

In October 2011, I will be working on a Templeton fellowship at the University of Oxford. My project is entitled Cognitive origins of intuitions in natural theology. See [here](#) for more details.

The abstract is as follows: "Arguments in natural theology (like the fine tuning argument or the cosmological argument) rely to an important extent on intuitions, for example about causality, agency, and design. Over the past few decades, cognitive scientists have provided convincing evidence that some of these intuitions are a stable part of human cognition. My aim is to explore to what extent cognitive science can elucidate the origins of intuitions that underlie arguments in natural theology, and what this implies for the justification of the premises in these arguments (a fortiori, of their conclusions). The project will draw on empirical and theoretical research in the cognitive science of religion in order to critically analyze arguments in natural theology, with an emphasis on the work of contemporary philosophers of religion."

According to Pascal Boyer (2001), the tragedy of the theologian is that religious cognition tends to revert to ordinary, more intuitive modes of reasoning, persistently in a direction away from the sophisticated concepts that theologians develop. Undeniably, our intuitive ontological notions are widely at odds with some theological concepts, such as the Trinity (an example Pascal uses himself).



But it seems to me that in many cases the premises of theological arguments can be brought back to evolved, cognitive biases that arise early and spontaneously in development. For example, as Johan De Smedt and I argue in a forthcoming paper in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, the cosmological argument is based on the intuition that whatever comes into existence, needs a cause for its existence. This deeply rooted search for causality has already been demonstrated in infants; moreover, as Newman et al. indicate in [this paper](#), infants have a preference for agents as causes for situations that are ordered (e.g., they look longer when a mechanical tool causes an orderly arrangement of blocks, and less long when a hand causes this arrangement). Similarly, the argument from design seems to be grounded in normal intuitions about teleology and design, also in its sophisticated form of the fine-tuning argument. Perhaps we could call such intuitions the 'theologian's trump card': their intuitive appeal makes them irresistibly compelling.