DATA OVER DOGMA:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT: Experimental philosophy of religion is the project of taking the tools and resources of the human sciences—especially psychology and cognitive science—and bringing them to bear on issues within philosophy of religion toward explicit philosophical ends. This paper introduces readers to experimental philosophy of religion. §1 explores the contours of experimental philosophy of religion by contrasting it with a few related fields: the psychology of religion and cognitive science of religion, on the one hand, and natural theology, on the other. §2 offers a brief history of experimental philosophy of religion. The goal in this section is to highlight the ancient pedigree of this emerging area of research; as the contemporary experimental philosophy of religion literature expands and proliferates, it's important to remember that this field has deep historical roots. Then, §3 focuses on the following questions: Why should we care about experimental philosophy of religion? And why is it needed?

Key Words: Experimental Philosophy of Religion; Philosophy of Religion; Experimental Philosophy; Psychology of Religion; Natural Theology

Experimental philosophy of religion is the project of taking the tools and resources of the human sciences—especially psychology and cognitive science—and bringing them to bear on issues within philosophy of religion toward explicit philosophical ends.[1] The goal of this paper is to introduce readers to this emerging area of scholarly research.[2] §1 explores the contours of experimental philosophy of religion by contrasting it with a few related fields: the psychology of religion and cognitive science of religion, on the one hand, and natural theology, on the other. §2 offers a brief history of experimental philosophy of religion. The goal in this section is to highlight the ancient pedigree of this emerging area of research; as the contemporary experimental philosophy of religion literature expands and proliferates, it's important to remember that this field has deep historical roots.[3] Then, §3 focuses on the following questions: Why should we care about experimental philosophy of religion? And why is it needed?

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[1] This taxonomy is, of course, only a rough approximation. One might easily imagine, for example, that the tools and resources of other scientific fields (e.g. biology) could also shed light on important debates within philosophy of religion. Alternatively, some scholars might argue that merely bringing the tools and resources of the human sciences to bear on debates within philosophy of religion—without actively collecting data—isn't experimental philosophy but merely "science-engaged" philosophy. In any case, my hope is that the above taxonomy (even if only an approximation) captures a family of projects within the literature that can be naturally grouped together.

[2] Though, as will be explained in §2, experimental philosophy of religion has a truly ancient pedigree.

§1: Experimental Philosophy of Religion and Related Fields

The boundaries between related fields can be notoriously murky. For example, it's not always easy to tell where linguistics ends and philosophy of language begins, or whether a particular line of inquiry falls under the banner of, say, philosophical theology or philosophy of religion. Even so, while we can't always expect clear lines of demarcation, I think we can achieve a better grasp of experimental philosophy of religion by contrasting it with some other, related disciplines.

Of course, psychologists and cognitive scientists have been studying religion and religious belief for many years; however, this work is, on the whole, distinct from experimental philosophy of religion.[4] It is worth noting that insofar as an instance of psychological research has aims that aren't explicitly *philosophical*, then it cannot fall under the banner of experimental philosophy of religion. Of course, what counts as an explicit philosophical *aim* or *end* is up for debate—and it is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to settle that debate here—even so, I hope the general distinction being made is sufficiently clear.

Let's consider a few examples. Empirical research seems to be suggesting that how people relate to their childhood primary caregivers can have a significant impact on how they relate (or perceive themselves as relating) to the divine.[5] This relationship (or perceived relationship) can have a significant impact on a range of mental health outcomes (including depression, life satisfaction, etc.). As important and as interesting as such research is, it's not going to count as experimental philosophy of religion unless it can be seen as explicitly aiming at philosophical ends. That said, as scholars engage with that literature, and begin to explicitly apply it to debates within philosophy of religion, we begin to enter the purview of experimental philosophy of religion.[6] Such an extension of attachment theory to philosophical ends would be an example of experimental philosophy of religion.

Another example: Recent work in cognitive science of religion (CSR) points to a very interesting thesis—that human beings are naturally disposed to form religious beliefs regarding the existence of at least one god, something like a soul, an afterlife, etc.[7] Once again, as important and as interesting as such research is, it's not going to count as experimental philosophy of religion unless it can be seen as explicitly aiming at philosophical ends. That said, once again, as scholars begin to engage with that literature in a way that explicitly engages with debates within philosophy of religion, we begin to enter the purview of experimental philosophy of religion.[8] Such an extension of CSR to philosophical ends would, again, be an example of experimental philosophy of religion.

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[3] This point is, I think, useful when responding to critics who want to either (a) dismiss experimental philosophy as something other than (or less than?) genuine philosophy or (b) consider it with a jaundiced eye merely because it seems new or novel.

[4] See, for example, Evans-Pritchard and Gillies 1976; Durkheim 2008; Malinowski and Redfield 2015

[5] See, for example, Kirkpatrick 1992; Bradshaw, Ellison, and Marcum 2010; Horton et al. 2012; Noffke and Hall 2007.

[6] And we see some philosophers making such connections in the extant literature. See, for example, Green 2015.

[7] See, for example, Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; 2012; Bering 2011; Boyer 2001; Guthrie 1995; McCauley 2013; Pyysiäinen 2001; Pyysiainen 2009.

In both of the above examples, the scientists were independently doing empirical research which philosophers happened to find relevant to various debates within philosophy of religion. Of course, experimental philosophy of religion doesn't always have to be so passive.[9] Sometimes there are empirical questions that are interesting to philosophers of religion (that are salient to philosophical debates), that haven't yet been explored by scientists. Empirically exploring the intuitions that underwrite arguments in philosophy of religion, for example, may not attract much attention from psychologists or cognitive scientists, but this can be a central concern for experimental philosophers of religion.[10]

Natural theology is another field that might (at least to some readers) bear some familial resemblance to experimental philosophy of religion. Natural theology is commonly understood to be "the project of arguing for the existence of God on the basis of observed *natural facts*" (Chignell and Pereboom 2020, para. 1). At various points in the history of philosophy—perhaps especially in the Middle Ages of Europe—these two fields were closely related (see §2 below). And given each field's concern for (i) topics that are salient to philosophy of religion (perhaps centrally whether or not God exists) and (ii) careful observations of "natural facts," there are important points of intersection between natural theology and experimental philosophy of religion.[11]

That said, there are many points of divergence between the two fields. On the one hand, experimental philosophy of religion isn't necessarily committed to arguing for or against the existence of God, and its interests extend well beyond such arguments. For example, experimental philosophers of religion might simply be interested in understanding how the intuitions that drive arguments in favor of divine simplicity, say, diverge across different demographic variables; however, natural theologians would presumably have little interest in such intuition variation as an end in itself.

Going the other way, however, natural theology has interests that extend far beyond experimental philosophy of religion—extending beyond the observations delivered by psychology or cognitive science, even extending beyond the empirical to the *a priori*.[12] The ontological argument, for example, is a topic that falls under the umbrella of natural theology but not, on its own, experimental philosophy of religion. (Though, of course, experimental philosophers of religion might be interested in better understanding the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite the folk reception of the ontological argument.)

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[8] For example, Justin Barrett and Ian Church (2013) argue that the conjunction of such findings with common forms of atheism lead to intractable skepticism. For more on the epistemological relevance of CSR, see Clark 2019.

[9] An anonymous referee pointed out that some scholars might not see the "passive" projects discussed above as experimental philosophy; instead, they might simply categorize them as "science-engaged" philosophy. While people are welcome to propose their own taxonomies, in this paper I'm suggesting a broader understanding of "experimental philosophy" in general and "experimental philosophy of religion" in particular. Whether someone has actively collected data themselves or utilizing the data of existing empirical research is not, by my lights, a relevant difference when it comes to the category of experimental philosophy.

[10] This type of project will be discussed a bit further in §3.

[11] Barrett and Church (2013) could arguably be seen as both an example of experimental philosophy of religion and of natural theology.

[12] For more on the intersections of experimental philosophy of religion, cognitive science, and natural theology see De Cruz and De Smedt 2015

§2: Some of the History behind Experimental Philosophy of Religion

Experimental philosophy is, in a way, both old and new. By most people's reckoning it's a fairly new sub-discipline, with a body of literature that has rapidly proliferated over the past 25 years or so. That said, however, some would argue that experimental philosophy has a truly ancient pedigree. Consider the following quote from the 2008 paper, "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto," by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols:

> It used to be commonplace that the discipline of philosophy was deeply concerned with questions about the human condition. Philosophers thought about human beings and how their minds worked. They took an interest in reason and passion, culture and innate ideas, the origins of people's moral and religious beliefs. On this traditional conception, it wasn't particularly important to keep philosophy clearly distinct from psychology, history, or political science. Philosophers were concerned, in a very general way, with questions about how everything fit together.
>
> The new movement of *experimental philosophy* seeks a return to this traditional vision. Like philosophers of centuries past, we are concerned with questions about how human beings actually happen to be. We recognize that such an inquiry will involve us in the study of phenomena that are messy, contingent, and highly variable across times and places, but we do not see how that fact is supposed to make the inquiry any less genuinely philosophical. On the contrary, we think that many of the deepest questions of philosophy can only be properly addressed by immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about how human beings really are. (2008, 3)

And it is certainly the case that a sharp division between science and philosophy is a relatively modern invention—being grounded more in how modern universities are administered than in history. And of course throughout history many great philosophers were also great scientists—from Aristotle, to Descartes, to various members of the Vienna Circle. Experimental philosophy is in many ways a return to this tradition.[13]

But it's worth noting that in the recent return to / flourishing of experimental philosophy, experimental philosophy *of religion* has been the slowest to develop. While the tools and resources of psychology and cognitive science were being fruitfully applied in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and more, very little work was being done to apply those same tools to seminal debates within philosophy of religion.[14] Why was experimental philosophy of religion slow to join the party? The history of the field might shed some light on an explanation.

Like experimental philosophy in general, experimental philosophy of religion arguably has an ancient pedigree. Indeed, the case could be made that empirical questions have attended philosophy of religion from its very beginning. Consider, for example, Xenophanes' famous critique of religious belief:

> Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other. But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own. The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able

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[13] Even Plato—who's not typically known as an empirically oriented philosopher—occasionally gives us some reflections that can easily be seen as precursory to experimental philosophy. In Plato's *Meno* ([ca. 380 BCE], 2002), for example, he explores how the human mind might come into cognitive contact with truths concerning morality and mathematics.

[14] The work of Helen De Cruz is a notable exception. See, for example, De Cruz 2017; 2014; De Cruz and De Smedt 2015.

> to draw with their hands and do the work that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves. (translation from Kirk and Raven 1960, 168–69, KRS 169-72)

Such an observation is often taken as a serious objection to various traditional religious beliefs. Given the cultural genesis of many religions, we might justifiably suspect that people are simply inclined to worship gods of their own making; an observation that casts doubt on the veracity of those beliefs. Xenophanes (c. 570 BC – c. 478 BC), a pre-Socratic philosopher, has seemingly identified the kind of project that would be of serious interest to contemporary experimental philosophers of religion.

The history of experimental philosophy in the Western tradition is commonly traced from Aristotle through Aquinas in the Middle Ages and then on into the early modern period—this is often discussed in terms of a contrast between experimental or practical philosophy and purely speculative philosophy.[15] And throughout the early modern period, there was interest in exploring how well experimental research fit with or contrasted with Christian orthodoxy.[16] And throughout this period we can find a range of projects that, once again, are of serious interest to contemporary experimental philosophers of religion.

While experimental or practical philosophy and its intersections with philosophy of religion were largely positive when it comes to religious belief (i.e. supportive of such beliefs) throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the relationship eventually became increasingly adversarial. We see this in the early modern period in figures like David Hume—who can easily be seen as a *proto*-experimental philosopher of religion. Consider the following famous passage from Section 12 of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

> The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy: and they think, that they could never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief. *But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.* (1975, 161 emphasis mine)

Undoubtedly, many of the "dogmatical…opinions" that Hume was concerned with here were religious in nature. What we see here, then, is a call to better understand the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite our beliefs, including (if not especially) our religious beliefs. If we could better understand the cognitive, social, and psychological mechanisms that underwrite our various religious beliefs, we might (as Hume suspects) find that human understanding "is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects" (1975, 12) and that a lot of contemporary research within philosophy of religion should be "commit[ted]…to the flames" (165); however, more hopefully, we might alternatively learn a better way forward when it comes to philosophy of religion—a way that, if nothing else, is perhaps accompanied by more "modesty and reserve."[17]

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[15] See, for example, Anstey and Vanzo 2016.

[16] See, for example, Rutherford 2006. And perhaps it's worth noting that most of the early modern figures within the Western philosophical tradition were interested in preserving Christian orthodoxy of some sort; figures like David Hume and Baruch de Spinoza being important exceptions to that trend.

This adversarial relationship between empirical research and religious belief can also be seen in the work of Sigmund Freud.[18] Freud's most enduring critique of religion comes from his understanding of religious belief as being the product of what he calls "wish-fulfillment." As Freud explained in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927):

> These [religious beliefs], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impressions of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place. (Freud 1953-1974, vol. xxi, 30)

Importantly, describing religious beliefs in terms of wish-fulfillment does not entail that religious beliefs are, for that reason, *false*. (After all, perhaps God placed within us a sense of helplessness and a need for protection, as a way to draw us to himself.) Even if we can explain *why* a person believes some proposition, it does not follow that that person's belief is *false* (that would be to commit the genetic fallacy). One may believe a proposition as the result of an illusion, even when the proposition happens to be true.

That said, Freud is far from sanguine on this score. Freud later went on to describe religious belief not as an *illusion* (which, for Freud, is not necessarily at odds with reality) but as a *delusion*. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud explains: "A special importance attaches to the case in which [the] attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering through a delusional remolding of reality is made by a considerable number of people in common. The religions of mankind must be classed among the mass-delusions of this kind" (Freud 1953-1974, vol. xxi, 81). This empirically grounded critique of religious belief became enormously influential and of clear interest to experimental philosophers of religion; indeed, some prominent Christian philosophers identified Freud's objection to religious belief as one of *the* central objections facing Christian belief.[19]

During the first half of the 20th century, philosophy's growing fondness for empirical tools and resources actually led to philosophy of religion as a discipline falling out of favor within the broader philosophical landscape, at least within the Anglophone world. The rise of logical positivism and the verificationist theory of meaning meant that sentences commonly employed within philosophy of religion—"there is a God" or "there is not a God", "God is a perfectly loving," "an all-good God wouldn't allow for gratuitous suffering," etc.—were dismissed as *meaningless*. Sentences only had meaning if they were either self-evident (e.g. tautologies) or empirically verifiable. Understandably, if the work being done within philosophy of religion was largely taken to be meaningless, there wouldn't be much room for (or interest in) *experimental* philosophy of religion either. This is a point where we can clearly see experimental philosophy of religion largely disappearing from the philosophical literature.

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[17] For more on Hume's contributions to philosophy of religion, see Russell and Kraal 2021. Another classic work along these lines is, of course, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (originally published in 1776, but with many re-prints. See for example, Hume 1998).

[18] While Freud is commonly seen as one of the founding figures for modern psychology, it's worth noting that significant portions of Freud's empirical work was attacked as pseudoscientific. Famously, Sir Karl Popper argued in his book *Conjectures and Refutations* (1962) that Freud's work in psychoanalysis should not be considered science, since it does not make claims that are *falsifiable*.

[19] You can see some echoes of Freud's thought in, for example, some of the "New Atheist" movement of the early 21st century. See, for example, Harris 2005, 72. For an example of a seminal Christian philosopher who identified Freud's critique as a central concern, see Plantinga 2000.

That said, with the fall of logical positivism and the verificationist theory of meaning, philosophy of religion enjoyed a new golden age of activity. As Nicholas Wolterstorff noted in his 2011 article, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy," "Never since the late Middle Ages has philosophical theology so flourished as it has during the past thirty years" (2011, 155). That said, as noted above *experimental* philosophy of religion was slower to return. This is perhaps understandable given (i) that most philosophers currently working within philosophy of religion are theists and (ii) experimental philosophy of religion, at least in more recent history (Hume, Freud, etc.), has a reputation for being somewhat hostile to religious beliefs.[20] Even so, with the recent flourishing of experimental philosophy, experimental philosophy of religion is making a return as well and is expected to flourish in the coming years.[21]

§3: Why should we care about experimental philosophy of religion? Why is it needed?

One obvious motivation to welcome the return of experimental philosophy of religion is simply the fact that empirical research is already being done with enormous ramifications for major projects within philosophy of religion. There is a wide range of empirical work being done in cognitive science of religion, psychology, etc. that can speak to topics that are salient to philosophy of religion. Recall the examples we considered in §1: Justin Barrett and Ian Church (2013) argued that when contemporary research in cognitive science of religion is combined with a commitment to certain forms of atheism, the result is a deep and intractable form of skepticism. And Adam Green (2015) argued that the attachment literature within psychology has deep philosophical relevance to the problem of divine hiddenness, a seminal topic of discussion within philosophy of religion. But these are just two examples amongst many. Indeed, it has become increasingly common to see philosophers of religion appeal to research in psychology and cognitive science to support their philosophical projects.

All that said, there are still many leading projects within philosophy of religion that would benefit from closer engagement with the extant empirical literature. Let's quickly consider another example: One of the most seminal topics within philosophy of religion over the past 50 years has been what's called *reformed epistemology*—the view, roughly speaking, that religious belief can be rationally grounded (or properly basic) even in the absence of arguments in favor of the target belief.[22] For example, we might imagine someone looking into the night sky, into the great expanse of celestial lights, and noticing that it simply *appear*s to them or *seems* to them that there is a God.[23] According to reformed epistemology, such a person might rationally form the belief that "there is a God" merely on that appearance or seeming. Reformed epistemologists will frequently draw analogies with perception to explain what they see as going on in such cases. Just as we have perceptual senses that allow us to have properly basic perceptual beliefs (rational beliefs not grounded in argumentation), reformed epistemologists propose that we also have a sense for the divine (*sensus divinitatis*) that can underwrite religious belief. Just as I rationally believe that "there is an aquarium in my living room" simply by seeing the aquarium in my living room, so too could someone rationally believe that "there is a God" merely by "seeing" that there is a God. I don't need an argument to rationally believe that there's an aquarium in my living room, and, analogously, that person wouldn't need an argument to rationally believe that there is a God either.

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[20] For more on the correlation between philosophy of religion as an area of specialization and commitments to theism, see Bourget and Chalmers *forthcoming*, 50.

[21] See, for example, the "Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion" project, which has been funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

[22] For a seminal text, see Plantinga 1981.

In making these analogies between perception and religious belief, reformed epistemologists will frequently make various claims about the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite beliefs (both religious and perceptual)—claims that would benefit from broader engagement with the empirical literature on such mechanisms. Maybe the empirical literature can tell us that what we might call this sense of the divine is nothing like perception, and perhaps it's more like a bare seeming or a sense of 'fittingness'. More work is needed to explore these connections. If religious belief is going to be rational in the way reformed epistemologists suggest, then the belief-forming faculties that generate religious belief (the purported sense of the divine) should be seen as reliable. Perhaps in better understanding the mechanisms that underwrite religious beliefs, cognitive science of religion can speak to the veracity of those beliefs.[24] Again, more fruitful research needs to be conducted in this direction.[25]

Of course, the motivation for experimental philosophy of religion extends beyond simply mining the extant psychological literature for new philosophical insights. As was noted in §1, *new and decidedly philosophical empirical research is needed too.* Over the past 25 years, one of the central projects of experimental philosophy has been to powerfully call into question the theoretical import of any philosophical intuitions that are not shared across various demographics—cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, etc. Philosophers, so the story goes, commonly assumed that intuitions—like the intuition that the protagonist in Gettier counterexamples does not know—were more or less universal and rightly taken to be theory-guiding. But through empirical research, experimental philosophers have argued that a variety of philosophical intuitions are not nearly as universal as many philosophers might have initially hoped—potentially undermining the theoretical import of such intuitions.[26] After all, if I don't have a principled reason to champion one person's or group's intuition on a given thought experiment over the intuitions of another person or group, then perhaps I should remain agnostic regarding the theoretical import of such an intuition. Empirical research exploring the demographic variation of philosophical intuitions has been fruitfully conducted within epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of language, and more; there is no reason to think that this line of research won't fruitfully extend to seminal topics within philosophy of religion as well.[27]

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[23] To be sure, there is significant disagreement about how exactly to describe the relevant phenomena—be it via appearance, seeming, or something else entirely. We don't need to worry about those debates here.

[24] And it's worth stressing that some cognitive scientists argue that the empirical research casts serious doubt on the veracity of religious beliefs. See, for example, Bering 2011.

[25] See Clark 2019.

[26] For a landmark work pointing this direction, see Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich 2001. Also see Machery et al. 2015; Rose et al. 2019.

[27] For some examples of pioneering research going this direction see Church, Warcol, and Barrett 2021; McAllister et al. *forthcoming.*

In other instances, there are empirical claims that are extremely relevant to philosophical projects that haven't yet been explored by psychologists or cognitive scientists—perhaps being too *niche* to have attracted the attention of those scientists. Let's consider one example: The principle of sufficient reason is a "controversial philosophical principle" that stipulates "that everything must have a reason, cause, or ground" (Melamed and Lin 2021, para. 1). Importantly, the principle of sufficient reason is known to underwrite various arguments for the existence of God, perhaps most notably the cosmological argument. Intriguingly, William Rowe (2006) noted that "If it were shown" that we all "presuppose [the principle of sufficient reason] to be true, then... to be consistent we should accept the [conclusion of the] Cosmological Argument," adding that "But no one has succeeded in showing that [the principle of sufficient reason] is an assumption that most or all of us share" (2006, 32). How widespread is the principle of sufficient reason? Could it be the case that all or most of us assume such a thing? These were empirical questions that hadn't yet been taken up by psychologists; however, they could be extremely philosophically significant. Here new empirical research in experimental philosophy of religion was needed.[28]

Another motivation for welcoming the return of experimental philosophy of religion is that it might also push the field towards greater pluralism. A lot of work that is done in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion is done from the perspective of Western academia, along with Western academic intuitions. The problem, however, is that academic Western intuitions are often assumed to be *everyone's* intuitions, and this is particularly problematic when arguments are being made that aim to apply far beyond Western academia, across religions and across cultures. It's not at all obvious that philosophers and theologians should prioritize the intuitions of Western academics when it comes to many central debates (like the debates surrounding the problem of evil, natural law, purpose, etc.).[29] As such, one hope for experimental philosophy of religion is that it will expand the religious and cultural insights that are relevant to the contemporary debates, breaking down cultural barriers, and better revealing (and perhaps allowing us to honestly own) the presuppositions that shape our view of ourselves, the divine, and evil.

The problem of "echo-chambers" in contemporary religious debates—where people only listen to pundits "on their side" while ignoring or caricaturing opposition—is arguably antithetical to intellectual modesty, the honest exchange of ideas, and academic progress. If viable, divergent opinions are ignored, silenced, or simply overlooked, then it's all too easy to be intellectually arrogant—to think that our views are the only viable views, to just assume that our idiosyncratic ideas and intuitions are accurate representations of objective reality. As such, one hope of experimental philosophy of religion is that by opening the doors to a wide range of perspectives and intuitions regarding human nature, evil, and the divine, philosophers of religion will be able to take a humbler and more reflective stance toward their own presuppositions and insights.[30]

This leads us to a final motivation for experimental philosophy of religion: It might allow us to address the perceived sickness within philosophy of religion.

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[28] Happily, that's precisely what a team of philosophers did! See Partington, Vesga, and Nichols 2023; Nichols and Steinberg *forthcoming*.

[29] For more on the extent to which philosophical intuitions vary across cultural and demographic variables, see Stich and Machery 2023; Knobe 2019.

[30] See Machery 2017.

While philosophy of religion has seen an almost unparalleled flurry of activity over the past 50 years,[31] its public image within the field more broadly is somewhat suspect. As Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols explain: "[In] spite of the recent expansion of work in philosophy of religion, it exhibits at least four symptoms of poor health: it is too partisan, too polemical, too narrow in its focus, and too often evaluated using criteria that are theological or religious instead of philosophical" (2013, 421). They go on to suggest that the contemporary philosophy of religion literature is permeated by scholars who "suffer from cognitive biases and group influences" (2013, 420). As such, there are significant worries that many scholars working within philosophy of religion are simply constructing arguments for conclusions they're already committed to accepting. Recall, for example, Bertrand Russell's (in)famous critique of the widely venerated medieval theologian/philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, in his *History of Western Philosophy*:

> There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas... He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith. If he can find apparently rational arguments for some parts of the faith, so much the better; if he cannot, he need only fall back on revelation. The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times. (1967, 463)

If philosophers of religion really are just chasing down arguments for conclusions they're already committed to, then Russell's worry regarding Aquinas would certainly generalize across most work within philosophy of religion (and across religious belief more generally). Indeed, this is the worry that many scholars point to when diagnosing the perceived intellectual sickness within philosophy of religion.[32]

And this is where the tools of experimental philosophy can come into play. One of the central benefits of experimental philosophy of religion is that it might help us better understand the biases of scholars working within the field and perhaps even facilitate intellectual modesty. Experimental philosophy of religion can facilitate the use empirical data to help us overcome notoriously dogma-driven biases in philosophy of religion. Here, we can return to the passage from David Hume we quoted earlier:

> *But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.* (1975, 161 emphasis mine)

And here we find some of the greatest motivation for welcoming a return of experimental philosophy of religion. Again, if we (i.e. philosophers of religion) could better understand the cognitive, social, and psychological mechanisms that underwrite our beliefs, we *might* (as Hume ultimately suspects) find that human understanding "is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects" (1975, 12); however, again more hopefully, we might simply learn a better way forward in the field—a way that's perhaps not so plagued with "cognitive biases and group influences", a way that's accompanied by more "modesty and reserve."

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[31] See Wolterstoff 2011.

[32] See Moti Mizrahi 2020, and Helen De Cruz 2017. And given that the majority of scholars working in philosophy of religion are theists and the strong correlations between theism and various philosophical views, one can be forgiven for wondering if a lot of the work that's done in armchair philosophy of religion is more akin to post-hoc justification of dogma than anything like honest philosophical inquiry.

§4: Conclusion

Experimental philosophy of religion is the project of taking the tools and resources of the human sciences—especially psychology and cognitive science—and bringing them to bear on issues within philosophy of religion toward explicit philosophical ends. While such a project bears some familial resemblances to (and occasionally overlaps with) other fields like the psychology of religion, cognitive science of religion, and natural theology, it is, as we saw in §1, distinct and occupying its own space within the contemporary academic landscape.

And as we saw in §2, there is a sense in which the lines of inquiry that are commonly associated with experimental philosophy of religion have a truly ancient pedigree (cf. Xenophanes' critique of traditional religious belief); even so, such a project is also new and still gaining traction in the contemporary philosophical landscape. The tools and resources of psychology and cognitive science are, of course, themselves relatively new. And given that (i) the first half of the 20th century was broadly hostile to philosophy of religion *simpliciter* and (ii) the recent flourishing of philosophy of religion is itself very new, there hasn't yet been much time for experimental philosophy of religion to develop as a *bona fide* area of scholarly research.[33] *Even so, experimental philosophy of religion has arrived.*

New and fruitful lines of inquiry are opening up, which hope to expand and revitalize (even if *via* critique) the extant literature within philosophy of religion. There are fruitful projects to be explored that mine the current psychological and cognitive science literature for conclusions that are philosophically salient. And there are new projects that will investigate hitherto unexplored empirical claims that are extremely relevant to central debates within philosophy of religion.[34]

But perhaps most importantly, with the advent of experimental philosophy of religion, there's reason to hope, as I suggested in §3, that these empirical tools and resources might be able to pave the way to an expanded pluralism within philosophy of religion and address some of the known worries facing the field. There is a widespread concern that a lot of research within philosophy of religion is driven by certain dogmatic commitments—where scholars are simply chasing conclusions they're doctrinally already committed to. Here too experimental philosophy of religion might be of special significance—clearly and concretely laying bare our sometimes theologically idiosyncratic intuitions along with our own biases and presuppositions. Experimental philosophy of religion can, I propose and hope, help us use data to overcome dogma-driven biases within philosophy of religion.[35]

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[33] And, as we noted earlier, given that many philosophers of religion are theists and experimental tools have frequently been hostile to traditional religious beliefs, we shouldn't be surprised if there is some hesitancy amongst philosophers of religion to incorporate empirical tools and resources.

[34] To see some sketches of these sorts of projects see Church 2024; Church, Carlson, and Barrett 2020.

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