

Opinion

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Let's stick to the science

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In his attack on my research into children and religious ideas, AC Grayling plays the psychologist and spins conspiracy theories

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Last week at Cambridge University's Faraday Institute, I summarised some scientific research that leads me and many of my colleagues to argue that from childhood humans have a number of predispositions that incline them to believe in gods generally and perhaps a super-knowing, creator god in particular. Unlike [Andrew Brown](#), [AC Grayling](#) has opted to ignore the science and focus on the alleged motivations of the scientist (me) and one of his sources of funding (the [John Templeton Foundation](#)). As a philosopher, Grayling should know that attacking an argument not on its merits but by discrediting the arguer commits the ad hominem fallacy which is generally the strategy of school kids and desperate, uninformed people.

Had Grayling attended the seminar as Brown did (or read my book, [Why Would Anyone Believe in God?](#)), he would know that I do not say that religion is "hardwired" or "innate" - rather that children have propensities to believe in gods because of how their minds naturally work. Grayling writes that my "real reasons for thinking this, of course are that [I am] a man of faith funded by a faith-based organisation." He seems entirely unaware that the position he claims must be religiously motivated was argued for by Pascal Boyer, an atheist evolutionary psychologist and anthropologist, in his 2001 book [Religion Explained](#). Boyer was once asked whether a child left on an island to raise himself would become religious. Boyer responded that if there were two such children they would likely become religious. Likewise, Grayling seems unaware that the same theme has been taken up

by another prominent atheist anthropologist, [Scott Atran](#), who wrote in his 2002 book *In Gods We Trust*:

Supernatural agency is the most culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionarily compelling concept in religion. The concept of the supernatural is culturally derived from an innate cognitive schema ...

I find it ironic that Atran and Boyer have been demonised by religious writers for daring to suggest that religion is the product of natural predispositions and now a prominent atheist accuses me of religious agenda - and being an intelligent design defender - for saying the same thing.

Grayling does attempt to critically engage one scientific study: a study that provides some of the evidence (but not all of it) that children have an affinity for explaining features of the natural world (such as why rocks are pointy) in terms of design, function, and purpose. Rather than checking to see whether he has the details right, he draws upon second-hand accounts to mount his attack and writes as if his evaluation of a soundbite trumps the expertise of the professional scientists who refereed and published the research in a scholarly journal. Incidentally, this "pointy rock" study is not mine and it was not funded by the Templeton Foundation as Grayling implies in the article and claimed in our radio exchange last week. This study is one of a large number of excellent, professionally-refereed articles published in top scientific journals by psychologist Deborah Kelemen. Based on these and other experiments Kelemen has argued that children are "intuitive theists" even without Templeton funding or any known religious agenda for or against.

Because Grayling assumes that the only people arguing for the strong natural disposition to believe in gods are religious (most are not as far as I can tell), he cavalierly disregards the mounting body of scientific evidence in favour of an alternative account that he backs with no evidence at all. Grayling favours what I call the "evolved gullibility hypothesis": for good evolutionary reasons they [children] are extremely credulous. I do not disagree that children have a tendency to trust their parents and other adults - surely this is how children learn about the particular god of their cultural environment - but children are not equally likely to believe anything that parents teach them.

Good luck teaching a five-year-old that people don't really have conscious minds or that it is okay to murder the neighbours in their sleep. The preponderance of scientific evidence (peer-reviewed and published) shows that some ideas find children's minds infertile ground, whereas others readily grow and flourish.

Grayling may disagree with me regarding just which ideas are most at home in children, but surely it is the scientific evidence that we should determine who is right instead of trying to psychoanalyse each other's motivations.

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