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Referee's report on the doctoral thesis written by

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Outline

Karolina Prochownik (KP hereafter) has written a thesis that consists of a short introduction, four chapters and a couple of pages of conclusions. Her stated aim is to “examine and evaluate different accounts of the link between religion and morality in the cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion.” In particular, she examines two approaches that she calls cultural adaptationism and cultural epidemiology.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the reader to cognitive science of religion, the discipline within which lie the approaches KP examines, and to many of the basic concepts that she will rely upon in her book. The second chapter has the aim of explaining the basics of the debate between the cultural adaptationist and cultural epidemiological approaches. The third and fourth chapters focus on each of those approaches in turn in order to discuss them in detail and evaluate the evidence for them.

Language

While it is clear in reading the book that KP is not a native speaker of English, the linguistic infelicities are relatively minor and at no point interfere with understanding the points that KP wishes to make. She has a good grasp of scientific terminology and uses it to clearly communicate her points throughout the book. Likewise, her text is well structured in terms of individual sentences and paragraphs. The use of citations and the bibliography are such as one would require from a scientific work in this field.

KP is to be commended for having taken the effort to write her doctoral dissertation in English – a choice that most certainly raised difficulties but is sure to help her work reach a broader audience within the world scientific community.

Structure

The first two chapters of KP's thesis are for the most part scene-setting. For over a hundred pages, the reader is presented with concepts and distinctions whose relevance to any points that KP will ultimately make is not necessarily at all clear. Indeed, in many cases, I would argue that the concepts and distinctions she explains turn out to be unnecessary – the problem being that there is usually no way for the reader to know which of them these will be.

This way of structuring a dissertation is the norm in Poland and indeed may well have been required of the doctoral candidate and, as such, it would be unfair to be too harsh upon her for

having written her book that way. Therefore, I will simply say that, given her evident determination to communicate with the world scientific community, she should never write this way again. The structure of the book should be the structure of the argument she wishes to present, and concepts as well as distinctions should be introduced as and when they are necessary to make her point. This ensures that the reader is able to follow the author's intent and to judge the relevance of the ideas that are being introduced, thereby making it possible to immediately relate them to other ideas and, in effect, understand them and remember them to a much greater degree. As it is, it would have been best for KP to have written a very short introductory chapter and then jumped straight into the material that she discusses in chapters three and four.

The problem that the structure of the argument and the structure of the book are not aligned with each other arguably continues in the last two chapters where KP presents the two main approaches she wishes to evaluate. Her choice has been to first present cultural adaptationism and then to turn her focus on cultural epidemiology. I should note that her discussion of cultural epidemiology is less than half as long as that of the first of the approaches – a mismatch which suggests either that she grew tired of the material or that she had made most of her points in the previous chapter. While this is not as clear a case as with the first two chapters, I would suggest that if she wished to compare the two approaches she should have not discussed each in turn but chosen to examine the two simultaneously. The structure of the book would then be motivated by the different kinds of evidence that the two approaches need to consider: with chapters to consider the historical, psychological and conceptual issues.

A further significant issue with the structuring of this thesis is the signposting. While KP begins each section of her book with a short outline of the material in that section, her outlines are quite cryptic. The problem is that while KP explains what she will do in each section, she typically does not explain how she will do it nor does she necessarily explain what role the section play in her overall argument. The result is that quite often I was at a loss as to the purpose of particular passages. The aim for the author should be to make sure that, for any single sentence, the reader will be able to understand why it is necessary to reach the overall conclusion. This aim works both ways, of course. It also means that the author must know the role each sentence plays in the overarching argument.

Part of the problem is that the author does not really bring together all of the material she presents in her book. The conclusions are hurried so that after having examined the two different approaches there is little effort put into a substantive comparison between them. Their analyses function for the most part as separate.

Having said this, the two substantive chapters (3 & 4) are generally well-structured – the exceptions to this being spelled out in my later comments.

Scope

The question of the relationship between religion and morality is of significant general scientific interest and one of the central issues within the field of cognitive science of religion. As such, KP's choice of topic is without any doubt of scientific value. What is more, the

debate regarding it within cognitive science of religion is both lively and clearly progressing forward with important new research appearing very regularly. As such, the debate makes for an interesting but difficult thesis topic. The difficulty lies in framing the exact scope of thesis in such a way that it is doable in just a few years and in ensuring that the end result is up-to-date with a rapidly changing field. While KP has managed the latter, I feel that she has somewhat over-reached herself in terms of the former.

KP decided to look at two different approaches to the relationship between religion and morality that are currently being developed within cognitive science of religion. She examines them from the point of view of a naturalized philosophy of science. While this requires her to focus her discussion on theoretical issues, it also forces her to engage closely with the concrete results obtained, as well as the methods used to obtain them. Since cognitive science of religion is highly multidisciplinary, the material KP has to explore is very broad. That KP mostly does justice to it, shows that she is a young scholar with great promise. Even so, I would argue that it would have been better had she chosen to focus upon only one of the two approaches she examines. This is particularly true given that she has not fully taken advantage of her examination of the two approaches by properly comparing the two, as has already been pointed out.

Scholarship

KP has a good grasp of the literature within cognitive science of religion that is of relevance to her thesis. For the most part I am happy with her choice of work to look at and her understanding of it. Similarly, for a number of scientific fields outside of cognitive science of religion, but of relevance to her work. Even so, the book would have benefitted significantly from a closer engagement with a few areas outside of cognitive science of religion and KP's treatment of several key issues is troubling.

The first of these is the relationship between prosocial behavior, morality and altruism. The problem is that she seeks to explain what morality and prosociality are in the context of cognitive science of religion without properly grounding the discussion in an understanding of altruism, which is the key concept for any discussion of morality or prosociality that is informed by evolutionary theory. This leads to a number of difficulties. Firstly, she seems to identify prosociality and morality as too closely aligned. While many authors do this, it would be well to recognize that what is moral and what is prosocial can, and do, often differ in radical ways. Secondly, she seems to fail to recognize that for the purposes of the topic at hand what is important is not so much any objective morality but the beliefs that people have regarding what is moral. In the context of cognitive science of religion the significance of morality is primarily that it is a means by which people in a cultural setting are motivated to act in particular ways, at times in prosocial ways. Again, authors writing in the field often fail to acknowledge this adequately but it would be hoped that someone with a philosophical background would.

Continuing with this general topic, KP distinguishes between parochial and universal prosociality, drawing upon the work of a number of people in the field. Unfortunately, I am somewhat skeptical of the concept of universal prosociality, and the use that KP makes of it

raises a number of questions. What is the difference between universal prosociality and universal altruism? How could it be anything but maladaptive? How is this kind of prosociality to be distinguished from examples of reciprocal altruism, etc.? Some religions, such as Christianity, do make claims to a universal altruism. But there is a world of difference between the stated ideology and the actual behavior of the proponents. Aiding outgroup members with the hope of getting them to join the faith would not seem to be a good example of universal prosociality, given the obvious goal, as well as the capacity of religions such as Christianity to react violently against religious outgroups. Pointing out that Christianity accepts members of different ethnic groups merely points out that it constructs its ingroup on a cultural/religious basis rather than on an ethnic basis, not that it supports universal prosociality. It does not help that her examples come from the time when Christianity was one of the religions within a pluralist Roman society, that pluralism forcing the religions to function in a very different way from the way they work in a religiously homogenous society such as the later Roman Empire or Medieval Europe.

Secondly, the main distinction in KA's thesis is between cultural adaptationism and cultural epidemiology. The way that KA uses this distinction has several problems including one that reappears in several other cases. The way she speaks of cultural adaptationism and cultural epidemiology vacillates between a description of the status quo in the field – which is fairly accurate notwithstanding some further objections – and something akin to a logical analysis of the possible stances that can be taken. This second stance is not justified and does not appear to be expressly intended by KA but, nonetheless, some of the ways she writes invite this interpretation. In much the same way, KA vacillates between her thesis evaluating two potential views regarding the relationship between religion and morality and evaluating the concrete views of particular authors expressed in specific papers. Thus, when originally presenting the positions, she mainly discusses them as possible positions to hold, in abstraction from concrete examples; but when dealing with the positions in detail she comes to discuss specific authors and publications. The problem is particularly sharp in the case of 'cultural epidemiology' whose very characterization as epidemiology seems both unnecessary and weakly justified, the proper explanation of what it entail coming quite late in the structure of the thesis. Another aspect of this general issue is that she has in numerous places criticized various aspects of the actual positions held by Norenzayan and Boyer – the two researchers whose work she comes to focus upon – without, in most cases, an attempt to present the significance of those aspects for the positions that these researchers hold. Thus, it is all-to-often unclear if she has a major objection or merely a quibble. It would have helped if she'd simply stated that she was going to discuss the most significant examples of adaptationist and nonadaptationist views regarding religion (where the example of nonadaptationism is strongly influenced by Sperber's epidemiology).

Thirdly, KA often comes to talk about 'religion' in ways that are problematic. While some such loose talk is often necessary and even helpful in explaining some views, KA seems to overuse the category. Cognitive scientists of religion are generally very wary of putting any theoretical weight upon the category of religion, with the great majority claiming that there is no natural kind of religion so that the category should not be used as a crucial one in scientific

explanations. Very often KA would have benefitted from talking about specific mechanisms rather than speaking about 'religion'. The prime example of this is when on page 36 she talks of 'religion in general' where she really is talking about specific mechanisms involved with religious beliefs and practices, with the problem leading to further difficulties when she returns to the term on page 44. Later in the book, on page 224, this over-emphasis can be seen in the way KA comes to suggest the idea of a package view as a novel solution whereas it is the norm within cognitive science of religion.

Fourthly, KA goes along with a number of authors in characterizing the supernatural as that which violates our natural ontological expectations. While this is a commonly held view it has the unfortunate effect of making scientific claims supernatural as they standardly violate ontological expectations. It would have been better to make use of Bob McCauley's distinction between views that a minimally counterintuitive (folk religion) and maximally counterintuitive (science and theology).

At the same time, KA appears to have largely ignored two topics of major significance within cognitive science of religion for understanding the prosocial impact of religion. The first is that of the role ritual plays in motivating cooperation. While there is no need to deal with the whole of the field, of course, this lacuna is doubly troubling. Firstly, as philosophers it is all too easy for us to assume the primacy of beliefs over all else. In working on the cognitive and cultural basis of religion, it would be well if KA stayed aware of this potential bias and tried to avoid it. Secondly, and more relevantly to the topic, there were a number of places within the thesis in which KA seemed to simply ignore the potential significance of religious practices and assume that any prosocial effects would be due to the content of religious beliefs. The second is the significance of anxiety for causing supernatural beliefs and ritualised behavior. This particular lacuna is most evident in her discussion of secularization where she fails to consider the most significant explanation that is currently on offer, i.e. the existential security explanation proposed by Norris and Inglehart.

Methodology

As KA explains within the introduction to the book, she has written it as a piece of research within the philosophy of the cognitive science of religion. For the most part, her methodology within the thesis reflects that and is appropriate to the task she has chosen for herself. There is a significant problem, however, that should be outlined.

In various places within the thesis, KA seems to demand from scientific theories the same level of evidence and precision that is demanded of philosophical ones. Claiming that this is a problem may seem counterintuitive and therefore requires some explanation. For example, on page 105 KA points out conceptual issues with the epidemiological approach. While for a philosophical theory this might be enough to show a serious problem, for a scientific theory it is only a significant issue if it can be shown to significantly impact the predictions or explanations that it makes. As philosophers of science we have to be aware of the standards of argumentation that are used within science, why they have been adopted and where they do fall short in significant ways. Scientific methodology does not demand the level of logical rigor that philosophical methodology does and yet it has been very successful. If we, as

philosophers of science, are to make a useful contribution to the general scientific debate we should be careful to show how the things we care and know about impact the issues that scientists are concerned with.

In the specific case of evolutionary explanations of human behavior, the difficulty with showing the truth of any particular claim is well known at least since Tinbergen outlined the various questions that have to be answered to provide a full account. People in the field are generally aware of this and that any research is necessarily only looking at parts of that picture. KA does not show awareness of this general issue and, thereby, seems to demand too much of the work that has been carried out. Analogously, when looking at historical cases, KA appears to expect that general sociological theories will account for all of the possible examples. Identifying particular counterexamples raises the objection that she may be cherry-picking them – a point she raises earlier in her discussion of the need for large historical data sets.

This issue is very much connected to the one I raised earlier about KA failing to explain the significance of many of the points she raises. A very concrete way to do that would have been for KA to propose experimental tests in which the distinctions she outlines could be borne to bear upon empirical matters. More generally, it would have been good if rather than largely critiquing the approaches she examines, KA had done more to try and fix the shortcomings she has identified.

This leads to a further, connected qualm I have about KA's method. In her effort to criticize the approaches she looks at she sometimes fails to treat them fairly. An example of this is on page 139 where she cites the criticisms of the BBS article by Norenzayan but fails to discuss the author's response that is always included in that journal.

Conclusions

The thesis has raised a significant scientific issue that is currently open to investigation. It has tried to cast light upon it using philosophical methods and used those methods for the most part correctly. It shows a familiarity with the relevant scientific literature even though there are certain lacuna that it would have been better to have filled before submitting. It is well-written, though its overall structure would have benefitted from a fundamental rethink. Overall, I find the thesis competent though not unproblematic.

I recommend that this thesis be accepted as the basis for granting Karolina Prochownik the title of Doctor of Philosophy.

