

Warranted Scepticism: If we are to be consistent and fair, extraordinary claims do indeed require extraordinary evidence

Abstract/Introduction

I thank the editors of *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* for allowing me to respond to Scott Ventureyra's article, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test",¹ with the main focus being on the idea that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. I critique Ventureyra's article and demonstrate why this concept holds true, particularly if we are to remain consistent, and fair to a great number of religious and non-religious groups.

Hume's maxim

Ventureyra's first substantive claim, that the Humean idea that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence is "essentially an assault on the concept of miracles",² is not entirely correct, as this approach can be used for all manner of improbable claims, such as claims about alien visitations. Several pages follow speculating on the possibly emotive reasons behind the CFI's use of Hume's maxim, and that there are some atheists who prefer God not to exist, and I shall generally avoid such discussion to focus on the bigger issues, such as whether the maxim is correct, and also because I am not one such atheist. Despite being a de facto naturalist, I would think the existence of God to be a marvellous thing! It is also unfair to assert that "secular humanists must maintain that the majority of people are either

¹ Scott Ventureyra, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 16, no. 36 (2015): 1-18.

² *Ibid.*: 2.

delusional or have something wrong with their cognitive faculties in order to explain why most people still believe in some sort of spiritual religion”,³ as people are often wrong, about a great many things, due to either incomplete evidence or not being up to date with the latest evidence.

More importantly, Ventureyra seems to basically accept Hume’s maxim but has an issue with “the fact that the evaluation of certain claims being either ordinary or extraordinary can be to a degree subjective”, pointing to the effective claim that ‘buses are dangerous’ might be true in Israel but false in Canada.⁴ This particular conundrum is easily resolved by combining the known facts, and making the one, very reasonable, claim: “Buses are more dangerous in Israel than in Canada.” However, the potential for subjective evaluations is a rational concern, and so, while we should not throw out the helpful methodological tool altogether, Ventureyra is correct to imply that we need to be careful about what claims we consider to be ‘extraordinary’.

The God question

Inevitably, our focus should then turn to considering whether hypotheses concerning God should be considered ordinary or extraordinary. There is much in this part of Ventureyra’s article that I find problematic but I wish to draw attention to his claim that “God as understood by classical theism is an immaterial being who by definition cannot be examined by empirical tools.”⁵ This places unjustified limits on the omnipotent God’s power to reveal himself to us, and is directly contradicted by the biblical texts of Ventureyra’s own religion – after all, according to many of the books of the Bible, God has appeared to many, in various forms.⁶ Nevertheless, we can

³ Ibid.: 5.

⁴ Ibid.: 6.

⁵ Ibid.: 8.

⁶ A famous example would be Exodus 3:2-4.

both agree that “the effects of God’s action, from primary and secondary causes, can be examined in such a fashion”.⁷ And, importantly, Ventureyra would seemingly agree with me that ‘negative evidence’ counts as evidence, since he correctly refers to the apparent lack of Greek gods at Mount Olympus. Also significant is that Ventureyra seemingly accepts that it would be harder to demonstrate God’s existence, compared to the existence of other gods:

To verify claims of the existence of a transcendent God, that may or may not be immanent as well, is a more challenging task than one(s) that seem to be part of the material world or at least inhabit it (such as Zeus and other such gods).⁸

This does considerable damage to Ventureyra’s preferred hypothesis, that the god of theism (called ‘God’) exists, since terms like ‘more challenging’, ‘harder’, ‘more surprising’, and the like, equate to ‘less probable’ once we move to a probabilistic analysis, which is precisely what is required when trying to determine which hypothesis – whether it be naturalism, theism, or some other model of the divine – is probable or at least more probable. He takes this to be a point for considering more than evidence but what he has actually done is admitted that, when it comes to the upcoming probabilistic analysis, theism is already on the backfoot since the theistic hypothesis must contend with a smaller prior probability (the more direct evidence will factor into the consequent probabilities, and we can then ascertain the overall posterior probability). Hume’s maxim, expressed mathematically, simply says that for claims that involve a smaller prior probability, the more relevant evidence (directly affecting the consequent probabilities) must be more impressive to compensate. So

⁷ Scott Ventureyra, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 16, no. 36 (2015): 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 9.

Ventureyra has here come quite close to accepting the maxim, even in its application to the God question.

Ventureyra mentions the Kalam Cosmological Argument, though the truth of the first premise is unknown, and the second premise, that the universe began to exist, is not at all justified by “the evidence for big bang cosmology” as he asserts;⁹ this evidence only makes it reasonable to think that the universe, around 14 billion years ago, underwent a period of expansion – it says nothing of a proper beginning, particularly one from nothing, as theists like Ventureyra generally are committed to. Nor does the argument, even if we accept it as correct, allude to theism. There are a number of alternative supernaturalisms that could apply here, as I explain in my other work, especially *The Case Against Theism (TCAT)*.¹⁰ Ventureyra further claims that “science in and of itself remains neutral on the question of God”, but that seems incorrect, as I explain in my other work (such as *TCAT*), if only because there are numerous alternatives to theism, many of which are more amenable to scientific exploration, as Ventureyra actually admitted earlier. If theism cannot be demonstrated to be true by scientific means, when other ‘isms’ can, that is a problem for theism, not for science. Ventureyra, however, asks an excellent question, which gets to the heart of probabilistic (Bayesian) reasoning:

If God exists, who is the cause of the universe (both determinant and sustaining), immaterial, spaceless, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent - what sorts of things would I expect to be true in reality?¹¹

⁹ Ibid.: 10-11.

¹⁰ See, for example, Raphael Lataster, *The Case Against Theism: Why the Evidence Disproves God's Existence* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

¹¹ Scott Ventureyra, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 16, no. 36 (2015): 11.

This is precisely what we ask in proper probabilistic analyses. For example, if a nuclear explosion rocked my office yesterday, would everything that was in it be intact, or can I expect debris everywhere? On the topic at hand, is the presence of gratuitous evil more expected on theism, naturalism, or some alternative? Is the hiddenness of the divine expected from a loving God who wants us all to believe, or is it more expected on naturalism, or some alternative, such as a god who doesn't care if we believe in it or not? Is the inefficient design we find throughout our world best explained by a perfect god, and imperfect one, or none at all? Is theism the only explanation for the universe or could some alternative, like deism, also explain the universe's existence? As I have shown elsewhere, and as many other philosophers have shown with regards to the argument from evil, asking these sorts of questions typically leads one away from theism, and towards naturalism. In my work, I show that even if naturalism were accepted as false, it is more likely a supernaturalistic alternative to theism that is true, like some form of deism, panentheism, or pantheism (in a footnote here Ventureyra commendably accepts that individual arguments 'for theism' could actually lead to alternatives).

Naturalism presumed?

Ventureyra complains that atheists, or to be more precise we should say 'naturalists', benefit from presumption and demand "that the burden of proof rests on their opponents to show them otherwise".¹² This does not apply to all atheists or naturalists. For example, I am an atheist, and a de facto naturalist, and do not have this attitude. I subject naturalism to the same rigorous probabilistic analyses as theism in *TCAT*, and I am not the only one, and I further consider alternatives to both theism and naturalism. My Bayesian approach to such questions is used by several philosophers of religion, on both sides, including a scholar Ventureyra references often, William Lane

¹² Ibid.: 12.

Craig.¹³ I recommend that he look more into this, if only to see how both theism and naturalism can be taken to account, particularly when scrutinised in light of the fact that there are many alternatives to both (though they are not discussed as often – something I aim to rectify in my work).

Ventureyra raises the cosmological argument again, pointing, as Craig does, to Borde, Guth, and Vilenkin in support of the theistic notion that the universe had an absolute beginning, from nothing.¹⁴ This seems to be a misinterpretation, with even those authors denying this and taking offence at how theistic philosophers are misrepresenting their work (and that is before we get to the realisation that theoretical physicists typically speculate so that none of these theories could be used as unobjectionable support for theism, or naturalism or some alternative for that matter).¹⁵ Ventureyra goes on to highlight John Shook as an example of a philosopher unfairly presuming naturalism, and while I feel that is being uncharitable to Shook, this again does not apply to all atheists or naturalists, such as myself. In all of my work arguing against theism, for naturalism and alternatives, and

¹³ I use this approach in *TCAT*. Philippe does likewise, capably arguing for naturalism, in Herman Philippe, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Oppy does similarly, though he hesitates to call it probabilistic, in Graham Robert Oppy, *The Best Argument Against God* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). From the theistic and Christian side, we have the influential Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Craig effectively accepts and somewhat endorses the Bayesian approach to the question of God's existence, though he does not use it in any transparent (numerical) sense: William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

¹⁴ Scott Ventureyra, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 16, no. 36 (2015): 13.

¹⁵ For example, see Alexander Vilenkin, "Creation of Universes from Nothing," *Physics Letters B* 117, no. 1-2 (1982): 25-28.; Alexander Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p. 176.; Victor J. Stenger, *The Fallacy of Fine-Tuning: Why the Universe is not Designed for Us* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2011), pp. 127-130.

against the resurrection of Jesus (which we will address soon), I never once presume naturalism, and even show how many of these non-theistic alternatives work if supernaturalism is presumed. To end this part of Ventureyra's article, and this response, I look to his assertion: "the CFI does not seem interested in building a positive case for their a-theological views particularly with their application of Sagan's quote but instead want to solely attack anything they presuppose as being irrational particularly whatever is supernatural".¹⁶ That is a very strong claim, and one would expect it to be backed up with solid evidence. Unfortunately, Ventureyra only provides one reference to official CFI publications throughout his article, and not here; and that reference is irrelevant here, being only their online mission statement about intending to spread rational thinking throughout the world.

Jesus' resurrection

And so we get to the test case concerning Jesus. I have skipped a little section on basicity as Ventureyra makes many 'if' statements (such as "if belief in God is properly basic"),¹⁷ which are speculative, and because the entire basicity/warrant enterprise falls apart when considering that alternatives to theism can also be presumed to be 'basic' and 'warranted', and the same can apply to alternative theisms such as Islamic theism.

Ventureyra claims that "As long as the possibility of God is feasible then so are miracles."¹⁸ That is fine. However, we once again have an 'if', and furthermore we need to know if God's existence is actually probable, and then if miracles are probable. Referring to mere possibilities does not help us achieve those aims. He asserts that "as we have seen... the evidence for God's existence is more probable

¹⁶ Scott Ventureyra, "Warranted Scepticism? Putting the Center for Inquiry's Rationale to the Test," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 16, no. 36 (2015): 14.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 14-15.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 16.

than not”. He did not at all demonstrate that, and that seems very implausible given my analyses of alternatives to both theism and naturalism. Intriguingly, Ventureyra seems to endorse probabilistic reasoning, stating that “probability calculus and Bayes theorem have shown the fallaciousness of Hume’s arguments”. That seems odd to me, since Hume’s maxim is quintessentially Bayesian, but I digress. Unfortunately, Ventureyra does not apply Bayesian principles to the issue of Jesus’ resurrection correctly.¹⁹

Ventureyra completely ignores the consequent probabilities, focusing on prior probabilities. And he mistakenly thinks that all the evidence about the event (namely, “the empty tomb, the disciples having experiences of Jesus appearing to them and the origin of the disciples’ belief that Jesus was raised from the dead”) is background knowledge that boosts the priors. This evidence actually affects the consequents, and, as most critical New Testament scholars would agree, is not all necessary reliable historical information (note that for those who do not presume that the New Testament books are generally reliable many problems therein present themselves – the anonymity of the Gospels for one). A proper consideration of background knowledge and prior probabilities (as I make in my article on this topic, as well as in *TCAT*)²⁰ would acknowledge that people typically do not come back to life (or walk on water, turn water into wine, and so forth). This is not a presumption of naturalism. This is fact. Even if God exists. Even if Jesus were divine. Such things rarely, if ever, happen.

That justifies assigning low prior probabilities when encountering such claims. Of course, if one such claim turns out to be true, we would expect to have ‘extraordinary evidence’ that would convince us. Unfortunately, we do not have that in the case of Jesus’ miracles. We have a handful of anonymous accounts, written decades after the fact, and that have been tampered with over the centuries. We also

¹⁹ Ibid.: 16-17.

²⁰ Raphael Lataster, "A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig's Resurrection of Jesus Argument," *Think* 14, no. 39 (2015): 59-71.

lack contemporary non-Christian accounts bolstering these miraculous claims (Josephus and Tacitus don't help, and they were born decades after Jesus' death). Funnily enough, we have better evidence (contemporary accounts from known witnesses) for the resurrections of several Hindu religious figures, and it seems likely that Ventureyra would not accept that evidence, terrible as it is, though it is superior to his evidence for his preferred religious tradition.

As for the evidence appealed to, all three are easily explained on naturalism, and that is before we even get to alternative supernaturalisms. For example, the apparent witnesses (if we even value the Gospels so highly) could simply have been mistaken, about the tomb, post-mortem appearances of Jesus, and so forth. People are mistaken all the time, and this applies to religion as well, which Ventureyra would surely agree with, since he would not accept the claims of various other religions. He should not be so surprised, then, if the Hindu looks upon his claims with the same sort of dismissiveness he offers to theirs.

Conclusion

No, not all atheists presume naturalism. Nor does the CFI. Hume's maxim is entirely reasonable. If it is used to argue against miracles, that too is reasonable, since the prior probabilities of miracles are very low – and they are supposed to be!²¹ The scepticism about such miracles is not because of a presumption of atheism but because with low priors, really good evidence is required, and that is not what we have; this is effectively admitted by Ventureyra who acknowledges that theism and associated claims are very difficult to prove

²¹ If resurrections were quite common, people would wonder why they ought to follow Jesus instead of someone else. And Elijah's dealings with the priests of Baal reveal that God is a Bayesian, seeing as Elijah took action to lower the probability of the fire appearing – to make it all the more amazing and obviously 'divine' when the fire would come.

scientifically. I suspect that if we do not presume naturalism, or theism, and fairly and objectively consider all the other alternatives as well (such as deism, pantheism, the polytheisms, and more), we would accept that agnosticism is the most reasonable option, which effectively leads to de facto naturalism. But naturalism need not be presumed. Scepticism over theism is very much justified even if supernaturalism were true, and scepticism over Jesus' resurrection is also very much justified even if God exists. Maybe God does exist, and maybe he did raise Jesus from the dead. It is certainly possible. But we do not (yet?) have the evidence to justify those hypotheses, particularly in light of the multitude of alternative hypotheses. That does not mean that one should not be a theist or a Christian. That is another matter entirely.

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