs lead to, or entail an implicit belief in God. The next chapter of this paper will argue that this is wrong, and that these beliefs can actually be found separately from god beliefs.

The belief in a soul or essence of human beings

Many world religions have doctrines and beliefs about the 'soul' and while this concept has been formulated differently across religious traditions, they all seem to entail a sort of 'spiritual essence' of human beings.[70] This pervasiveness of a soul concept across cultures has lead cognitive scientists to believe that there is something intuitive about the attribution of a soul to people. It has been argued that people have the natural tendency to perceive themselves and others as possessing certain immeasurable qualities that are not described by physical properties and that ultimately define who

[70]For an account of the concept of a 'soul' in different world religions, see: Richert & Harris, 2006, p410

they are. This intuition is referred to as *psychological essentialism.*[71] This 'essence' has been labelled under diverse terms such as a soul, a mind, or a spirit. In our intuition, this essence is the home of our personal thoughts, emotions, and personal identity. In short, this essence is what makes us who we are.

Paul Bloom has argued that the reason belief in souls is so widespread is because people are '*natural dualists'.* According to this perspective, humans have the cognitive tendency to differentiate the physical body from the non-physical mind or soul. In other words, we think of the body and the soul as distinct. "We do not feel as if we *are* bodies, we feel as if we *occupy* them".[72] Bloom has argued that this dualism is rooted in our most fundamental cognitive architecture, which is predisposed to process social and non-social stimuli in different ways. Under this explanation, our dualism is a natural by-product of the fact that we have two distinct cognitive systems, one for dealing with the material world, the other for the social world.[73] In arguing for dualism, Bloom has not differentiated between concepts of the mind and of the soul. In his argument, these concepts are equated and referred to as a single entity mind/soul, as opposed to the body. However, it has been argued that people actually do differentiate between these concepts. Richert and Harris have noted that in many languages around the world they have words that distinguish something like a soul from something like a mind. [74] Early empirical research on dualism has mainly taken place in western settings, affirming the cognitive tendency to separate between the body and the soul/mind. Only quite recently have scholars begun to research dualism in non-western contexts.[75] This body of research has given rise to the claim that in many cultures people differentiate between the concepts of souls and of minds. Stephanie Anglin has developed this notion further and stated that even in the western context where people have been exposed to the concept of the soul as it has been traditionally researched, people actually differentiated between the mind and the soul.[76] She states that the mind is more commonly defined in mental terms, and the soul is seen as ones essence. In sum, what seems to be evident

[71] Forstmann & Burgmar, 2015, p222-223
[72] Bloom, 2004, p191
[73] Bloom, 2007, p149
[74] Richert & Harris, 2006, p411
[75] Some examples of research on dualism in non-western context are found in: Astuti & Harris, 2008 (rural Madagacar), Singerland & Chudek, 2011 (Ancient China),), Chudek et al. 2018 (Fiji)
[76] Anglin, 2014

from the body of empirical research concerning dualism, is that even though there is no consensus about what exactly constitutes the soul, it does seem to be the case that in every culture studied so far distinctions are made between the body, and that what is considered as someone's essence.

Bloom has claimed that dualism is a prerequisite for the development of other religious ideas such as the belief in supernatural agents and afterlife beliefs.[77] If bodies and souls are thought to be separate, you can have one without the other. This has led to the possibility of imagining supernatural beings such as gods, who are thought of as 'minds' or 'souls' without physical bodies. Another implication of dualism is that it opens the possibility that people can survive the biological death of their bodies.

Afterlife beliefs

Afterlife beliefs have been discussed as another line of natural religious intuitions. Around the world, people tend to believe in some form of afterlife in which people retain their 'essence' after their physical body is dead. One very prominent explanation for the pervasiveness of afterlife beliefs among social psychologists has been the "terror management theory". According to this theory, afterlife beliefs are adaptations that serve as a psychological defense against severe death anxiety.[78] However plausible this explanation sounds, researchers have failed to demonstrate a direct correlation between fear of death and believing in the afterlife. It has not been demonstrated that someone with more death anxiety is more likely to develop a belief in an afterlife. [79]

Within CSR a number of by-product accounts have been offered as well to account for the universality of afterlife beliefs. Three of these will be discussed here. Bering has argued that afterlife beliefs are a direct result of our Theory of Mind. In his *simulation constraint hypothesis* Bering claims that people use their Theory of Mind to imagine themselves and others after they die. He has argued that the core reason that humans have afterlife beliefs is because we frequently observe the cessation of biological processes but we find it hard to imagine the cessation of mental processes. In thinking about what comes after death, our everyday ToM is inadequate. "Because we have never consciously experienced a lack of consciousness, we cannot imagine what it

[77] Bloom, 2007, p149
[78] Thorson, 1998
[79] Jong, Halberstadt & Bluemke, 2012, pp983-984

will feel like to be dead".[80] Bering argues that when we try to imagine what it is like to be dead, we appeal to our own background of conscious experiences. However, death isn't like anything we have experienced before. "Because we have never consciously been without consciousness, even our best simulations of true nothingness just aren't good enough."[81] He goes further and states that because our ancestors could not sufficiently project themselves into an afterlife devoid of any sensation, they suffered the "the unshakable illusion that their minds were immortal."[82] This tendency to continue thinking about metal processes after death is referred to as *psychological-continuity reasoning.* Bering has come to this theory mainly through research on early cognition in young children. An example of this is an experiment Bering conducted with David Bjorklund.[83] In the experiment the scholars performed a puppet show for two hundred three-to-twelve year olds. The children were presented with the story of a baby mouse that was killed and eaten by an alligator. After the show, they asked the children about the biological and physical features of the mouse after the alligator has eaten him. The study showed that all the children, even the youngest ones, had a solid grasp of the biological cessation; they knew for example that the mouse didn't need food or water anymore. Thus, from a very early age, children realize what biological death entails, and that a dead body does not come back to life. Further, they noted that the younger children from their test group were more inclined to reason in terms of psychological continuity than the older children. By using their Theory of Mind, the younger children tended to attribute thoughts and emotions to the dead mouse more frequently than the older children. This has led Bering to argue that young children are naturally prepared for the concept of an afterlife, because it matches their own intuitions about the continuity of the mind after death. The older the children get, the more they are shaped through cultural learning. In Bering's theory, this cultural learning is important insofar as it directs how and to what extend these afterlife beliefs develop.[84]

Pyysiäinen has criticized this simulation constraint hypothesis. He states Bering has failed to provide empirical evidence for the idea that people can image the cessation

[80] Bering, 2011, p113
[81] Idem. p119
[82] Idem. p114
[83] Bering & Bjorklund, 2004
[84] Bering, 2011, pp120-125

of psychobiological functions (such as thirst and hunger), but that they cannot imagine being without desires, emotions and thoughts.[85] Pyysiäinen notes that it could well be argued that people do have experiences of cessation of emotions and he refers to people that are trained in meditation that could provide examples of the cessation of consciousness. He goes on and proposes and alternative theory which is based on mind-body dualism. He argues that while thinking about dead agents people tend to focus on the types of experiences they could have without a body.[86] As mentioned in the previous section, Bloom has also argued that our dualism is the foundation for a belief in the afterlife. The argument is that people are natural dualists and this opens up the possibility of people surviving the death of their bodies. Like Bering, Bloom believes that while we have to learn the specific sort of afterlife that we believe in through culture, the notion that our consciousness can survive our death is not learned at all; it is natural to us. The dualism hypothesis has provoked much research on afterlife beliefs, however there have also been scholars that have questioned this relationship between dualism and afterlife beliefs.

Mitch Hodge has noted that the implications of intuitive dualism are at odds with many funerary rites, mythologies, iconography, and religious doctrines.[87] According to the dualism stance the body is left behind and the essence/soul of a person goes on to the afterlife. Thus death is seen as encompassing the end of the life inside the body and the start of the life outside the body. He notes that in many religious traditions and cultural representations, the body remains an integral part of the beliefs and practices surrounding the afterlife. For example, Hodge notes that throughout time and cultures the body has been treated with great care and respect and people often return to the biological remains of their deceased social partners.[88] Contrary to Bloom, Hodge has argued that our 'offline social reasoning' system, rather than a propensity towards dualism accounts for the pervasiveness of afterlife beliefs across cultures.[89] Humans have the ability to think about individuals that are not present in their immediate perceptual fields. Thus humans can have thoughts about other people in their absence.

[85] Pyysiäinen, 2003, pp218-219
[86] Idem. p219
[87] Hodge 2008, pp287-399
[88] Idem. p292-389
[89] Hodge, 2008 & Hodge, 2011

According to Hodge, we understand death as an absence, "we think about our deceased loved ones in the same way we would about a living but absent individual".[90] In addition, when we imagine absent third parties we imagine them embodied. We do not envision them a disembodied minds because we cannot interact with such beings. According to Hodge, we imagine our deceased loved ones as physically present in the afterlife.

In sum, all of the scholars discussed seem to agree on the idea that humans are cognitively predisposed to develop afterlife beliefs and that the suppression of these beliefs require considerable cognitive effort. However, there seems to be no consensus among the scholars concerning exactly which cognitive mechanisms are to blame for this predisposition.

The purpose of life

Another feature that scholars have found throughout human cultures is the tendency to reason about the world and everything in it in terms of meaning and purpose. Beliefs about 'why we are here', and 'what it all means', have featured prominently throughout human history. People often seem to ask themselves about the purpose of life and more specifically, about the purpose of *their* life. We tend to think about the world, including our own existence as purposeful and meaningful, and scholars have suggested that we are naturally prone to feel as if we are the product of intelligent design.

To explain this tendency, researches have argued that it is a by-product of the cognitive tendency to reason *teleologically*. *Teleological reasoning* entails that we think of things as existing for a preconceived function. Deborah Kelemen has claimed that children have a strong teleological bias to treat objects and natural phenomena of all kinds as existing for a purpose.[91] For example, in a study 4- and 5-year old American children were asked what living things, artifacts, and non-living natural objects were "for" while explicitly being given the option of saying they were not "for" anything. The children assigned a function to almost every kind of object, (e.g. "Mountains are for climbing", "clouds are for raining" and "Lions are for to go in the zoo").[92] Because of this tendency to over-attribute reason and purpose to aspects of the natural world, Kelemen has referred to children as "promiscuous teleologists". At a certain point in life, Kelemen

[90] Hodge, 2011, p371

[91] Kelemen & DiYanni, 2005

[92] Kelemen, 1999: the scope of teleological thinking in preschool children

has argued, children begin to realize that scientific explanations are considered correct, and so they begin to rely on scientific explanations, even though their first inclination might be to give teleological answers. Kelemen and DiYanni have proposed that by the age of 10, most western children have learned to favor scientific answers. However, it has been claimed that without sufficient scientific education, this tendency to explain natural phenomena by reference to purpose remains active later in life. In a study with uneducated Romany adults, Casler and Kelemen found the same preference for teleological reasoning that is found in children.[93] In another study it was found that adults whose semantic knowledge had been fragmented by Alzheimer's disease also explicitly show teleological reasoning.[94] In addition, it has also been suggested that this bias to think teleologically never fully disappears and that it persists, often implicitly, throughout the course of a life. For example, it has been found that even professional physical scientists showed a tendency towards teleological explanations for natural phenomena when they had to operate under cognitive constraints, such as severe time pressure.[95] Thus it has been claimed that implicitly we are all compelled to reason in terms of inherent purpose when we think about origins. This has led Kelemen to claim that we are all 'intuitive theists'.[96] We have a bias to see all things as if they were intentionally created for a certain purpose, including ourselves.

Bering once again refers to our Theory of Mind as a tool that is used to sustain this teleological bias.[97] He proposes that in reflecting on our origins and purpose, we use our ToM to 'try to get in to the head' of that what has created us. According to Bering, our bias towards teleological reasoning in combination with our ToM, has provided our species with a natural tendency to believe that we have been created "for" a certain purpose. However, he states, people are often inclined to go a step further, claiming that individual members of our species are also here 'for' a special reason. This is what the concept of destiny implies: that people tend to feel as if they are here to satisfy a personal unique purpose that has been crafted by intentional design.

---

[93] Casler, kelemen, 2008
[94] Lombrozo, Kelemen, Zaitchik, 2007
[95] Kelemen, Rottman & Seston, 2012
[96] Kelemen, 2004
[97] Bering, 2011, pp39-75

Meaning in life events: seeing hidden messages in the world

Just as we see the world and ourselves in it as being about 'something more', it has been argued that we also tend to attribute meaning to certain events in our lifetime. For example, natural disasters can be interpreted as divine warnings to sinful societies. Personal tragedies, such as the death of a loved one, can also be seen as a punishment for prior misbehaviour. In addition, unexpected good fortune, such as winning the lottery or recovering from a severe illness, can be viewed as a reward for virtuous behaviour. In light of this, it has been argued that humans have a cognitive tendency to see 'hidden messages' in (natural) events. Further, it has been claimed that people are especially inclined to search for hidden meanings in case of events that are difficult to explain in terms of material causes. For example, Gray & Wegner found that people were more likely to believe that God was responsible for a flood that killed an entire family when no human cause was mentioned than when a human agent was explicitly blamed for the accident.[98] In light of this, they have argued that human suffering and the search for an agent that caused it go hand in hand. "without another person to blame, people need to find another intentional agent to imbue the event with meaning and allow some sense of control."[99] But even when the cause of an event is clear, people also often explain the event both in terms of its material causes and supernatural purpose-based influences. Cristine Legare and Susan Gelman, have conducted a research about the beliefs on the causes of AIDS in South Africa and they found that although biological explanations for the illness were endorsed at high levels, witchcraft was also often endorsed. The bewitchment explanations did not replace the biological explanations. Instead, both natural and supernatural causes were used to explain the same illness.[100]

To explain this tendency to think that things happen for a reason, CSR scholars have pointed once again to teleological reasoning and our bias to think of the world in terms of agency, purpose and design. Just as we see the world and ourselves as the product of intended design, so do we see ambiguous events as having agentic causes.[101] Bering has claimed that people have an 'innate explanatory drive', that strongly drives

[98] Gray & Wegner, 2010
[99] Idem. pp10
[100] Legare & Gelman, 2008
[101] Banerjee & Bloom, 2014, p278

us to search for causal explanations.[102] In addition, it has been argued that people also have an implicit *intentionality bias,* a tendency to infer intention in others agents behavior. Banerjee and Bloom have noted that this intentionality bias sometimes causes errors in people's ability to recognize truly non-intentional behavior.[103] Thus when something unexpected happens, we are biased to look for an agent that intentionally caused this event, even when no one is directly to blame. According to Bering's theory, we use our ToM to think about the underlying psychological causes for things that were not caused by humans. ToM enables us to think about who is to blame for misfortune, and why it has happened. He states that, by searching for meaning we are trying to understand God's behaviors, or otherwise the universe acting as if it were some intentional agent.[104] In addition to thinking about natural events in terms of purpose and design, humans also have the tendency to think about certain autobiographical events in this manner. As noted in the previous section, many individuals have the feeling that their lives have a specific purpose. Bering has noted that in most people's minds, their lives appear to be moving in a linear progression towards a satisfying climax. It has been argued that people tend to see their lives as a sort of pre-authored screenplay, "one with the promise of an intelligent narrative climax that will eventually tie all the loose ends together in some meaningful, coherent way".[105] This pattern of thinking makes it possible for us to see events in our lives as happening for a certain purpose. For example, when someone gets fired from a job, it is not uncommon to hear someone say that it must have happened because another, greater job, is waiting in the future.

Morality of the universe

Seeing messages embedded in nature and in events has a clear relationship with morality. In their research Gray and Wagner have argued that human suffering and religion go hand in hand because our evolved cognitive systems are inherently unsatisfied with 'unfair' events in life and we use religion to ease the pain of tragedy.[106]

---

[102] Bering, 2011, pp77-109
[103] Idem.
[104] Bering, 2011,pp79-80
[105] Idem. p158
[106] Gray & Wegner, 2010, pp7-16

As mentioned in the previous section, when something bad happens to us, we immediately go on a search for the responsible party. The question of why bad things happen to good and innocent people has been raised in every place where tragedy has struck. Social psychologists have argued for some time now that people are guided by expectations of a just world. Marvin Lerner has first proposed this adaptive just-world theory. He has claimed that people need to believe in a just world; thus, evidence that the world is not just is threatening, and people have a number of strategies for reducing such threats.[107] For example, Lerner and Carolyn Simmons found that when presented with a victim who suffered through little fault of her own (for instance a woman that is pulled from the streets and raped), people compensated the victim if they believed this would have a positive effect. Thus under these conditions, people seemed to recognize the unfairness of the situation and were motivated to respond with compassion. However, when presented with the same victim, along with the expectation that the victim will continue to suffer from what happened, people derogated the victim's character, describing her in relatively more negative terms. The scholars interpreted these reactions as resulting from a concern with justice. They proposed that people need to believe that the world is a just place in which individuals get what they deserve. Thus when something terrible happens to innocent people, we look for ways to maintain our belief in a just universe.[108] The thought that the universe would be indifferent to our suffering and that terrible things happen for no reason is just not very appealing to people. Bering has argued that we have the feeling that something is watching us, something that is inherently good, and that makes sure that people get what they deserve.[109] Attributing tragedies to a God or fate, allows us to keep our sense of justice. The tragedy can be described as being for a certain purpose. A purpose that is sometimes completely unclear to us. Because God/the universe will have it's own reasons for putting us through this. We can appeal to our ToM to figure out what these reasons might have been, but many people also reckon that God/the universe has His own moralistic logic and it is not always for us mortals to understand.

[107] Hafer & Begue, 2005, pp128-129
[108] Idem.
[109] Bering, 2011, p159

In sum, the CSR literature has argued that people have the cognitive tendency to believe in supernatural agents, something like a soul, an afterlife, a purpose of life, meaning in certain life events, and the morality of the universe. These beliefs are not strictly separated and as we have seen they are often closely related to each other and caused by many of the same cognitive mechanisms. Often these religious building blocks can be found all together in the believe systems of people. This is the case in the great theistic religious traditions around the world. However, these religious ideas can also be found separately from each other in different belief systems. Here it is argued that people that do not believe in gods can if fact believe in other religious ideas that have been deemed natural by CSR. In the following chapter contemporary atheism will be discussed and it will be illustrated that we can find the religious building blocks in different kinds of open-atheism.

Chapter 4: the complicated reality of many different kinds of atheisms.

Studying atheism in it's own right

Research in psychology of religion has a long history, but only recently have scholars begun to actively consider atheists and nonbelievers in this field.[110] Atheists and nonbelievers present a substantial part of the global population and the psychology of religion would not be complete without taking them into account. Previously it has been argued that within the CSR discussion on the relative unnaturalness of atheism, the term atheism has been used to reflect a mirror image of religion. Religion has been characterized as the belief in supernatural agents and 'related beliefs'; atheism in turn has been defined by a lack of these beliefs. Thus the building blocks that have been discussed in the previous chapter have generally been considered as belonging to religious belief systems and lacking in atheist worldviews. Recently scholars have noted that defining atheism solely in terms of what it is not makes the study of atheism incomplete.[111] Even though the category of atheism is linguistically defined in terms of what individuals do not believe, it also conceals a wide range of positive beliefs, values and behaviors. In the past, scholars have often studied atheists as a single, unified category. However, lately it has been argued that there actually have been many atheisms throughout human history.[112] Scholars are now beginning to probe for the components that populate the lives of the nonbelievers.

Religious beliefs among atheists

Previously, a distinction has been made between two types of atheism, closed- and open-atheism, and it has been argued that open-atheists can actually hold beliefs that have been studied by CSR. In recent years, there have been several studies that have found religious beliefs among atheists. For example, Jensen and Arnett have conducted a study into the religious beliefs of Danish emerging adults that have received little to no religious upbringing. The majority of the participants in their study were nonbelievers.[113] Nevertheless, most of them did hold a variety of beliefs of some kind of

[110] Colemen, Strieb & Hood, 2018, p203

[111] For example: Coleman, Hood & Streib, 2018, Taves, 2019, and Taves, Asprem, Ihm, 2018

[112] Gray, 2018, p3

[113] According to Jensen & Arnett 'nonbelievers' refers to atheist, agnostic, and no beliefs. Jensen & Arnett, 2015, p661

life after death. They note that of the 18 participants that they interviewed, only five believed that death was the end of everything. About half of their participants held a general belief in an afterlife existence, although they were very vague about what form it would take. To some of these participants it seemed illogical that death would be the end of everything. One girl stated: "I find it difficult to accept that it is just over and done when you die, I can't imagine that."[114] For others, it was emotionally too uncomfortable to believe that there is nothing after death. Another girl said, "I've chosen to believe in something, because I can't tolerate the idea that if someone in your family dies, there's nothing more."[115] Several of these participants stated a belief in a soul that goes on in some form. According to another participant "Our soul cannot just disappear. It lives on, in one place or another, but I don't know how."[116] They also note that many were unsure how to describe the afterlife and the notion that "there is more between heaven and earth" came up frequently in these interviews.

Another study has been conducted by Kracmarova, Dutkova & Tavel. They have researched the spiritual beliefs from Czech adolescents from nonreligious families. In accordance with the study of Jensen and Arrett, the idea that "there is more between heaven and earth" was expressed rather frequently.[117] Even though the adolescents did not express belief in gods, some of them did believe in invisible higher powers and beings. They were rarely afraid of them and they rather emphasized the helping and positive nature of these beings and powers. With regard to afterlife beliefs they mention that most participants believe in a form of life after death. They noted that these beliefs mainly consisted of some mixed Christian concepts, with Eastern ones and with New Age spiritualities. In their conversations about the afterlife the majority of the participants articulated an awareness of the concept of the soul. Three of the seventeen participants said that they did not believe in anything supernatural related to death. They note that "after death there is nothing, the body stops and the soul disappears into the air as energy".[118] In addition, it is mentioned that nearly half of the participants believed in fate and that what is meant to be will be. A girl is quoted saying that "I think

[114] Jensen & Arnett, 2015, p674
[115] Idem.
[116] Idem.
[117] Kračmarová, Dutková & Tavel, 2019, p68
[118] Idem. P.69

there is some kind of destiny but if we try, we can do it in a different way. But there certainly is something like a 'little destiny.'"[119]

Thus recently scholars have begun to investigate the positive beliefs that atheists do hold. Even though the body of research is still very small, it seems that several of the religious building blocks from the previous chapter are also quite frequently present among atheists. Different kinds of afterlife beliefs seem to be present in the worldviews of many atheists and the concept of the soul is often incorporated in these beliefs. Beliefs about purpose and destiny have also been found among atheists and even beliefs about 'higher powers and beings' were found among atheists. In sum, it is save to say that a lack of believe in God(s) does not necessarily lead to a lack of believe in other religious ideas and a lot of atheists do think that there is more 'between heaven and earth'.

Typologies of atheism

One of the main challenges of studying atheism in empirical studies concerns the basic criteria for distinguishing different kinds of atheists from one another. In recent years, several typologies have been offered that have been based on different characteristics. Three of these will be discussed here.

First, a typology has been offered by Silver et al. that has defined different kinds of atheism based on self-reported religious identities.[120] They have distinguished six types: *intellectual atheist, activist atheist, seeker-agnostic, anti-theist, non-theist,* and *ritual atheist.* These types have mainly been based on the level of rejection of theism and on how the atheists present themselves to the world. For instance, the *activist atheists* are defined by their tendency to be very vocal and proactive regarding issues in the atheist socio-political sphere. In addition, the *non-theists* are defined by their lack of concern for religion. Religion plays no role or issue in the conscious worldview of these individuals. Another type, *ritual atheism* is identified by its openness towards certain teachings of some religious traditions. They find utility in religious traditions and rituals, without themselves believing in God or the divine.

[119] Idem. P.69

[120] Silver, Coleman III, Hood & Holcombe, 2014

A second typology has been put forward by Vainio and Visala.[121] They have identified four types of atheism and these have mainly been based on what they criticize, and what sources they use to support their unbelief. These four types are *scientistic atheism, philosophical atheism, tragic atheism,* and *humanist atheism.* Members of the first type, *scientistic atheism,* base their arguments on scientific premises. They belief that the trueness of religion and the existence of God are ultimately a scientific issues. *Philosophical atheists* have a lot in common with the previous type, because they often use scientific arguments as parts of their arguments. However, they also incorporate philosophical and non-scientific premises into their arguments because they do not think that findings in physics or biology automatically solve the debate between theistic and non-theistic worldviews. The third type *tragic atheism* is characterized by its critique on belief in moral progress and liberal values. It is noted that these atheists not only criticize religion, but they also criticize many other atheists because these would still hold beliefs about the gradual progress of humanity throughout history. They state that this manner of thinking in terms of progress has been taken over from Christianity, but that it is inaccurate to use this manner of thinking when you identify as an atheist. The final type of atheism, *humanist atheism* is noted to share several sensibilities with religious worldviews. These humanists hold beliefs about justice and goodness as existing objectively somewhere in the universe, beyond this realm of existence.

A final typology has been offered by Hashemi, and distinguishes between two kinds of atheism: *Pilgrim Atheism* and *Tourist Atheism.*[122] The former refers to a kind of atheism that is based on the position that science conflicts with religion and it is characterized by its hostility towards religion. The latter refers to a kind of atheism that approaches religion as a cultural heritage that still contains some benefits for nonbelievers.

The typologies that have been offered so far have been first attempts to study atheism in positive terms and they have aimed to define atheists by more characteristics than simply their lack of belief in God(s). These three typologies have provided very useful frameworks for the study of atheism in the future and they illustrate very well the great varieties between different kinds of atheists. However, despite the fact that these

[121] Vainio & Visala, 2015
[122] Hashemi, 2016

typologies look at many characteristics of atheists, they have generally failed to ask questions about the positive beliefs that atheists can hold and they have basically defined different kinds of closed-atheism. Apart from the *humanist atheists* mentioned in the typology by Vainio and Visala, who hold beliefs about justice and goodness of the universe, these studies have not provided types of atheism that are characterized by positive religious beliefs. The studies have mainly identified different types of atheism by the kind of thinking they use to come to their atheist views and how they promote their atheism to the world. The scholars have focused on how atheists define themselves in opposition to religion and they continue the line of thinking about atheism as a mirror image of religion.

One typology that does provide insight into the positive beliefs of atheists has recently been offered by Lindeman et al.[123] The aim of their study was to differentiate between types of atheists based on their supernatural beliefs and lack thereof. They have argued that not all supernatural beliefs are religious, and that one can be a religious unbeliever, and still have supernatural beliefs. In addition, they note that a distinction should be made between three different kinds of supernatural beliefs. First, there are 'religious supernatural beliefs'; these are God beliefs. Second, there are supernatural beliefs that are often, but not necessarily, linked with God beliefs. These include afterlife beliefs and a belief in an immortal soul. Third, there are supernatural beliefs that are not typically religious, such as telepathy and astrology. Lindeman et al. argue that religious disbelief does not necessarily imply disbelief in other supernatural phenomena and in their research, they analyze the supernatural beliefs of religious unbelievers.[124] They have identified nine different kinds of supernatural beliefs and these were measured by letting the participants rate their agreement (from 1 to 5) with the following nine statements: "I believe in God", "I believe in life after death", "the universe originated from intelligent design", "The universe has an ultimate purpose", "I believe in fate", "There is spiritual energy in the universe", "In the universe, everything is connected in a way that cannot be explained scientifically", "Telepathic mindreading is possible", and "I believe in angels". The answers from the participants suggested that there are large

[123] Lindeman, et al. 2019

[124] Their study is conducted among groups of unbeliever from three Western European countries: Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

differences among atheists in how much they hold supernatural beliefs. From the results, three different types of unbelievers have been distilled: *Analytic Atheism*, *spiritual but not religious*, and *Uncertain Nonbelievers* (fig. 1). These results have been combined with an analysis of several other characteristics of the atheists, such as attitudes toward religion, cognitive characteristics, religious identity, and self-identification

The *analytic atheists* were the largest group. Generally they did not hold any supernatural beliefs. Further, the participants from this group were more often men than women, they had a somewhat higher level of education and socioeconomic status and they were slightly older that the other atheists. Compared to the other two categories, they scored higher on cognitive reflection and they relied less on their intuitions and more on analytic thinking. They were also more certain about their supernatural disbeliefs than the other two groups and regarded religion more negatively. They see more conflict between science and religion and are generally convinced that their way of thinking about religion is the right way.[125] In short, this type is basically the textbook example of atheism and it corresponds well with the outlines of the type of closed-atheism/nonreligion that we find in the CSR discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism.

The *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) atheists presented the smallest of the three unbeliever groups. These individuals believed moderately or strongly in all other supernatural phenomena except God. These individuals were more often women than men and less educated than the other two groups. Their attitudes towards religion were more moderate: they had less negative and less determined attitudes toward religion than the other groups. They were less certain that their attitudes towards religion are correct and they see less conflict between science and religion. With respect to cognitive characteristics, they relied more on their intuitive thinking in everyday life than the other types.[126]

The third group, the *uncertain nonbelievers,* was medium in size and their supernatural beliefs were average, compared to the other types. They differed from the other two groups in that they had more doubts. This group of nonbelievers was most

[125] Idem. pp196-197
[126] Idem. pp197-198

hesitant in scaling their (un)beliefs. Together with the 'spiritual but not religious' group, their attitudes toward religion were more ambivalent, more difficult to explain to others, and less elaborated than the analytic atheists' attitudes. In cognitive profile they were between the other two groups.[127]

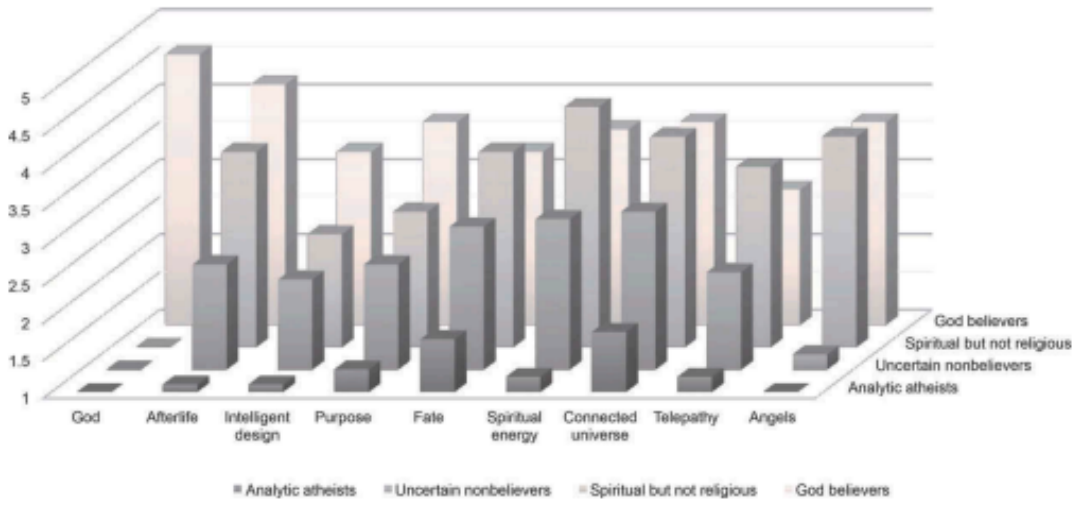

Figure 1. Supernatural beliefs among the three atheist groups (Analytic Atheists, Uncertain Nonbelievers, and Spiritual but Not Religious) and among participants who reported believing in God.

The unnaturalness of atheism as a comparative claim.

The typology by Lindeman et al. is a first attempt to identify atheists by the positive beliefs they hold and the typology is very useful for the present study. The supernatural beliefs that Lindeman et al. have researched among atheists greatly overlap with the religious building blocks that have been distilled from CSR in the previous chapter.[128] The study illustrates that these religious beliefs can be found in a variety of quantities among different kinds of atheists. Further, the study suggests that when naturalness is viewed as a comparative claim, some forms of atheism could be regarded as more natural then others. In the first chapter it has been mentioned that the naturalness

[127] Idem. p198

[128] Lindeman et al. have distinguished nine kinds of supernatural beliefs. These overlap in great deal with the religious building blocks from chapter 2. The notion of a soul concept lacks in the study by Lindeman et al. However they do implement all the other religious ideas from the previous chapter, only in different ways. The religious building blocks of a purpose of life, of meaning in life events, and of the connectedness of the universe show great similarities with Lindeman et al.'s notions of intelligent design, purpose, fate, spiritual energy and a connected universe. What has been labeled as 'supernatural agents' in the present research is divided in two categories, with Lindeman et al. Namely Gods and Angels (angels are used as an example of non-religious supernatural beliefs). The category of "telepathy' lacks in the present study.

hypothesis is to be taken as a comparative claim (one thing is more natural than something else). According to this line of thinking, the typology of Lindeman et al. would present a clear hierarchy in naturalness. The *analytic atheists* would be the least natural type, since it denies all the religious beliefs that CSR has deemed natural. As mentioned, this type has generally been used in the discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism. The other two types mentioned could be considered as more natural. The *spiritual but not religious group* could be seen as the most natural of the three types, since it affirms the religious beliefs the most. The *uncertain nonbelievers* would fall in between the other two considering naturalness. The typology from Lindeman et al. clearly shows that atheism cannot simply be put on the zero point of the naturalness scale, because there are different kinds of atheisms that could be considered as more or less natural compared to one another.

These results from the study of Lindeman et al. suggest that different supernatural beliefs represent some sort of unitary construct in which you can believe to certain degrees (fig 1). Accordingly, in a study by Wilson, Bulbulia, & Sibley, it has been found that people who believe in one supernatural phenomena tend to also believe in others.[129] However another study from Rice, suggests that there is no correlation whatsoever between supernatural believes, and that individuals can 'pick and mix' freely from them.[130] Altogether, it is not yet clear how supernatural and religious beliefs relate to one another and whether individuals can freely choose them in any combination, or whether some supernatural and religious beliefs should be seen as package deals that cannot be separated from one another. In any case, even though the information about the positive beliefs of atheists is still very fragmented, the studies from the present chapter have clearly shown that atheists can hold many of the religious beliefs that CSR has deemed natural.

[129] Wilson, Bulbulia & Sibley, 2014
[130] Rice, 2003

Chapter 5: Moving Forward, Solutions and Suggestions

A new terminology

Several implications follow from the preceding analysis. First, the discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism is in need of a new terminology. This paper argues that the term 'atheism' is simply inadequate to frame the present discussion. In the previous chapters, it has been argued that the discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism was not actually about atheism; rather it was about the unnaturalness of nonreligion. CSR has often neglected to provide clear definitions of the subjects of their study, and as a result the discussion has lacked conceptual clarity. The discussion has been about whether a disbelief in religious concepts would be unnatural, or whether this could be just as natural as belief in these concepts, due to environmental, cognitive and evolutionary circumstances. This paper has argued that the term 'atheism' is not sufficient to discuss this position of unbelief, since atheism is not a homogenous category. The term solely refers to a lack of belief in God(s) and it leaves open all the other beliefs that have been identified by CSR. In order to navigate the discussion better this paper has proposed a distinction between two kinds of atheism that will enable a more nuanced conversation about atheism and naturalness. Open-atheism refers to a category of atheists that do not believe in gods, yet they do hold other religious ideas. The discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism has not been about this group. The second type, closed-atheism, refers to a category that does deny all religious beliefs. The discussion has been about this group of atheists. This position can also be referred to as nonreligion. Using the term nonreligion indicates clearly that what we want to discuss is in relation to religion, while the term atheism solely indicates that what is discussed is in relation to theism. Having defined religion more clearly we can now use nonreligion to refer to the position that denies the existence of transempirical agents, worlds, and/or processes. To sum up, this paper proposes that the discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism should rather be framed as being about the unnaturalness of nonreligion.

Naturalness as a continuum

A second implication of the preceding analysis is that CSR discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism should become more sensitive to the varieties of atheism. In this paper, there have been two references to the notion of a continuum. First, it was mentioned how Beit-Hallami has argued that religiosity could be considered as a scale

from 1 to 100. Atheism, in his theory would present a score of zero in religiosity. It has been argued that this notion, of atheism presenting a position opposite of religion has been used implicitly in the CSR discussion. Further, it has been argued that this position is wrong, simply because atheism does not present a homogenous category, and there are many types of open-atheism that do have religious beliefs that CSR has studied. This entails that different kinds of atheism could be found on different places on this 'religiosity scale'. A second reference to a continuum entailed the concept of naturalness. McCauley has explained that naturalness is supposed to be taken as a comparative claim. One thing is more natural than something else, rather than one thing is natural and something else is unnatural. He has argued that naturalness should thus be seen as a continuum. When we endorse in this view, and we regard naturalness as a scale, it is by now evident that we cannot simply place 'atheism' somewhere on this continuum. Instead, there would be many kinds of atheisms that could present different levels of cognitive naturalness. This scale would not start with atheism as the zero score. Rather it would then start with nonreligion (or closed-atheism), the type of atheism that has been the subject of the unnaturalness debate. This 'naturalness scale' would end with belief systems that affirm all the religious building blocks that CSR has deemed cognitively natural. Thus at this end of the spectrum we find believers of the many theistic religions. When we envision this scale, it becomes clear that in between these two ends, there is a whole spectrum of atheist belief systems (open-atheisms) presenting different levels of naturalness depending on how many of the religious building blocks they affirm. It should be noted then, that some open-atheists could even fall into the category of the most natural belief systems. This is illustrated rather well in the study of Lindeman et al., which has indicated that there are atheists (which they have referred to as spiritual but not religious) who believe in other supernatural entities, such as angels. Thus, it is possible for open-atheists to affirm to all the religious building blocks that have been identified in this paper. Further it could be noted that there is actually also a wide variety of non-theistic religions. For example, there are Buddhist religious cultures where theism is not a useful category for describing any beliefs or practices and yet supernatural beliefs are very intense and important.[131] To summarize, when naturalness of religion is regarded as a spectrum it is not accurate to

[131] Wildman, Sosis & McNamara, 2012, p2

claim that atheism is always less natural than religion, since there are many kinds of open-atheisms, and many kinds of religions, that would present different levels of naturalness.

A new way of thinking about naturalness

It could be argued that what the extensive body of CSR research has illustrated is not that 'religion is natural', rather it has proposed that all humans have certain 'religious intuitions'. The vast body of CSR research has identified several religious beliefs that are cognitively natural to humans and that can be found all over the world in many different forms. To sum up the third chapter of this paper, CSR has argued that humans have intuitive beliefs about supernatural agents, souls, afterlives, a purpose of life, meaning in life events, and the morality of the universe. Suppressing these intuitions, and developing worldviews that deny these intuitive beliefs, would be cognitively effortful and therefore less natural than giving in to these intuitions. However, it might also be the case that combining and developing the intuitive beliefs into specific reflective beliefs or belief systems might also require a level of cognitive effort. The religious intuitions that CSR has identified have been combined and developed all over the world in many different specific belief systems and religious traditions. The development, remembrance, and passing on of specific religious traditions might also present higher levels of cognitive effort than simply giving in to the religious intuitions. For example, it is one thing to intuitively believe that there is a life after death and that a person has an essence that lives on after they die. However, it is another thing to fully conceptualize what this afterlife would look like. For example, religions can have developed beliefs about the afterlife in the forms of heaven, hell or reincarnation. Really conceptualizing and envisioning what these concepts entail and to reflectively believe in this might be more cognitively challenging than has been expected by CSR so far.

Thus, CSR has provided theories about several religious beliefs that all humans intuitively share. Suppression of these intuitions would require special cognitive effort, and therefore nonreligion would be rather effortful and thus relatively unnatural. In addition, the development of these intuitions into full blown religious constructs might also require a level of cognitive effort and really conceptualizing these intuitions might provide a cognitive challenge as well.

Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to provide a critical analysis of the 'atheism is unnatural' discussion in CSR and it has been argued that the discussion is mainly in need of a clearer conceptual framework and a more nuanced vision on atheism.

The discussion surrounding the unnaturalness of atheism resulted from the claim that 'religion is natural'. This theory was first proposed by scholars such as Boyer and Bering, who argued that belief in supernatural entities was cognitively natural to humans. Over time, this theory expanded, and a whole body of religious ideas was argued to be cognitively natural and intuitive for people. Thus the 'religion is natural' hypothesis argued that humans had cognitive intuitions about supernatural agents, souls, afterlives, a purpose of life, meaning in life events, and the morality of the universe. The claim that 'religion is natural' has led scholars to ask about the widespread presence of atheists in the world. A complicated discussion surrounding the relative unnaturalness of atheism has followed. In this discussion, atheism was seen to present a mirror image of religion that implied a disbelief in religious concepts. On the one side of the discussion we find scholars such as Barrett and Bering, who have argued that religion is always more natural than atheism, because of our cognitive predisposition towards religious ideas. On the other side, we find scholars that have argued that disbelief in religious concepts can also be a natural for certain people due to environmental, genetic, and evolutionary circumstances. This paper has proposed that 'atheism' is not the right term to frame this discussion, since atheism solely refers to a disbelief in God(s), and it leaves open many other religious beliefs. The discussion has rather been about nonreligion, as the absence of beliefs in supernatural/transempirical agents, worlds, and/or processes.

Further, it has been argued that the discussion about the unnaturalness of atheism should be more sensitive to the varieties in atheism. Atheism does not present a homogenous category. Instead there are many different kinds of atheisms. This paper has proposed a general distinction between two types of atheism. Closed-atheism refers to the kind of atheism that has been studied in the CSR discussion, and it entails the disbelief in religious concepts. Open-atheism on the other hand, refers to a kind of atheism that is solely characterized by a disbelief in God(s) and it leaves open all the

other religious beliefs about supernatural/transempirical agents, worlds, and processes. In the past, atheism has mainly been studied as a solely negative identity, however in recent years scholars begun to research the positive beliefs that atheists do hold. Even though the body of research is still rather small, it seems that the religious building blocks from CSR are also quite frequently present among atheists. Several studies have indicated that it is not uncommon for atheists to believe in a soul and a form of afterlife, or in destiny. And even beliefs about other kinds of supernatural agents have been found among atheists. The discussion on the unnaturalness of atheism should be more sensitive to these varieties. Within CSR naturalness has generally been viewed as a comparative claim and as a spectrum. Some things are more natural than other things. The different kinds of open-atheism illustrate very well that atheism is not a homogenous category that can be placed somewhere on this spectrum, or that can be opposed to religion. There is no strict line between religion and atheism. Instead the many different kinds of atheism could present different levels of naturalness. In this line of thinking, some types of naturalness could be found in the category of the 'most natural' belief systems, since there are atheists who belief in all of the religious building blocks.

Finally this paper has proposed that the naturalness hypothesis is actually more about the naturalness of certain religious intuitions, rather than fully elaborated religious concepts and belief systems. CSR has identified several religious intuitions that humans all over the world share. Rejecting these intuitions in reflective belief systems, of which closed-atheism is a good example, can be cognitively very effortful. However, developing and combining these intuitions into specific religious concepts, and to further internalize and genuinely believe in these concepts might also require a level of cognitive effort.

Bibliography

- Anglin, S., "I Think, Therefore I Am? Examining Conceptions of the Self, Soul, and Mind, in *Consiousness and Cognition,* vol.29, 2014, pp.105-116
- Arnett, J., & Jensen, L., ""There's More Between Heaven and Earth": Danish Emerging Adults' Religious Beliefs and Values", in *Journal of Adolescent Research,* vol.30, 2015, pp.661-682
- Astuti, R. & Harris, P.L., "Understanding Morality and the Life of the Ancestors in Rural Madagascar", in *Cognitive Science,* vol.32, 2008, pp713-740
- Atran, S., *In God we Trust: the Evolutionary Landscape of Religion,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002
- Banerjee, E.G.K. & Bloom, P., "Why did this Happen to me? Religious Believers' and Non-believers' Teleological Reasoning About Life Events", in *Cognition* 133 (2014), pp277-303
- Barrett, J.L., *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?,* Altamire Press, 2004
- Barrett, J.L., "The Relative Unnaturalness of Atheism: On Why Geertz and Markússon are Both Right and Wrong, in *Religion* 40, vol.40, 2010, pp169-172
- Barrett, J.L., *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology from human minds to divine minds,* Templeton Press, 2011
- Barrett, J.L., Church, I.M., "Should CSR Give Atheists Epistemic Assurance? On Beer-Goggles, BFF's, and Skepticism Regarding Religious Beliefs", in *The Monist,* vol.96, 2013, pp.311-324
- Beit-Hallahmi, B., "Atheists: a Psychological Profile." In: Martin, M., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge: University Press, 2007, pp.300-317
- Bering, J.M., *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life,* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011
- Bering, J.M., "Atheism is only skin deep: Geertz and Markússon rely mistakenly on sociodemographic data as meaningful indicators of underlying cognition", in *Religion,* vol.40, 2010, pp.166-168
- Bering, J. & Bjorklund, D.F., "The Natural Emergence of Reasoning About the Afterlife as a Developmental Regularity", in *Developmental Psychology,* vol.40, 2004, pp.217-233

- Bloom, P., *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains what Makes us Human,* New York: Basic Books, 2004
- Bloom, P., "Religion is Natural", in *Developmental Science* 10, 2007, pp.147-151
- Boyer, P., *Religion Explained: The evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought,* New York: Basic Books, 2001
- Bullivant, S. & Ruse, M., *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism,* Oxford: University Press, 2013
- Caldwell-Harris, C.L., Understanding Atheism/non-belief as an Expected Individual-Differences Variable, in *Religion, brain & Behavior,* vol.2 2012, pp.4-23
- Casler, K. & Kelemen, D., "Developmental Continuity in Teleo-Functional Explanation: Reasoning About Nature Among Romanian Romani Adults", in *Journal of Cognition and Development,* vol.9. 2008, pp340-362
- Chudek. M., McNamara. R.A., Birch S., Bloom P., & Henrich J., Do minds switch bodies? Dualist interpretations across ages and societies, in *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 8:4, 2018, pp 354-368
- Coleman, T.J., Hood, R.W. & Streib, H., "An Introduction to Atheism, Agnosticesm, and Nonreligious Worldviews, in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,* vol.10, 2018, pp.203-206
- Davidsen, M.A., "Van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Science of Religion and a Way Out", in *NTT Dutch Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion,* 2020
- De Cruz, H. & De Smedt, J., *Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion,* MIT Press, Cambridge, 2015
- Forstmann, M., & Burgmer, P., "Adults are intuitive mind-body dualists", *in Journal of Experimental Psychology,* vol. 144, 2015, pp.222-235
- Geertz, A.W., Markússon, G.I., "Religion is Natural, Atheism is Not: On why Everybody is Both Right and Wrong", in *Religion,* vol.40, 2010, pp.152-165
- Gervais, W.M., Willard, A.K., Norenzayan, A. & Henrich, J., "The cultural Transmission of Faith: Why Innate Intuitions are Necessary, But Insufficient, to Explain Religious Belief", in *Religion,* vol.41, 2011, pp.389-410
- Gray, J., *Seven Types of Atheism*, Allen Lane, Peguin Books, 2018

- Gray, K. & Wegner, D.M., "Blaming God for Our Pain: Human Suffering and the Divine Mind", in *Peronality and Social Psychology Review,* vol.14, 2010, pp.7-16
- Hafer, C.L. & Bègue, L., "Experimental Research on Just-World Theory: Problems, Developments and Future Challenges", in *Psychological Bullitin,* vol.131, 2005, pp.128-167
- Harris, P. & Richert, "The Ghost in My Body: Children's Developing Concept of the Soul", in *Journal od Cognition and Culture,* vol. 6, 2006, pp.409-427
- Hodge, K.M., "Descartes' Mistake: How Afterlife Beliefs Challenge the Assumption that Humans are Intuitive Cartesian Substance Dualists, in *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* vol.8, 2008, pp.387-415
- Hodge, K.M., "On Imagining the Afterlife", in *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* vol. 11, 2011, pp.367-389
- Johnson, D., "What are Atheists for? Hypotheses on the Functions of Non-Belief in the Evolution of Religion", in *Religion, Brain & Behaviour,* vol.2, 2012, pp.48-70
- Jong, J., Halberstadt, J., & Bluemke, M., " Foxhole atheism, revised: The Effects of Moratality Salience on Explicit and Implicit Religious Beliefs", in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, vol.48,* 2012, pp.983-989
- Kelemen,D., "The Scope of Teleological Thinking in Preschool Children", in *Cognition*, vol.70, 1999, pp.241-272
- Kelemen D., Are Children "Intuitive Theists"?: Reasoning About Purpose and Design in Nature", in *Psychological Science,* col.15, 2004, pp.295-301
- Kelemen, D. & Diyanni, C., "Intuitions About Origins: Purpose and Intelligent Design in Children's Reasoning About Nature", in *Journal of Cognition and Development,* vol.6, 2005, pp3-31
- Kelemen, D., Rottman, J. & Rebecca, S., "Professional Physical Scientists Display Tenacious Teleological Tendencies: Purpose-Based Reasoning as a Cognitive Default", in *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* vol.142, 2013, pp.1074-1083
- Kráčmarová, K., Dutková, L.K. & Tavel, P., "Everybody Needs to Believe in Something: Spiritual Beliefs of Non-Religious Czech Adolescents", in *Psychology of Religion and Sppirituality,* vol.11, 2019, pp.65-73

- Launonen, L., "The Naturalness of Religion: What it means and Why it Matters", in Neue Zeitschrift fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie, vol.60, 2018, pp.84-102
- Legare, C.H. & Gelman, S.A., "Bewitchment, Biology, or Both: The Co-Existence of Natural and Supernatural Explanatory Frameworks Across Development, in *Cognitive Science,* vol.32, 2008, pp.607-642
- Lindeman, M., van Elk, M., Lipsanen, J., Marin, P. & Schjødt, U., "Religious Unbelief in Three Western European Countries: Identifying and Characterizing Unbeliever Types Using Latent Class Analysis", in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion,* vol.29, 2019, pp.184-203
- Lombrozo, T., Kelemen, D., Zaitchik, D. & Lombrozo, T., "Inferring Design: Evidence of a Preference for Teleological Explanations in Patients with Alzheimer's disease", in *Psychological Science,* vol.18, 2007, pp.999-1006
- McCauley, R., "Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011
- Norenzayan A., Gervais, W.M., "The origins of Religious Disbelief", in: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences,* vol.17, 2013 pp.20-25
- Pyysiäinen, I., "On the 'Innateness' of Religion: A Comment on Bering", in *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* vol.3, 2003, pp.218-225
- Rice, T.W., "Believe It Or Not: Religious and Other Paranormal Beliefs in the United States", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 42, 2003, pp.95-106
- Silver, C.F., Colemen, T.J., Hood, R.W. & Holcombe, J.M., "The Six Types of Nonbelief: a Qualitative Srudy of Type and Narrative, in *Mental Health, Religion & Culture,* vol.17, 2014, pp.990-1001
- Slingerland, E. & Chudek, M., "The Prevalence of Mind-Body Dualism in Early China", in *Cognitive Science,* vol.35, 2011, pp.997-1007
- Smedes, T.A., *God, Iets of Niets. de Postseculiere Maatschappij tussen 'geloof' en 'ongeloof'*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2016
- Taves, A., "What is Nonreligion? On the Virtues of a Meaning Systems Framework for Studying Nonreligious and Religious Worldviews in the Context of Everyday Life", in *Secularism and Nonreligion,* vol.7, 2018, pp.1-6

- Taves, A., Asprem, E. & Ihm, E., "Psychology, Menaing Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion", in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,* vol.10*,* 2018, pp.207-217
- Thorson, J.A., "Religion and Anxiety: Which Anxiety? Which Religion?", in Koenig, H.G., *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, chapter 10, pp.147-160
- Vainio, O. & Visala, A., "Varieties of Unbelief: A Taxonomy of Atheistic Positions", in *Neue Zeitschrift Fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophy,* vol.57, 2015, pp.483-500
- White, C., "What the Cognitive Science of Religion Is (and Is Not)", in Hughes, A.W, *Theory in a Time of Excess: Beyond Reflection and Explanation in Religious Studies Scolarship,* Sheffield: Equinox, 2017, pp.96-108
- Wildman, W.J., Sosis, R. & McNamara, P., "The Scientific Study of Atheism", in *Religion, Brain & Behaviour,* vol.2, 2012, pp.1-3
- Willard, A.K. & Norenzayan, A., "Cognitive Biases Explain Religious Belief, Paranormal Belief, and Belief in Life's Purpose", in *Cognition,* 129, 2013, pp 379-391
- Wilson, M.S., Bulbulia, J. & Sibley, C.G., "Differences and similarities in religious and paranormal beliefs: a typology of distinct faith signatures", in *Religion, Brain & Behaviour,* vol.4, 2014, pp.104-126
- Zuckerman, P., "Atheism, Contemporary Numbers and Patterns", in: Martin, M., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge: University Press, 2007, pp.47-65