Can theism be debunked by philosophical reflection grounded in the findings of CSR? A reply to LeRon Shults

Studia Theologica

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Abstract:
Contrary to Helen DeCruz and Johan DeSmedt (and many others), LeRon Shults finds that it is easy to defeat theistic belief. He offers a recipe in three steps, but I argue in this article that every step fails. While Shults claims that scholars should focus more on abduction, retroduction and contexts of belief, I argue that they already do this a lot and that it does not defeat theistic belief.

Keywords: Debunking theism, LeRon Shults, *A Natural History of Natural Theology*, abduction, retroduction

Cognitive science of religion is the study of religious thoughts and praxis, typically from an evolutionary perspective, but also many other disciplines and perspectives like evolutionary psychology or neurobiology. Different aspects of religion are given natural explanations, for example as products or by-products of evolution. A typical example is the hyperactive agency detecting device which makes people infer agents where there are none. A question that has been much discussed, is then whether explanations like these can refute religious explanations.[1]

Can theism – and religious belief in supernatural agents in general – be debunked by philosophical reflection grounded in the findings of Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)? In a recent article, LeRon Shults is disappointed by the answer that Helen DeCruz and Johan DeSmedt (and many others) offer,[2] namely that "CSR cannot straightforwardly provide a debunking account of natural theology and religion."[3] Shults, on the other hand, finds it "relatively easy to spot theistic bunk", and offers a recipe in three steps to find defeaters for religion. I disagree with Shults' analysis on all points and will now comment upon each step.

Step 1, according to Shults, is to "[l]eave the cul-de-sac of deductive/inductive arguments".[4] He says that "the important thing to notice here is that the (only?) two possible sorts of defeaters the authors treat rely on deduction or induction, eclipsing abduction and retroduction".[5] I have noticed from earlier debates that LeRon Shults often claims to be

misunderstood,[6] and for this reason I quote him quite extensively so that readers can consider the interpretations themselves.

In Shults' view, debates about theism mainly focus on either deduction or induction, but he argues that focus should be more on prior assumptions, prior probabilities and the contexts of beliefs:

> Despite its astonishing fecundity in so many other arenas of discourse, the "cognitive turn" in science (and philosophy) has not yet altered the course of (a)theological debate, which all too often follows the ruts carved out by the longstanding attempts to (dis)prove God through deduction or render God (im)probable through induction.
>   It is time to explore other avenues. Yes, theists and atheists have quite different "prior assumptions" and "prior probabilities," but where did these come from? We cannot answer this question simply by appealing to the cognitive generation of the content of such (dis)belief. We must also ask about the coalitional contexts within which ideas about the gods (and God) are kept alive.[7]

Deductive arguments are arguments where the conclusion is implied in the premises. They are logically valid, meaning that if the premises are true, the conclusion is necessarily true. Inductive arguments in a broad sense of the term, are arguments that are not deductive. However, "inductive arguments" is also a term that can be understood narrowly, so that abduction and retroduction (defined below) are alternatives to deduction and induction. For example, an inductive argument can be a generalization, where one could argue that since many swans are white, probably all swans are white.

This is relevant, because in the broad sense of "inductive arguments" (=arguments that are not deductive), abductive and retroductive arguments are inductive arguments, and this broad definition is a common definition of "inductive arguments".[8] If we consider famous theists today, their argumentation is often called inductive. But I find it clear that although they may not use the terms *abductive* or *retroductive* arguments, they are certainly using abductive logic in their arguments. They are well aware of their prior assumptions and prior probabilities, and spend much time on defending these rationally. The context of their claims is not left out. Here are some examples:

Robin Collins uses fine-tuning to argue in favour of God having designed the universe. He specifies that the argumentation is via the likelihood principle, which is basically the same as how Shults explains abduction.[9] Collins defends this approach as a kind of epistemic probability often used in science.[10] "Prior probability" is a term used for how probable a hypothesis is before the data in question are considered. Prior probabilities in this debate depend on how probable the existence of God is in general, so Collins discusses other arguments for and against God.[11] He also considers the context of his beliefs broadly, arguing against naturalism and for theism.[12]

When William Lane Craig argues in favour of the resurrection of Jesus, he argues that the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the historical facts,[13] and abduction is usually understood as an inference to the best explanation.[14] In a debate with Bart Ehrman, Craig is very explicit on how arguments for or against the resurrection depends on prior probabilities or background beliefs, and he explains this in detail by use of Bayes' theorem.[15] Bayes' theorem can be formulated in many ways – a simple way of putting it is to say that the probability of a hypothesis given a certain piece of evidence equals the probability of the hypothesis in itself times the probability of the evidence given the hypothesis divided by the probability of the evidence in itself. Craig spends much time defending his background beliefs and the whole context of his world view.[16]

The list could go on. Richard Swinburne defends particular beliefs like Jesus being God or rising from the dead, but refers to background beliefs being defended in other books he has written.[17] He also defends different parts of his world view compared to alternative world views.[18] Keith Ward does the same. He defends specific Christian views, but also compares his views with materialistic world views and other religions.[19]

It seems to me that abductive arguments are very common in the theism-atheism debate. Shults says that "the 'cognitive turn' in science (and philosophy) has not yet altered the course of (a)theological debate, which all too often follows the ruts carved out by the longstanding attempts to (dis)prove God through deduction or render God (im)probable through induction. It is time to explore other avenues."[20] Contrary to what Shults claims, it seems to me that these other avenues have been well explored for a long time.

Step 2, according to Shults, is to "Start at the site of alleged religious abductions".[21] He explains abduction the following way:

> C.S. Peirce used the term abduction to refer to the way in which we develop conjectures that are intended to make sense of ambiguous phenomena. I observe a surprising fact (C). But then I reflect – or intuit – that if (A) were true, (C) would be a matter of course. This gives the hypothesis (A) an initial plausibility. In everyday life, we usually go with this "best guess" unless and until we encounter some challenge to it. In scholarly life, however, we are encouraged to overcome our confirmation bias, to reflect critically on our own idiosyncratic interpretations, and to invite others to challenge our hypotheses.[22]

As shown above, there is no relevant difference here between scholarly theists and other scholars, since they all discuss their views critically in debate with alternative views. All individuals are prone to confirmation bias, but the scholarly ideal in theology and other scientific disciplines is to be self-critical.

Nevertheless, Shults seems to think that abductive challenges are a special threat to theists:

Abductive challenges, on the other hand, press those who think they have detected a mysterious contingently embodied intentional force to reflect carefully on the way in which they might be unconsciously immunizing such hypotheses from serious critique because they have a conflict of interest in maintaining the idiosyncratic beliefs of their own religious coalition.[23]

Self-deceit is always a possibility for anyone. We all may have all sorts of motives for believing what they do, and thus self-criticism is an ideal for everyone, theists and atheists alike. For this reason, motives for beliefs, causes of beliefs and functions of beliefs are generally considered irrelevant when it comes to evaluating the rationality of beliefs. Only relevant arguments can decide the rationality of beliefs. Abductive challenges, as they are exemplified by Shults, are irrelevant for determining whether theistic claims are true, for beliefs may be true also when we want them to be true.

When criticized for making a genetic fallacy or functionalist argument elsewhere, Shults says that he does not hold such a silly position,[24] but why then does he present unconscious immunization and interest in maintained beliefs as defeaters of religious claims? He says: "In light of BCSR, it is not at all challenging to explain why beliefs in UFO abductions are widespread although their referents (probing aliens) do not exist. Why hesitate to make similar claims about gods (or God)?"[25] Well, because it would be a genetic fallacy — and because God is not a thing among others.[26]

Again, self-deceit is possible, and one should always be self-critical, but the four scholars I mentioned above are good examples of persons who seek the best challenges to their views and discuss those challenges. One example is my own book about the existence of God.[27] When I discuss miracles, I conclude that none of the examples discussed are good arguments in favour of there actually being miracles, and when I discuss the problem of evil, I conclude that it speaks against the existence of God. I do this even if I believe in God and miracles, because I am self-critically searching for the truth, following the evidence where it leads. The whole book is written in discussion with naturalism, which I find to be the best alternative to theism.

Some may read this article and think that it is yet another example of a theist defending an irrational belief. They should ask themselves whether or not they think that all theists are disqualified from discussing the question of God. It is easy to psychologize all kinds of positions, but the rational thing to do is to consider arguments alone.

Shults continues:

> How do scientists, (non-religious) philosophers, and most educated people in general respond when they hear claims about UFO abductions, the detection of spirit-guides at a séance, celestial forces fulfilling astrological predictions, or the presence of trolls in the Norwegian forest? They consider them bunk. It is not always clear why "gods" are given a pass.[28]

I think it is very clear why the question of God is very different from UFO abductions, spirits at a séance, astrology, trolls, and various gods. The reason is that there are hardly any good arguments in favour of the latter, but good arguments against. That is why UFO abductions, spirits at a séance, astrology, trolls, and various gods (like Thor, Zeus, Kali etc) are not discussed in philosophical journals and in books published at serious university presses, but the question of God as a personal creator of the universe is. The reason is not just that there are many who grew up believing in such a God. Philosophers like Anthony Flew came to find belief in such a God rational, and Thomas Nagel finds naturalism insufficient.[29] Shults has, in earlier writings, said that it is a mistake to think of the theistic God as an entity among other entities,[30] but now he puts God and trolls in the same category. People who think that God obviously does not exist need to show the same degree of self-criticism as believers in God.[31]

Step 3 is, according to Shults, "Don't be afraid to pursue retroductive destinations." Retroductive arguments are inferences that lead to claims about what makes a phenomenon possible or actual. Scientists make such inferences all the time, and Shults mentions as examples humours in the blood and ether as medium for light, which scholars today, without qualms, claim do not exist. He also refers to Paul Bloom, who says that immaterial souls do not exist, but then says that this is logically separate from the question of whether God exists. Shults asks:

> He (Bloom) has no problem retroductively inferring that there is no Cartesian "ghost" in the machine. Why, then, the reticence to straightforwardly reject hypotheses that appeal to the "Holy Ghost" in the hearts of Christian believers or "ancestor-ghosts" in the heart of the forest?[32]

Notice that Bloom distinguishes between belief in souls and God, not spirits. The reason why we can confidently reject humours, ether and souls is that we have very coherent alternative theories where humours, ether and souls are superfluous. But in the question of God, there is not a very coherent alternative making God superfluous. I grant that naturalism is a good alternative to theism, but still there is the question of origin, laws of nature, consciousness, fine-tuning for life, etc., which make the debate between theism and naturalism a debate with interesting arguments in favour of both sides, where it is not obvious that one alternative is more coherent than the other. Those who think that it is obvious need to reflect more on the fact that so many rational people believe in God and may do so for a good reason.

This is important to note since many think that it is obviously a more parsimonious choice to leave God out of one's ontology, so that Ockham's razor should be used to remove God from one's ontology. But one should only choose the simpler of two ontologies if they are otherwise equally coherent. If a theory including God is more coherent than an ontology without God, simplicity is not a good reason to choose the least coherent theory, for we have no reason to suppose that truth is simple. Simplicity is a pragmatic criterion: it is for our sake that we prefer a simpler theory, but nothing about truth implies that truth should be simple.

I would like to point out also that it is far from obvious that an ontology without God is simpler than one with God. For it is necessarily the case that everything actual in our world must have been possible from the very beginning, otherwise it could not have been actualized. Any ontology must thus start with something extremely complex in the sense that it must be something with the potential for everything that has ever been actualized later. If the fundamental structure of our world was conscious from the start, it deserves to be named God, but if there is no God, then consciousness was merely possible from the beginning and actualized later. This is a smaller difference between theism and atheism than what is often recognized.

Shults ends with a comment on whether this is worth discussing:
> It is certainly not the job of BCSR scientists qua scientists to address the theoretical and practical problems associated with religiously salient biases. But scientists are human too, and I see no reason why they should feel compelled not to point out the maladaptive effects that theism has on our species when it comes to (for example) dealing with the challenges of climate change and the injustices of consumer capitalism.[33]

Both theism and atheism can have good effects or bad effects when it comes to dealing with the challenges of climate change and the injustices of consumer capitalism, and of course it is much more than people's religion that influences their behaviour in these matters. I find the distinction between theism and atheism here meaningless, since it is rather different kinds of theism that can justify good or bad behaviour, as it is with atheism and naturalism as well.

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Notes

[1] Visala, *Naturalism, theism, and the cognitive study of religion: Religion explained?*; Jong et al., "Born idolaters: The limits of the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion."

[2] DeCruz and DeSmedt, *A Natural History of Natural Religion: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion.*

[3] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 14.

[4] Ibid., 15.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See https://syndicatetheology.com/commentary/philosophy-after-the-bioculturalization-of-theology/

[7] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 16.

[8] See, for example, the definition in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-inductive/

[9] Collins, "The teleological argument: An exploration of the fine-tuning of the universe." Shults: "I observe a surprising fact (C). But then I reflect – or intuit – that if (A) were true, (C) would be a matter of course. This gives the hypothesis (A) an initial plausibility." (Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 16.). Collins: "According to the likelihood principle, an observation e counts as evidence in favor of hypothesis h_1 over h_2 if the observation is more probable under h_1 than h_2." (Collins, "The teleological argument: An exploration of the fine-tuning of the universe," 209.).

[10] Collins, "The teleological argument: An exploration of the fine-tuning of the universe," 226-233.

[11] http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Fine-tuning/FT.HTM.

[12] http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Fine-tuning/FT.HTM.

[13] Craig, *Reasonable Faith,* 333-404.

[14] Shults relates abduction to "inference to the best explanation" when he says: "In the present book, the authors indirectly approach the issue of abduction when they discuss the way in which "inference to the best explanation" plays a role in arguments from design." (Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 17.). Peirce himself used "abduction" with different meanings, but it is most commonly used synonymously with "inference to the best explanation". (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abduction/).

[15] http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman.

[16] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*; Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*.

[17] Swinburne, *The resurrection of God incarnate*; Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?*; Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism, rev. ed.*; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

[18] Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*.

[19] Ward, *Defending the Soul*; Ward, *More than Matter? What Humans Really Are*; Ward, *Religion and revelation*; Ward, *Religion and creation*; Ward, *Religion and human nature*.

[20] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 16.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] https://syndicatetheology.com/commentary/philosophy-after-the-bioculturalization-of-theology/.

[25] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 18. BCSR means the bio-cultural study of religion.

[26] Jong and Visala discusses possible cases where a causal explanation of a person's belief would undermine the rationality of the belief, but finds very few, and none which are relevant here (Jong and Visala, "Evolutionary debunking arguments against theism, reconsidered.")

[27] Søvik and Davidsen, *Eksisterer Gud? En drøfting av argumenter for og mot*.

[28] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 17.

[29] Flew and Varghese, *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind*; Nagel, *Mind and cosmos: Why the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*.

[30] Shults, *Reforming the doctrine of God,* 38, 291-92.

[31] Shults has other examples where I agree with him that the claims should be rejected (like reformed epistemology and the fall of Adam and Eve), but I find these examples very different from the question of whether or not there is a God, whereas Shults does not distinguish between them.

[32] Shults, "Can theism be defeated? CSR and the debunking of supernatural agent abductions," 18.

[33] Ibid.