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*Edited by*

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AND

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## Explaining Belief in the Supernatural

### Some Thoughts on Paul Bloom's 'Religious Belief as an Evolutionary Accident'

*Peter van Inwagen*

Naturalistic explanations of religion are as old as Xenophanes (570–480 BC). The most famous are probably those of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. I must confess that I don't find these three famous explanations of religion very interesting.<sup>1</sup> Large parts of them are unintelligible (this is particularly true of Feuerbach's writings on religion) and the parts that are intelligible are vague and untestable (Feuerbach and Freud), or else they demand allegiance to some very comprehensive theory that has been tried and found wanting on grounds unrelated to religion (Marx's theory of the dialectics of history and Freud's psychology).

Paul Bloom's theory, however, is very interesting indeed, and it certainly has none of the defects I have ascribed to the theories of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. Bloom's theory, or the part of it that is set out in 'Religious Belief as an Evolutionary Accident', is an explanation of a certain fact, the fact that supernaturalistic belief—belief in the reality of the supernatural—is so widespread among human beings that it may properly be called a universal.<sup>2</sup> (I will take it for granted that Bloom's contention that this is a

1. Not as explanations of religion, that is. I concede that they represent interesting episodes in the history of thought.

2. I say supernaturalistic belief; Bloom's term is religious belief. I prefer my term. For one thing, a supernaturalistic belief is not necessarily a religious belief. (I would say that someone's belief is a religious belief only if it is in some straightforward way connected with that person's religion.) People who frequent mediums presumably believe that those mediums are able to establish

fact is correct.) The fact that most human beings have some sort of belief in the supernatural is, to my mind, a fact that is much more likely to have a simple, unified explanation than the much more complicated fact that there is such a thing as religion.

And why does this fact need an explanation? Might not the universality of a belief in the supernatural be due simply to chance? Might the answer to the question, 'Why is supernaturalistic belief a human universal?' be simply 'Well, why not??' The answer to this question is that the universality of supernaturalistic belief is an evolutionary puzzle. Most universal human beliefs (the belief in 'other minds', the belief that unsupported bodies fall . . .) have some simple, immediately evident connection with evolutionary fitness, but a human being's being without supernaturalistic beliefs does not decrease his or her evolutionary fitness in any obvious way. And supernaturalistic beliefs are not without their cost: they have an obvious tendency to lead to actions (rituals, prayer) that involve an expenditure of resources that might have been devoted to survival and reproduction. And it is a commonplace of evolutionary biology that any feature of a species that is costly in terms of energy and resources requires some sort of explanation. (The colorful plumage of the males of many species of birds is an example.)

The fact that supernaturalistic belief is a human universal, a feature of our *species*, therefore requires an explanation. But what fact, exactly, is this fact? The concept of the supernatural is a difficult one,<sup>3</sup> but nothing I say in these comments will require a sophisticated understanding of this concept. It will suffice for present purposes to understand a supernaturalistic belief as follows: 'A belief is a supernaturalistic belief if it implies the existence of invisible and intangible agents<sup>4</sup> whose actions sometimes have significant

contact with beings that most people (if not sophisticated philosophers and theologians) would classify as 'supernatural', but I should not want to call their belief a religious one. Bloom has pointed out (in the discussion following an oral presentation of some of the material in his chapter) that although Iceland is generally conceded to be the least religious of all nations 80 per cent of Icelanders believe in reincarnation. A religious belief, moreover, is not necessarily a supernaturalistic belief. My belief that Anglican orders are valid is a religious belief, but its truth or falsity depends only on whether certain human beings have performed certain actions with certain intentions.

3. As is the concept of the natural, and therefore of a naturalistic explanation.

4. These agents are to be thought of as non-human intelligences possessed of more-than-human power. By calling them invisible and intangible, I mean that they normally have these features; it is consistent with what I mean by 'invisible and intangible agents' that invisible and intangible agents have the power to make themselves visible to human beings—and even (a favorite

effects on human life,<sup>5</sup> or implies that human beings have a post-mortem existence.’

I will not recapitulate Bloom’s naturalistic explanation of the universality of belief in the supernatural among human beings. His own exposition of this explanation is very clear, and anyone who is reading these comments can be presumed to be familiar with it—and can in any case find it by turning back a few pages. I will, however, remind you that the thesis that supernaturalistic belief is a ‘universal’ does not imply that everyone has supernaturalistic beliefs—a fact that does not need to be pointed out to Professor Bloom, since he himself has none, and he daily moves in social and professional circles in which the belief that there are invisible and intangible agents is not much more common than the belief that absolute monarchy is the ideal form of government.

It is also worth pointing out that Bloom’s explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief is not intended to imply that the causal factors that it appeals to are operative in the case of every particular person who has supernaturalistic beliefs. If the explanation did imply that, it would be wrong. I am a case in point. My own supernaturalistic beliefs are extensive and elaborate (they differ from those of the Pope only in respects that would interest theologians). And yet I have no tendency to see purpose or teleology everywhere. Indeed, I have no tendency to see teleology *anywhere* other than in human actions and their consequences. If I witnessed a notoriously wicked landlord being struck dead by lightning at the moment he was giving the order to evict a weeping single mother, my natural inclination would be to believe that his death was accidental and meaningless in every sense of those words. (I suppose I do believe that many things that happen have a meaning or purpose that is not grounded in the desires and intentions of human beings, but that belief is for me a sort of theological theorem—a logical consequence of certain very general theological propositions I affirm; and I certainly do not claim to be able to identify even one thing that serves some non-human purpose.) Nor do I claim to see any design in the world other than the design that is obviously due to human beings. At any rate—I must be careful about how I put this—I do not see any design that is independent of or prior to my belief that

activity of Zeus), to present themselves to human beings in so ‘tangible’ a form as to be able to engage in sexual intercourse with them.

5. These effects might be anything from guiding a shepherd to a lost sheep to being responsible for the existence of the heavens and the earth and all that they contain.

there is a Designer.<sup>6</sup> I frequently quote Cardinal Newman on this point: ‘I believe in design because I believe in God, not in a God because I see design.’ I think I am right to look at the world and see design, but I do not think that the cognitive apparatus of atheists and agnostics is somehow defective because they look at the world and see no design (or ‘see’ it in a way, but regard the experience as illusory, like the experience of seeing one line in the Müller-Lyer figure as longer than the other). Finally, I have no tendency to mind–body dualism at all. I believe that I am a physical thing; a living animal shaped like a statue of a human being and made entirely of up-quarks, down-quarks, and electrons. And not only do I believe that I am a physical thing I *feel* it: I can find within myself no tendency to regard myself as something non-physical, and it seems to me to be entirely natural to suppose that when something has touched my head or my hand or my foot it has touched *me*.

If Bloom’s explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief is right, therefore, he is an atypical specimen of humanity in that he has no supernaturalistic beliefs. And I am an atypical specimen of someone who has supernaturalistic beliefs in that my supernaturalistic beliefs have atypical causes.

What I want to discuss in these comments is not whether Bloom’s explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief is correct but, rather, what the implications of its being correct would be for the epistemological status of supernaturalistic belief. This is a question that Bloom has considered and which he takes very seriously. He correctly points out that no naturalistic explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief can *demonstrate* that there are no invisible, intangible agents or that human beings cease to exist when they die. Having said this, he goes on to say:

While it is true that nothing from the empirical study of human psychology can *refute* [supernaturalistic] belief, certain theories can challenge the rationality of those who hold such beliefs . . .

Suppose you meet someone who believes in intelligent life on Mars, and you discovered that she holds this belief based on wishful thinking—she believes in

6. I will admit that I find the argument from design to be a very interesting argument—particularly in the form that appeals to the apparent ‘fine-tuning for life’ of the parameters of the laws of physics. Interesting, but far from conclusive (like all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions). And I would say that it has no more to do with my belief in the existence of God than the analogical argument for other minds (also a very interesting argument) has to do with my belief in the existence of my wife’s inner mental states.

life on Mars because she wants this to be true. It would be pretty cool if there were Martians, she explains. There is no consensus among epistemologists as to the precise conditions that have to hold for a belief to be justified, but whatever these are, surely wishful thinking does not satisfy them. Wanting X to be true is a terrible reason to believe X to be true. While it is possible that there is intelligent life on Mars (that is, she could be right by accident), still, she is unreasonable in holding this belief, and you would be unreasonable if you found yourself persuaded by her.

As I read Bloom, he does not mean what he says in this passage to imply that if his own explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief is correct then such beliefs are based on wishful thinking. His thesis is rather that certain theses about the causes of someone's holding a belief can imply that that person is irrational in holding that belief—and 'because she wants this to be true' is put forward only as an indisputable example of such a thesis.

I assent to the spirit of this passage, but I have some pedantic quibbles about the letter. The target of my quibbles is the sentence 'Wanting X to be true is a terrible reason to believe X to be true.' It is not that I suppose that wanting X to be true *is* a good reason for believing X to be true; it is rather that it does not seem to me to be a reason at all. I shall try to explain. Let us call the irrational believer Alice. As the example is set up, wanting there to be Martians is the *cause of Alice's belief* that there are Martians, and not *Alice's reason for believing* that there are Martians. Alice's reason for believing that there are Martians is the reason she would give if you asked her 'Why do you think that there are Martians?' That question *could* be a request for the cause of her belief, but would naturally be taken as a request for a reason. And she did her best to provide a sincere and reflective answer to this question. As Bloom has set the example up, Alice's answer would not be 'Because I want there to be Martians' but, rather, 'Oh, it would be pretty cool if there were Martians.' That *is* a reason for believing that there are Martians—and a terrible one (so Bloom would say and so I would say and so anyone likely to be reading these words would say; Alice, of course, sees matters differently). Here is perhaps a more realistic example of someone who believes that there are Martians, whose belief is caused by his wanting there to be Martians, and who states his reason for that belief.<sup>7</sup> Alice's friend

7. More realistic, but 'it would be pretty cool if there were Martians' is a *possible* reason for believing in Martians. Consider the following exchange (from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*):

'But my dear Sebastian, you can't seriously *believe* it all.'

Fred responds to the question ‘Why do you think that there are Martians?’ in these words: ‘Oh, their existence is a scientific fact. I read about the Martians and their canals in a book by a famous astronomer.’ (But the book was by Percival Lowell and was published in 1906. Because Fred wants to believe in Martians he simply ignores all other relevant evidence—and his reason for believing that there are Martians is thus a very bad one.)

In my view, Bloom should not have mentioned reasons at all. The point that he should have made, the point that is really relevant to the question of the relevance of his explanation of supernaturalistic belief to its rationality, has to do with causes, not reasons. And the point is this. It is at least very plausible to suppose that its having causes of certain kinds can render a belief irrational: if a person’s belief is caused in certain ways, that fact about the causes of the belief *entails*—quite independently of the content of the belief—that that belief is irrational. If, for example, Alice believes that there are Martians because—*simply* because—she wants there to be Martians, it follows that her belief in Martians is irrational. This conditional statement may not be true (scrupulous epistemologists may want to qualify it in some way) but it will serve as an example of what I mean: it may be that among the causes that a belief may have, *some* are such that any belief that has those causes is perforce irrational—and wishful thinking is at the very least a strong candidate for a cause that has that undesirable property.<sup>8</sup>

Bloom has postulated certain causes for the fact that supernaturalistic belief is a human universal. Are *those* causes of the sort that render beliefs with those causes irrational? Put the question this way: Jane believes that there are invisible and intangible agents—non-human intelligences of great power—who sometimes interact with human beings. If she becomes convinced that Bloom has correctly explained the fact that belief in such agents is a human universal should she conclude that her belief in them is irrational—or that it is in any other way epistemologically dubious?

‘Can’t I?’

‘I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass.’

‘Oh yes, I believe that. It’s a lovely idea.’

‘But you can’t *believe* things because they’re a lovely idea.’

‘But I *do*. That’s how I believe.’

8. But only some. All rational beliefs must have causes of some sort—for a belief that had *no* causes, a belief that popped into one’s head ‘out of the blue’, would certainly be irrational even if it happened to be true. A rational belief must be one that has *causes of the right sort*. One of the central problems of epistemology is that of supplying some non-circular account of ‘causes of the right sort’.



Let me make a couple of obvious but important points. If there are no supernatural (invisible, intangible) agents, then, to a near certainty, the fact that almost all human beings believe that such agents exist will have some naturalistic explanation or other (presumably an evolutionary one). If, on the other hand, there *are* supernatural agents, and if, at most times and in most places, they have interacted causally with human beings, that fact might well have a lot to do with the fact that belief in such agents was a human universal. If that were the case, this belief might be a human universal even if it had no evolutionary explanation—just as the fact that almost all human beings believe that there are birds has no evolutionary explanation.<sup>9</sup> But if there are supernatural agents it does not *follow* that the explanation of the fact that human beings believe in them has no evolutionary component. It might be, for example, that the local presence of one of these supernatural agents was a very hard thing for human beings to detect (they are, after all, invisible and intangible), and it might be that if human beings did not have some innate disposition to believe that there were supernatural agents they would never have interpreted anything they perceived as signaling the presence of such an agent.

Naturalistic explanations of supernaturalistic belief offered by naturalists like Professor Bloom (and they are not very often offered by anyone who is not a naturalist; see, e.g., Barrett 2004) tend to convey the implication that they are ‘all the explanation there is’. But this implication is not logical. Any naturalistic explanation of any phenomenon<sup>10</sup> can be incorporated without logical contradiction into a ‘larger’, more comprehensive supernaturalistic explanation of that phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> A theist (or other ‘supernaturalist’)

9. Which is not to say that the human sensory apparatus, and the fact that human beings attend to things *like* birds have no evolutionary explanations. Put the point this way: if birds had somehow suddenly appeared all over the world *after* human beings had evolved into their present form all normal human beings would thereafter have believed that there were birds.
10. Unless it explicitly contains some such clause as ‘and this is all the explanation there is; in particular, this phenomenon has no supernatural causes’. One might raise the question whether it is the business of a naturalistic explanation to go beyond nature in this way: whether it is allowable for a naturalistic explanation to do more than appeal only to natural causes; whether a naturalistic explanation can properly *deny* that the phenomenon it purports to explain has any supernaturalistic causes. This is no doubt a verbal question. But it does seem—and this is *not* a verbal point—that an explanation that contained such a clause would not be a (purely) *scientific* explanation, for it would have a metaphysical component. This is an elementary point, but, elementary though it is, it is consistently ignored by those who contend that the Darwinian account of evolution is logically incompatible with the thesis that a supernatural being is responsible for the apparent teleology exhibited by living organisms.
11. In this way if no other. Let N be any naturalistic explanation of some phenomenon P. Consider a timeless God contemplating (timelessly) the creation of a cosmos. Since he is omniscient, all

may therefore accept any naturalistic explanation of supernaturalistic belief (or of any other phenomenon) without logical contradiction.<sup>12</sup> But this point verges on the trivial, for avoiding logical contradiction is not all that impressive an epistemological achievement. Some naturalistic explanations of a fact or phenomenon *resist* being incorporated into a larger, more comprehensive supernaturalistic explanation. And this resistance is no less real for not being a matter of logic.

An example may be helpful. Suppose that a statue of the Virgin in an Italian church is observed to weep; or, at any rate, that is how it looks. It is eventually discovered, however, that the apparent tears are bat urine (it seems that some bats have made their home in the dim recesses of the church ceiling). This account of the tears is of course logically consistent with their having a partly supernaturalistic explanation (maybe God wanted the statue to appear to be weeping and He so guided the bats that they took up residence in just the right spot). Still, it *resists* being incorporated into a larger supernaturalistic explanation—it strongly suggests that there's 'nothing more to it' than ordinary causes and chance. (If Father Guido, the beloved rector of that church, is being considered for canonization, the Roman Catholic Church will certainly not let the 'tears' pass as a miracle that could be ascribed to God's special favor to Father Guido.) I cannot think of any very informative way to give a general account or definition of the concept this example is supposed to illustrate. I cannot provide a useful definition of 'resists being incorporated into a larger, more comprehensive supernaturalistic account'. The idea is simply that a naturalistic explanation of a phenomenon would have this feature if any possible attempt to incorporate it into a supernaturalistic account of that phenomenon would be regarded by any unbiased person (including those unbiased persons

possible distributions of matter and radiation in space–time are present to his mind. Consider the one among them that is displayed by the actual cosmos. God chooses that one and says, 'Let it be!' or 'Let there be a cosmos that consists of matter and radiation distributed in space time in *that way!*' And, by that act, a complete four–dimensional whole—from the Big Bang to, well, whatever—timelessly *is*. If the thesis 'N explains P' is true, and if N is a naturalistic explanation, the truth of 'N explains P' must have been established by this timeless act of creation: its truth must 'supervene' (as philosophers like to say) on the distribution of matter and radiation in space–time. If the truth or falsity of 'N explains P' does not supervene on—is not 'settled by'—the distribution of matter and radiation in space–time N is not an explanation that can properly be called 'naturalistic'. The right description of N in that case would be 'metaphysical explanation'.

12. As Bloom says, 'If there is an omnipotent God, then he could have orchestrated the universe so that belief in him could have emerged in any fashion whatsoever.'

who believe in the supernatural)<sup>13</sup> as unreasonable, contrived, artificial, or desperate. Although I cannot give any very informative explanation of this idea it seems to me to be a real and useful idea, and it seems to me that I have given a clear example of one case in which it applies. As Justice Potter Stewart said in another connection, 'I know it when I see it.'

The famous naturalistic accounts of religious belief that I have alluded to (those of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud) are certainly over on that side: any of them would resist being incorporated into a larger, partly supernaturalistic account of religious belief. (In their entirety; in my view, significant parts of the Marxian and Freudian accounts of religious belief could be incorporated into larger, supernaturalistic accounts.)

Is Bloom's naturalistic explanation of the universality of supernaturalistic belief like that? Does it resist being incorporated into a larger, supernaturalistic account of the universality of supernaturalistic belief? It certainly doesn't seem to me to have that feature. (As Justice Stewart went on to say, 'And this isn't a case of it.') Suppose that God exists and wants supernaturalistic belief to be a human universal, and sees (he would see this, if it were true) that certain features that it would be useful for human beings to have—useful from an evolutionary point of view: conducive to survival and reproduction—would naturally have the consequence that supernaturalistic belief would in due course become a human universal. Why shouldn't he allow those features to be the cause of the thing he wants?—rather as the human designer of a vehicle might use the waste heat from its engine to keep its passengers warm.

There are two aspects of Bloom's chapter that might seem to suggest that it does 'resist incorporation'. One of them is certain of his incidental remarks and turns of phrase, remarks that reflect his belief that supernatural belief in fact does have a (purely) natural explanation. (For example, 'these are the seeds from which religion grows'.) But this aspect of the chapter does not represent any of the working content of his explanation of supernatural belief. A psychologist who was a religious believer (and hence not a metaphysical naturalist) might have presented the same theory without using language that suggested that all correct explanations of any phenomenon are purely naturalistic explanations.

13. That is, those believers in the supernatural who have no special reason to want the phenomenon in question to have a supernatural explanation. In the 'Father Guido' example, a staunch advocate of Father Guido's canonization would be 'biased', but a devout Roman Catholic who didn't care one way or the other whether Father Guido was ever declared a saint might well be 'unbiased'.

The other aspect of the chapter is this: its appeal to the concept of an evolutionary accident. If a theory represents a phenomenon as an 'evolutionary accident', does that not strongly suggest—if it does not logically imply—that, according to the theory, the phenomenon has only natural causes? I think the answer to this question is simply, No. For what does it mean to say that some universal or widespread feature of a species is an evolutionary accident? It means only that possession of that feature by members of the species does not increase the fitness of the organisms that have it, and that, therefore, its presence in the members of the species does not have a straightforward explanation in terms of natural selection. (But it may well have a non-straightforward explanation in terms of natural selection: it may be—metaphorically speaking—an unintended consequence of a complex of more-or-less unrelated features—'fitness friendly' features—exhibited by the species, features that do, individually, have straightforward explanations in terms of natural selection.) A feature of a species that is an 'evolutionary accident' in this sense could certainly be part of the Creator's plan for that species. I offer a simple proof-in-principle of this thesis, without meaning to imply that I endorse the particular theology of creation that it incorporates. Consider an omniscient Creator of the sort that figured as an example in note 12. This Creator decrees 'complete' distributions of matter and radiation in space-time. Many of the features of the four-dimensional cosmos such a Creator produces will be intended features of that cosmos (others, no doubt, will be 'don't cares'). If we knew that our world had such a Creator, and if we were convinced, on scientific grounds, of the correctness of the Darwinian theory of evolution, there would be no barrier, no barrier at all, to our supposing that many features of living organisms were both intended by the Creator and evolutionary accidents. (Any distribution of matter and radiation in space-time that is remotely similar to ours must contain organisms with features that are evolutionary accidents. In choosing one particular distribution our omniscient Creator chooses the evolutionary accidents 'along with everything else'. Many of the accidents he chooses are don't-cares, but many others are—we suppose—intended.)

It is important to realize that nothing I have said implies that (nothing I have said is addressed to the question whether) supernaturalistic belief is rational. There are all sorts of well-known and powerful arguments for the conclusion that belief in the supernatural is irrational. The best of these arguments are versions of or elaborations on this simple argument:

there is no evidence for the existence of any supernatural beings, and it is irrational to believe in the existence of things for which there is no evidence.<sup>14</sup> I have been addressing, rather, this question: is there anything about Professor Bloom's naturalistic explanation of supernaturalistic belief that would—if this explanation were correct and known to be correct—imply or strongly suggest that supernaturalistic belief is irrational or in any other way epistemologically defective? I have identified this question with the following question: is Bloom's explanation of the sort—and there are naturalistic explanations of this sort—that resist incorporation into some larger, more comprehensive supernaturalistic account of the universality of human belief in the supernatural? And I have suggested that Bloom's explanation is not of that sort, or at any rate that there is no evident reason to suppose that it is. Perhaps there are causes a belief can have that have the following property: a belief that had causes of those sorts would necessarily be irrational—irrational no matter what else was true of the believer's history and circumstances. Wishful thinking is certainly a plausible candidate for a cause with that property. I do not see that evolutionary causes of the kind Bloom has proposed are like that. If they indeed have that property they do not wear the fact that they have it on their sleeve: some non-trivial argument would be required to show that they had it.

14. For my thoughts on arguments of this sort, see my 'Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis?' (Dole and Chignell 2005: 131–49).