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Do religious beliefs aim at the truth?

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Abstract: **This paper evaluates Brian Zamulinski's argument from considerations of relative likelihood for preferring a 'religion-as-fiction' hypothesis to metaphysical realism. The paper finds that the argument fails to consider numerous variant hypotheses, and that the 'religion-as-fiction' hypothesis is poorly formulated. It is concluded that an argument from likelihood about the status of religious belief will not, in the way Zamulinski constructs it, give support to a hypothesis unless supplemented by an estimate of its probability. Moreover, once probability is taken into account, the 'religion-as-fiction' hypothesis looks very weak.**

In a recent paper,[1] Brian Zamulinski argues that religions do not represent the world accurately because they aim primarily to satisfy a human longing for a state of affairs which makes right all that is inequitable in the world. Unable to make the world morally fair themselves, Zamulinski contends, believers invent a story about an unobservable supernatural realm which (for them) evens out apparent moral injustice. He calls this a 'religion-as-fiction' hypothesis and argues for it on the ground that it provides a much more *likely* explanation for why religion has evolved than a 'religion-as-non-fiction' hypothesis, or metaphysical realism. The likelihood of a hypothesis H is the degree to which it raises the probability P of the evidence E – in this case the evidence is religious belief and practice. The likelihood of H can be expressed as P(E/H), and is distinct from the probability of H given E, or P(H/E).

Psychological explanations of religious belief are by no means new, Freud's wish-fulfilment theory being a familiar example, but Zamulinski believes that he has a 'new argument' for his position by virtue of his appeal to likelihood. In this paper, I will argue that establishing the likelihood of a hypothesis is not sufficient to believe that it is true, and that arguments of the type Zamulinski offers cannot by themselves provide a good ground to prefer 'religion as fiction' over metaphysical realism.

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Zamulinski's theory

Zamulinski considers two theories. The religion-as-fiction hypothesis (henceforth RAF) states that '[r]eligion ''satisfies'' a specific human longing for a state of affairs such that all is morally right with the world … and it has come into existence to achieve this satisfaction' (49). The religion-as-non-fiction hypothesis (RAN) is metaphysical realism (though more on this below). Zamulinski believes that RAF is plausible, but the inherent comparative probabilities of the two hypotheses are difficult to determine because 'there is no information about the probability of the postulates' of RAN (46). However, he believes that we are in a position to evaluate the *likelihood* of the two theories, i.e. the relative probabilities they give to established facts about religious behaviour and beliefs. That is, if we assess the evidence about religious belief and practice (call it E), Zamulinski believes that we are not in a position to evaluate P(RAN/E) against P(RAF/E), but that it is possible to show that P(E/RAF) > P(E/RAN).

Zamulinski offers ten items of evidence to show that RAF is more likely than RAN. Four examples of these are as follows. (1) It is predictable that we would posit a supernatural realm if we had a need to account for the moral imbalance in the world, but the existence of a supernatural realism does not by itself ensure that anyone will either believe or even apprehend it. (2) Since RAF identifies a basic fact about human psychology, we would expect religious beliefs to arise in all human communities, whereas we do not generally find universal recognition of factual truths. (3) We would expect a much greater degree of agreement in religious belief if believers were responding to an independently existing reality, than if believers were producing a speculative response to a psychological need. (4) RAF suggests that religious attempts to achieve salvation should have a moral component, a fact which does not obviously follow from the mere existence of a supernatural reality. Zamulinski argues that RAF assigns a probability to such observations that 'approaches certainty' (58).

I will raise some questions about these examples in the following, but the main point of dispute is not the evidence but whether the likelihood of a hypothesis is a sufficient standard of explanatory value: 'the bulk of the discussion will be aimed at showing that the religion-as-fiction hypothesis assigns a higher probability than the religion-as-non-fiction hypothesis to a number of observations about human religion. This will show that the religion-as-fiction hypothesis is a better explanation that the religion-as-non-fiction hypothesis' (48). Aside from the qualities of the supporting evidence, or even the hypothesis under consideration, it can be seen that Zamulinski's argument rests on a model of explanation that takes likelihood as the basis for explanatory value and our preference between hypotheses. Indeed, he takes this to be what is novel about his argument. In the following section I will set out some difficulties for this approach.

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Three problems with likely hypotheses

First problem

One initial concern can be stated briefly. RAN and RAF are consistent, so even if the likelihood of RAF is greater than RAN, it does not show RAN to be false. The consistency is obvious: one hypothesis posits facts about human psychology, the other posits facts about a mind-independent religious reality, so it is possible that both could be true. Why, therefore should we find the greater likelihood of RAF a reason for preferring it to RAN as an explanation of religion?

The difficulty could be avoided by building into RAF the claim that a supernatural reality does *not* exist. Call this hypothesis RAF*. Clearly, grounds for believing that RAF* successfully explains religious belief and practice are grounds for believing that metaphysical realism does not. The problem now, however, is that we have no good reason for preferring RAF* over RAF. Since RAF* adds nothing to RAF beyond the denial of the existence of a supernatural reality, it will not make the existence of religious belief and practice any more probable. In fact, unless RAF is more likely than RAN with respect to *every* single piece of evidence about religion (which Zamulinski does not claim or establish), RAF* is less likely than RAF. For consider some fact E1 about religion for which $P(E1/RAN) > P(E1/RAF)$. We would expect $P(E1/RAF^*)$ to be lower than P(E/RAF) because it excludes a possibility that would allow for E1 which, however unlikely, is at least consistent with RAF. So from considerations about likelihood, RAF* is less preferable than RAF.[2]

To bring the problem of consistency into focus, consider the arguments (1) and (2) given above. RAF, Zamulinski argues, makes it more probable than RAN that we adopt religious beliefs and that these beliefs should be found in all communities. So presumably RAF *and* RAN make it *even more* probable that we believe in the supernatural, and that the belief is widespread. Call this hypothesis RANF. RANF is more likely than RAF (or RAN) on its own. This is hardly surprising: it is more likely that we believe in the supernatural both if we are psychologically inclined to do so and if the supernatural really exists, than if we are only psychologically inclined to believe it. The problem is that if likelihood is our standard of good argument, then we should prefer a combination of the psychological and realist hypothesis over either RAN or RAF in our account of religion. In effect, this redirects Zamulinski's argument to support religious realism.

Zamulinski clearly intends RAF and RAN to be understood as distinct hypotheses, and at points implies that RAN is the conjecture not merely that a supernatural reality exists but also that religion could be a discovery of that reality. This contrasts with RAF, according to which religion is not 'truth-oriented' (43). Even if RAN is extended to cover belief formation, however, the problem of consistency remains the same. If facts about belief formation are built into RAN that make it

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inconsistent with RAF, for instance that religion is *not* a response to a psychological need or that religion is *only* a response to a supernatural reality, call the resulting hypothesis RAN*. The difficulty with RAN* will then be isomorphic with RAF*, given above: RAN* seems less preferable than RAN. If, in contrast, religious-belief formation could be a response to a supernatural realm and/or to a psychological need, then RAN and RAF will again be consistent and compare unfavourably with RANF (suitably modified to cover belief formation).

It is tempting to point out, in defence of Zamulinski, that while RAN and RAF might be consistent it is also very improbable that both RAF and RAN are true. Far from assisting Zamulinski's argument, however, this makes the difficulty more evident. For suppose we argue that, even though the combination of RAN and RAF is more likely than RAF, RANF should not be our preferred explanation of religion because it is less probable. It follows that we are conceding that greater likelihood is not sufficient grounds to believe an explanation, and that Zamulinski's argument that RAF is more likely than RAN is not sufficient to show that RAF is true. If, in contrast, greater likelihood *is* sufficient reason to believe an explanation, then even if Zamulinski is successful in showing that RAF is preferable to RAN, RANF is preferable to RAF – which leads us back to metaphysical realism. So either way there are difficulties: if likelihood is a measure of good explanation, then RANF is preferable to RAF; whereas, if we have grounds to prefer a less likely hypothesis because it is more probable, then Zamulinski's argument that RAF is relatively more likely than RAN is not a sufficient reason to prefer it.[3]

Second problem

Zamulinski's argument is that RAF is relatively more likely than RAN and on that basis should be our preferred explanation of religion. A useful distinction, which helps to clarify the explanatory value of a relatively likely hypothesis, is between historical and nomological explanations. Suppose we wish to explain evidence E. The degree to which a hypothesis raises P(E) makes for its likelihood. So in saying that one hypothesis is more likely than another, all that is being proposed is that, *given* the evidence, this hypothesis makes its occurrence more plausible. A hypothesis could be likely, therefore, simply by virtue of providing a historical or backward-looking explanation of the evidence under consideration. A merely likely hypothesis need not supply us with a framework for the reliable prediction of the evidence from an earlier state of affairs, provided it offers a story about why the evidence should be as we find it. Historical explanation contrasts with nomological explanation.

A nomological explanation for E states how E predictably arises from some preceding state of affairs according to certain general laws. For example, if E is the trajectory of a tennis ball that is struck by a player across a court, a nomological

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explanation of E can be given in terms of the ball being struck by a racket with certain properties at such and such angle and velocity, where the ball has certain properties, etc., in accordance with general physical laws. Given enough information about the starting conditions, we can reliably predict the ball's trajectory.

Examples of historical explanations, and closest to the type Zamulinski considers, include evolutionary explanations for human and animal traits. Consider, for example, the hypothesis F, that giraffes' necks are long because a species with more commonly sized necks needed access to a food resource at the top of tall trees. Clearly the evidence here, that giraffes have long necks, is more probable given the truth of F, since it gives us an account of why necks might have lengthened. Thus P(E/F) is greater than P(E), given just the background knowledge about evolution, because it seems more likely that such a trait should have developed in an environment that made for its fitness. However, unlike a nomological explanation, the starting conditions do not allow us reliably to predict that the species would evolve long necks. They might have grown long legs, learned to climb, started shaking trees, developed a taste for other food, simply died out, etc. Nor does our limited knowledge of the mechanisms of genetic mutation or the conditions under which they occur enable us to determine what trait would emerge.

RAF is clearly just a historical explanation for religion, and one which Zamulinski aims to show is relatively more likely than RAN. However, in justifying his case, Zamulinski attributes to RAF the kind of deterministic assurances that are characteristic of nomological explanations. He shifts between the claim that RAF makes religion more probable than RAN and the claim that if the hypothesis were true then we would have grounds for saying that religion would have developed as we have seen. For example, Zamulinski asserts that RAF 'assigns a probability to the observations considered that approaches certainty' (58), and that it 'enables us to predict that people will believe in a supernatural realm' (52). From looking at various features of religious belief and behaviour and arguing that they might plausibly result from a psychological need for moral fairness, it is perhaps tempting to make the much stronger assertion that, from consideration of this hypothesis alone, we could predict or be assured about the emergence of these features. However, the latter claim is quite distinct, and bears no more analysis than the claim considered above that an evolutionary hypothesis about giraffes' necks has significant predictive power.

Could RAF be developed into a nomological explanation with predictive power from which we could assert the near certainty of the evidence? It is difficult to see how. To begin with, RAF is hopelessly under-specified. We have no precise description of what a religion is (certainly nothing that would allow for a law-like prediction), and there are numerous ways in which human beings might accommodate a desire for moral equality – by striving to achieve it (even if it is unachievable), by ignoring it, suppressing it, just worrying about it, talking it

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through with someone, etc. How could we predict which of these responses would result?

Usually a need or desire for something results in one's trying to achieve it rather than delusively concluding that it has already been achieved. One might expect a similar response from someone wanting moral justice, i.e. the championing of moral justice. This is not to say that we never form delusive beliefs in the face of unachievable desires, but short of evidence to show that this is a prevalent response, we need an explanation for why it should occur in religious cases and not others. On the other hand, if believing a story about a benevolent God were enough to satisfy the desire for universal justice, why are any religious believers concerned about religious inequality or actively engaged in promoting social reform?

A further difficulty in predicting anything from RAF is that the psychological motivation that Zamulinski posits lacks the kind of detail that would allow us to make a reliable judgement about the future behaviour of someone who has it. The characterization of the psychological state is all over the shop: is it a craving (49), a need (50), a longing (49), a rationalization (49), a desire (50), or merely a wish? How do these psychological states function, and on what grounds can we determine from any one of them how the motivated agent's beliefs will develop? Zamulinski asserts that religion satisfies the moral need 'in the same way that methodone ''satisfies'' the cravings of the heroin addict' (49). *In the same way?* Here it seems that Zamulinski is inventing a novel type of mental state (or collection of states) that just guarantees that religious behaviour and belief will unfold in exactly the way that it has done. But of course we have no reason to believe in the existence of such a mental state, and no evidence from contemporary psychology is cited to the contrary – or, indeed, at all.

Third problem

A difficulty with arguing for the explanatory value of RAF on the basis of its relative likelihood, emerges when we consider other hypotheses that could be given for the same evidence. For there are numerous possible hypotheses, such as more sophisticated varieties of RAN, that could raise the probability of the evidence of religious belief and practice as much as or more than RAF. For example, one of Zamulinski's main arguments in support of the likelihood of RAF is that the existence of injustice, along with a psychological need for the world to be morally fair, substantially raises the probability that we would posit a supernatural realm, whereas given just the existence of a supernatural realm (RAN) it is not clear why we should even perceive it.

However, it would be easy to modify RAN to include a supernatural being who has certain ambitions for us and consequently ensures access to religious truths. Unfortunately, once the possibility of this kind of modification is recognized, it can be seen that we can build into the hypothesis enough conditions that it

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trivially guarantees the evidence occurs. For example, suppose we hypothesize a psychological condition that compels just those people who are or have been religious believers to develop religious belief in exactly the way that has occurred (call this RAF^+). Or suppose there is a supernatural realm that impinges on human awareness such that human beings perceive it and form beliefs about it in exactly the way that has occurred (call this RAN^+). Clearly both RAF^+ and RAN^+ are far more likely than their counterparts because they each give us $P(E/H) = 1$, yet as explanations they are clearly vacuous.

Aside from showing that the likelihood of a hypothesis is a poor measure of its quality as an explanation, RAF^+ and RAN^+ show that we cannot seriously consider a hypothesis without some evaluation of its probability. If there is any doubt about this, take any perceptual belief about the surrounding world with the content 'there is an *x*', where *x* stands for some object. In normal cases, the best explanation for the perceptual belief is that there is an *x* which caused the perception and subsequent belief. Given that you have the relevant belief, the hypothesis that there is an *x* seems likely. However, for the same reasons given in the argument that Zamulinski offered in support of RAF, that the existence of something does not guarantee that one will perceive it, it is *more likely* that you have a psychological compulsion to adopt the belief that there is an *x* at that particular time. It is unsurpassably likely still that you are in a matrix-type scenario in which a computer alters your beliefs in the relevant way.

We need, therefore, some way to discriminate among these likely hypotheses those which are good explanations from those which are not. As I indicated in discussion of the second problem above, backward-looking hypotheses fail to provide one feature of stronger types of explanations, which is a basis from which to predict events. However, we can evaluate the probability of historical explanations. Take, for example, the hypothesis about giraffes' necks. While it does not provide a ground from which we can predict evolutionary development, the story it offers is at least compatible with other information (although far from certain) and is in principle verifiable. Short of some similar evaluation of the relative probabilities of RAF and RAN, it is difficult to give any credence to the argument from likelihood.

The plausibility of RAF

Many of the arguments given above could be countered if we could find some grounds to favour RAF over RAN in addition to likelihood. As we have seen, Zamulinski does not think that it is possible to evaluate the plausibility of RAN because 'we have little information about the probability of the religion-as-non-fiction hypothesis'. Notably, this overlooks one of the more prominent research traditions in recent philosophy of religion, namely, the revival in natural theology particularly associated with Richard Swinburne. Whether or not one regards this

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project as successful, it aims to lend credence to a theistic hypothesis by showing that it is not only likely, but also intrinsically plausible (because of its simplicity, etc.), and numerous arguments are offered in favour of its truth. Moreover, the hypothesis is used to explain a broader range of facts than religious belief and behaviour, for example, the fine-tuning conditions of the universe and its law-like character. If RAF is to be believed, it needs to be shown to satisfy some of the same conditions, and to do so better than a theistic alternative.

Zamulinski does briefly address the probability of RAF, though the argument he offers for it is something of a surprise. Zamulinski claims that 'the three propositions that comprise the religion-as-fiction-hypothesis are certainly extremely plausible' (58). He proceeds to lay out the propositions as: (1) there is a great deal of morally random suffering; (2) we are powerless in the face of much of this suffering; and (3) 'most of us are distressed by it, particularly when it affects us or our loved ones'. Indeed, these propositions are highly plausible, but there seems to be something missing. What happened to the contentious component of RAF, namely, that craving for moral fairness that is satisfied by religious belief 'in the same way' as a heroin addict's addiction is satisfied by methadone?

The problem is that if we do not posit the existence of some compelling motivation we are not in a position to make any strong claims about the hypothesis raising the probability of religious belief. We would surely not be able to 'come up with something that resembled human religion' (57) just from the fact that people are distressed by evil and are sometimes unable to prevent it. On the other hand, if we do posit a compelling motivation, then without some independent evidence for its existence, the hypothesis looks implausible. As we have seen, the plausibility of a hypothesis is crucial to its value as an explanation. It is more *likely* that the lunar landings were faked in a Hollywood studio (with a following seamless cover-up) than that the footage shows a real space expedition; it is more likely that the noises we hear in the attic are due to angry gremlins stamping their feet than the wind. In the absence of further argument, RAF is on a par with conspiracy theories and other fantasies.

Notes

1. Brian Zamulinski 'Religion and the pursuit of truth', *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 43–60.
2. By comparison, suppose that I am comparing the hypotheses (M) that dinosaurs died out because of the earth being hit by a meteor, and (V) that dinosaurs died out from a viral infection. Suppose that, with regard to most but not all evidence, M is more likely than V. Since it is possible that both V and M are true, the hypothesis M-and-not-V will be less likely than M in those cases where V is more likely than M. In all other cases, M-and-not-V will, at best, be as likely than M. So, on balance, M-and-not-V is less likely than M.
3. Zamulinski believes that we cannot assess the probability of RAN, so we are presumably not in a position to assess the probability of the combination of RAN and RAF. Alternatively, it might be argued that P(RAN & RAF) is lower than either P(RAN) or P(RAF). Either option leads to one of the difficulties discussed.

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