

Supernaturalism is innate to natural moral law

God is Watching You: How the fear of God makes us human

Dominic Johnson

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This book is unusual in some respects. It combines evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, and other disciplines. The author, Dominic Johnson, has advanced degrees in evolutionary biology and in political science. The author parts ways with the likes of militant atheist Richard Dawkins, who has portrayed religion as something maladaptive. Instead, Johnson tries to explain supernaturalism, religion, morality, etc., in terms of human evolution. He says little about theology, but much of what he writes, when divested of its evolutionistic baggage, has much relevance to the biblical worldview. For this reason, I go beyond the immediate contents of this book in order to elaborate on these implications.

Supernaturalism is deep-seated and primordial

Author Johnson rejects the common humanist supposition that supernaturalism in general, and religion in particular, are mere products of culture, moreover borne of pre-scientific ignorance, and are fated to disappear with human advancement. He concludes:

“Clearly, human beings have a natural tendency to perceive supernatural agency, of which religion is only one example. Human brains are wired to believe that events happen



for a reason, and that our actions have consequences. This feeling is pervasive and powerful, churning away even when we are alone and even among atheists trained in statistics and skeptical of coincidences. All of us—believers, agnostics, and atheists alike—worry about unseen eyes observing and judging our actions, even our motives and thoughts. Humans are guided by an inner sense of duty to some kind of Big Brother. It’s not just a religious belief. It’s bigger than that. It’s human nature” (p. 136).

The alleged evolution of belief in the supernatural

The author, first of all, thinks that belief in supernatural beings arose as an extension of the mind-body dualism: Just as humans think of their minds as entities that exist independent of their brains, so also they imagine that sentient beings can exist even though they have no bodies.

In arguing this way, Johnson is, of course, afflicted with a materialistic bias—a bias that posits that our self is nothing but the firing of neurons in our brains, and that the only real entities are corporeal ones.

Johnson also supposes that human belief in supernatural causes derives from an exaggerated human sense of agency. As an example of this, he cites experiments where humans observe moving objects on a screen. The observers incorrectly conclude that one object is chasing or evading another even though the objects are actually moving randomly relative to each other.

The author suggests that the exaggerated sense of agency was of Darwinian survival advantage, based on the following line of reasoning: It is usually much costlier to disregard a valid connection (e.g. between a sound and an incoming predator) than it is to believe an invalid connection (e.g. between a sound and a non-existent predator). Johnson makes the analogy with the smoke detector that is intentionally made a little oversensitive: It is much better to put up with the occasional nuisance of a smoke detector going off from a bit of smoke during cooking than it is to face the potentially disastrous situation of the smoke detector failing to go off, in a timely manner, during a real fire.

The foregoing scenario makes perfect sense as an explanation for entire herds of animals going into immediate panicked flight (stampede) at the mere sound of a broken twig. It is much more difficult, however, to straightforwardly connect more complex forms of exaggerated human agency with Darwinian survival advantage.

Perhaps the exaggerated and misplaced sense of agency, among humans, is actually the product of the human alienation from God that had resulted from the Fall. The human no longer has direct knowledge of God's doings and God's plan for events. This

also can account for the prevalence of magic and shamanism, the occult, and superstition—all of which stem from an overdeveloped sense of agency. As a result of his lost closeness to God, the human is now clutching to poor-substitute forms of guidance about the future and control of the future. A rather egregious example of this was Saul, who, having abandoned his fellowship with God, consulted a spirit medium to try to determine the future (1 Samuel 28).

Core elements (including creationism and the universal deluge) in all religions

Johnson describes several studies that looked for universals among all religions. For instance, the author comments:

“Oxford anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has identified twelve characteristics that tend to be found among all religions, irrespective of period, continent, or culture. Included in this list are ‘beings with special powers’, ‘moral obligation’, an ‘afterlife’, and—not least—supernatural ‘punishment and reward’, all of which point to the universal importance of people’s concern for all the supernatural consequences of their actions” (p. 58).

More on this later. “The rest of Whitehouse’s twelve characteristics were: ritual exegesis, the sacred, signs and portents, deference, creationism, spirit possession, rituals, and revelation” (p. 251).

Scientific creationists have long been calling attention to the ubiquity of ancient accounts of a global Flood. Johnson concurs:

“Some commonalities do remain surprising in their specificity. For example, the legend of a great flood is widespread in indigenous cultures Even the details are similar As in the Biblical version, these floods were retribution for man’s misdeeds . . .” (p. 256).

Children are born theists, not born atheists

Modern atheists have essentially redefined atheism as an absence of belief in God, and not a conscious rejection of God. They have also argued that, in accordance with this definition, children are born atheists, and only come to believe in God when they are indoctrinated to do so.

The exact opposite is the case! It is atheism that must be inculcated, and not belief in God. Johnson makes this perfectly clear:

“The main finding is that children tend to hold beliefs in supernatural causes of events, the afterlife, supernatural agents, and a Just World, from a very young age. As soon as the relevant cognitive machinery is in place (such as a theory of mind), children exhibit beliefs in supernatural concepts (such as that there are supernatural agents who know what they know) It seems that children also have an innate tendency to believe that supernatural agents are especially concerned with right and wrong (again, something that has been explicitly explored and found in experiments). Hence Joseph Bulbalia’s argument that ‘children are not only intuitive theists, they appear to be intuitive moralists’” (pp. 131–132).

As for the other side of the coin, Johnson quips:

“Atheism must be enculturated, and this may not be easy Sociologist William Bainbridge suggests that atheism has other important causes, such as being raised by atheists, early traumatic experiences with religion, having ‘resolutely unmystical personalities’, a rebellious adolescence, or socialization to antireligious ideologies in one’s profession” (p. 132).

Fear of supernatural displeasure is innate to humans

While religions, of course, differ from each other in details, the element

of supernatural surveillance and punishment is common to most of them. Johnson comments:

“Discussions about supernatural reward and punishment often revolve around God, but of course there are many alternative agents wielding supernatural power. They may take the form of a single monotheistic God, a pantheon of different gods, angels, demons, ancestors, ghosts, spirits of nature, animal spirits, witches, sorcerers, jinns, and so on” (p. 86).

Johnson adds:

“As we have seen, ethnographic and cross-cultural studies suggest that beliefs in supernatural punishment are widespread, powerful, and deeply rooted, and this goes for indigenous, ancient, and modern societies alike. Exceptions do not reverse a broader trend While capricious gods crop up they are far less pervasive than the numerous supernatural agents that reward and punish for some systematic *reason* [emphasis in original]” (pp. 92–93).

The alleged evolution of the dread of supernatural displeasure

Johnson contends that the fear of being monitored, by supernatural agents, evolved to enable human societies to function. This fear of supernatural punishment drove humans to curb their naturally selfish instincts, and, as elaborated below, did so with levels of effectiveness that natural consequences of misconduct never could.

The author supports his reasoning as follows:

“My own empirical work comparing 186 preindustrial cultures around the world also found support for a link between beliefs about supernatural agents and cooperation. The overall result was that irrespective of the *type* of religion or *region* of the

globe, moralizing gods were more frequent among societies that were larger, centrally sanctioned, policed, use and loan money, and pay taxes [emphasis in original]” (p. 183).

Perhaps another explanation is in order. One must remember that, after the Noachian Deluge and the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, nations turned away from God. It is possible that the larger societies, by virtue of their size and sophistication, retained a larger vestige of pre-Abrahamic monotheism, and that is why they were more likely to still believe in moralizing gods. In contrast, smaller societies, owing to their modest size, were more likely to drift into total barbarization and total forgetting of the One True God.

Implications of the fear of supernatural displeasure

The author does not argue that belief in God, or other punitive supernatural agencies, is absolutely necessary in order for morality and social order to function. Rather, he sees them as potent ingredients in the enforcement of the same. He thus summarizes his ideas:

“This book has argued that supernatural punishment is a key driver, playing a powerful role in achieving and sustaining cooperation—and it does so among modern, ancient, and indigenous societies, as well as holding up to scrutiny in controlled laboratory experiments. Supernatural punishment is not only widespread, it is also a significantly more potent weapon than we might have thought, because human beings and human brains are particularly susceptible to *negative* events, and because *supernatural* punishment is inherently more powerful than secular punishment [emphasis in original]” (p. 238).

The power of the fear of supernatural retribution, in regulating human

conduct, owes to the fact that, unlike the human punisher, the supernatural punisher never slackens, cannot be deceived by the offender, and—most important of all—sees every single thing that a person thinks and does. No human leader—no matter how clever and powerful—can do that! Moreover, the offender has to face the possibility that the supernatural punisher will administer the punishment in his own supernatural way and time, and administer forms of punishment that no mere mortal ever could. The classic example of this in the Christian faith, brought up by Johnson, is Matthew 10:28, wherein the Lord told His disciples not to fear the human, who can only destroy the body, but to fear God, who can destroy both the body and soul in hell.

The reader can remember how Adam and Eve simultaneously tried to hide from God and to cover up their guilt with fig leaves (Genesis 3:7–10). Let us apply this as a corrective to Johnson’s reasoning. Instead of an evolutionary development, the universal human fear of supernatural retribution can best be understood as a displaced sense of unresolved guilt, before God, that owes to the Fall and its consequences. An extreme example of such displaced and unresolved guilt can include the pagan who engages in child sacrifice in order to appease the gods.

Only the Gospel can undo the effects of the Fall. In addition, only the Gospel can adequately resolve human guilt for sin.

Neo-Marxism debunked: religion is not an invention of the powerful

Karl Marx taught that religion is the opium of the people. The downtrodden would contentedly remain in their miserable state because they were inculcated in belief in the ‘pie in the sky’. A modern version of this

notion is that religion is a tool of the elite in enforcing the subordination of the masses.

Johnson, in contrast, points out that everyone, regardless of social class, is affected by religion, and benefits from religion. He writes:

“If large-scale social order is to be achieved, then someone has to lead, and others have to follow. . . . Indeed, for society to succeed at all, followers may have enjoyed a net benefit of being in a group, even if (a few) leaders gained more” (p. 197).

“To summarize, supernatural punishment is not a ruse of the elite. It is a deterrent that works precisely because it places authority and ultimate power way beyond what any mere mortal is capable of—whether peasant, priest, or potentate” (p. 198).

Thus it is no accident that some of the best social revolutions for good appealed to a power higher than the human rules, e.g. Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery, and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

“[T]here are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all’.

“Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

Natural moral law is tacitly validated

This book upends many popular liberal notions. It turns out that morality is not simply an arbitrary human

convention, and today’s climate of wishy-washy moral relativism is not in accordance with the facts. Although Johnson does not put it in these terms, he makes this clear.

The concept of natural moral law has a long history (figure 1). Thanks to this book, it now finds a fascinating scientific corroboration.

The author quotes David Welch, a political scientist:

“Comparative ethicists have shown that there are no premoral societies;

that all societies give some degree of moral value to such things as human life, sexual restraint, friendship, mutual aid, fairness, truthfulness, and generosity; and that all societies employ moral concepts such as good, bad, right, wrong, just, and unjust” (p. 95).

This fits perfectly with the teachings of the Apostle Paul (Romans 2: 14–15). Humans have a built-in sense of right and wrong, even when this sense is muted and distorted by the self-darkening of human sin and the debaucheries of pagan religions. This also helps answer the question of how God can send people to hell that have never heard the Christian message. Every human being has some sense of God (Romans 1:20–21) and has some concept of God’s law (Romans 2:14–15), even if he or she has never once been taught anything about God or the Ten Commandments.

Conclusion

Christians have long supposed that belief in the supernatural, and concepts of right and wrong (natural moral law), are not merely the products of cultural conditioning, but are innate to human beings. This is now supported by anthropological and other forms of scientific evidence. The existence of the supernatural, concepts of morality, and supernatural monitoring and punishment of human conduct, are all ‘hard-wired’ into the human brain.

Instead of having originated through evolution, as proposed in this book, all this can be recognized as the direct creative act of God. After all God had created humans in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), so it is hardly surprising that God has put these instincts into all human beings.



Figure 1. Both Christian and non-Christian thinkers have recognized the fact of natural moral law, and it now has a scientific basis.