

Rejoinder to Scott

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Abstract: Michael Scott attacks my use of likelihood in assessing two explanations for human religion. He assumes that I rely on likelihood alone. He is attacking a straw man. We have no alternative but to rely on likelihood when the probabilities of two competing hypotheses are identical, as I charitably assumed with respect to the hypotheses I discussed. His other criticisms likewise miss the mark.

Introduction

Michael Scott compares my approach to the question of religion to a conspiracy theory.¹ My kind of reasoning, he thinks, would lead to the conclusion that ‘it is more likely that the lunar landings were faked in a Hollywood studio (with a following seamless cover-up) than that the footage shows a real space expedition’ (224). In the film of the landings, the wheels of the lunar rover throw up dust. The dust follows a perfect arc as the wheels throw it up and gravity pulls it back down. Since there aren’t clouds of dust of the sort we see here on earth, we know that the film was made somewhere that lacked an atmosphere. The best explanation for what we see in the film is that people travelled to the moon and made it there.

The lunar-travel hypothesis is better than the Hollywood hypothesis because it assigns a higher probability to what we observe in the film, i.e. because it has greater likelihood. If we had nothing but the film and the relevant background knowledge, it would be more rational to believe that humanity had reached the moon than that there had been a successful conspiracy. It would be more rational because the lunar-travel hypothesis has the greater likelihood. There is no reason why the same type of reasoning would not work as well with respect to human religion. Instead of a film to analyse, we have people’s religious beliefs and practices.

Religion as fiction

In 'Religion and the pursuit of truth',² I ran an argument that parallels sceptical arguments concerning the existence of the external world. Instead of asking how we know that we are embodied brains rather than brains in vats, I asked how we know that religious believers are responding to a real supernatural rather than exhibiting responses to a naturally occurring counterpart to a scientist doing experiments on potted brains. I concluded that we could provisionally reject the notion that people are reacting to a real supernatural because at least one non-realist view, the religion-as-fiction hypothesis, has greater likelihood and at least as great a probability. The rejection of realism is provisional because further investigation might reveal evidence that would make it rational to alter the judgement. I did not claim that the religion-as-fiction hypothesis is true, or even the best naturalistic hypothesis, but merely that it is provisionally better than realism. However, that is enough to justify provisionally rejecting realism.

If we can conclude that we are dealing with naturally occurring illusions, we can also reasonably conclude that all religions are false because the probability that any one would be accidentally true is minute. A corollary is that, if religious believers are counterparts to potted brains, we can ignore their 'proofs' of God in the same way that we can ignore potted brains' 'proofs' of an external world (that resembles the world of their 'experience'). Therefore, when Scott takes me to task for ignoring Richard Swinburne's natural theology, my response is that there's another question that needs answering first. If it turns out that it is reasonable to believe that religious believers are trying to get at the truth, then natural theology would be appropriate because it could help us decide among competing religions. But first things first.

Swinburne: likelihood, and probability

Swinburne takes a Bayesian approach, which means that he uses a combination of likelihood and prior probabilities. Swinburne was appealing to the likelihood principle when he 'urged that various occurrent phenomena are such that they are more to be expected, more probable if there is a God than if there is not'.³ In order to assign a high probability to the theistic hypothesis, he argues that simplicity is a mark of truth and that the theistic hypothesis is simple. The trouble is that the testing of hypotheses can result in the rejection of the simpler hypotheses. He concedes this: 'In claiming that the simplest theory which yields the data is that most probably true, I do not ... rule out that theory's being shown false by subsequent observations.'⁴ If the simplest theory can be false, then the way to determine the prior probability of the theistic hypothesis, given its simplicity, is to compare how frequently the simplest theory is true with how

frequently it is false. The comparison has not been done. Therefore, it cannot reasonably be concluded that the theistic hypothesis has a high probability because of its simplicity. For this and other reasons, I don't think that we are justified in assigning a probability to the supernatural.

I responded to this state of affairs by going as far as I could to give realism the benefit of the doubt without begging the question in its favour by arbitrarily assigning it a higher probability. This act of intellectual charity makes likelihood the deciding factor. More relevant evidence is often desirable. However, the absence of optimal evidence doesn't mean that it's irrational to judge an issue in the light of the available evidence.

Scott distorts my position when he claims that 'the main point of the dispute is ... whether the likelihood of a hypothesis is a sufficient standard of explanatory value' (218). He ignores the following statement that I made: 'In evaluating competing hypotheses, it is naturally desirable that we ascertain not just the probability that the hypotheses assign to the observations but the probability of the hypotheses themselves.'⁵ If we have equally probable hypotheses, one of which is more likely than the other, it is simply more rational to prefer the more likely one. I assumed that the two hypotheses I considered were equally probable. In doing so, I was treating the supernatural hypothesis charitably. Therefore, what Scott needs to do in order to undermine my approach is demonstrate that likelihood is irrelevant, not merely insufficient.

In defence of likelihood

Scott says nothing that shows that using likelihood is problematic, however. In fact, I believe we need it. Consider the lunar-landing example. If all we had were the film and the relevant background knowledge, the competing hypotheses would not be distinguishable as better and worse on the basis of the standard criteria used to judge inferences to the best explanation. Neither hypothesis is better in terms of simplicity, conservatism, fruitfulness, scope, or testability. (Incidentally, I could use the criteria and the religion-as-fiction hypothesis would come out better in every comparison.) In contrast, the hypotheses can be distinguished on the basis of their likelihood. Moreover, appealing to likelihood gives us the right result.

Scott's specific criticisms don't reveal flaws that make the use of likelihood unreasonable either. He points out that the two hypotheses I consider are mutually compatible and asks why they shouldn't simply be combined. The combination would have greater likelihood. The answer is: for the same reason that when there is evidence that an accelerant was on the floor where a fire started, investigators prefer to hypothesize arson only and to exclude electrical faults as the cause. The options are compatible. It is possible that someone dropped a match at the very same time as a fault ignited the accelerant. The

probability that both events occurred is less than the probability that one or the other occurred.

The probability of the hypotheses is relevant and we should take information on their probability into account when it is available. It is available with respect to the realist/non-realist options as a matter of a priori principle. Since increases in likelihood achieved by conjoining two different explanations is a matter of addition and since their joint probability is a matter of multiplication, combinations will tend to be inferior as explanations as long as the probability of the components is less than one. There will be gains in likelihood. However, there will be decreases in probability as well and the losses will tend to outweigh the gains. Since this is knowable a priori, we don't need to know the actual probability of the supernatural to make the judgement in the case of religion. Although a combination of the realist and non-realist hypotheses would assign greater likelihood to the observations, the decreased probability of the combination would reduce its overall plausibility.

Scott claims that we need nomological rather than historical explanations in order to make predictions and that the religion-as-fiction hypothesis is historical. To make his case, he says that knowing the initial conditions would not enable us to predict whether giraffes would grow long necks: 'They might have grown long legs, learned to climb, started shaking trees, developed a taste for other food, simply died out, etc.' (221). It is false to say that we can't make predictions. Given that giraffes were leaf-eaters and given that there was variation in neck length, we could predict selection for longer necks. Longer-necked giraffes would have had access to a larger food supply and would therefore be more viable than shorter-necked giraffes. The prediction that long-necks would supplant short-necks cannot be made with certainty. Long-necks might be more vulnerable than short-necks in ways that outweigh the benefits of long necks. It might have happened that all the long-necks died in a fire but that some short-necks survived. Nonetheless, we can still make plausible probabilistic predictions. Scott's objection is a false dilemma. Nomological and historical explanations don't exhaust the options. The religion-as-fiction hypothesis is good enough when it comes to its predictions.

Scott points to alternative hypotheses that are supposedly even better than the religion-as-fiction hypothesis. He declares that 'it would be easy to modify [the realist hypothesis] to include a supernatural being who has certain ambitions for us and who consequently ensures access to religious truths' (222). Really? Whose religious truths? Those of Christians? Muslims? Buddhists? The unconverted Bidayuh of Borneo? Access to truths might be guaranteed for some but it seems that falsehoods would have to be foisted on others. This sort of realist explanation for some religions would have to be accompanied by non-realist ones for others. Building in revelation doesn't help realism; it results in a weaker version of it. If we don't posit revelation, then religious differences can be explained as human error.

The probability of the religion-as-fiction hypothesis

In his final section, Scott points to my discussion of the probability of the postulates of the religion-as-fiction hypothesis and asks where the desire for a just world has gone. The postulates I mention are the very ones I used earlier to argue for the existence of the desire. He appears to be unaware of the earlier discussion.

In connection with this ‘objection’, Scott contends that my approach would lead to us prefer to attribute noises to ‘angry gremlins stamping their feet’ rather than to the wind (224). Suppose we did posit stamping gremlins to ‘explain’ some noise. We should observe little gremlin footprints. We don’t. So, we have to posit flying gremlins that never alight and that make the noise in another way. False conspiracy theories can be saved by postulating bigger conspiracies to cover up the problems they encounter. However, ‘in the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds for believing in anything’.⁶ Gremlin hypotheses can only be saved by positing more and more fantastic gremlins. The consequences are the same. In both cases, the explanation becomes more and more improbable as a matter of principle and the loss of probability outweighs the increase in likelihood. Contrary to Scott, my use of likelihood is not like a conspiracy theory.

Conclusion

Having to rely on likelihood alone is not the best option. Its not being optimal that we rely on it alone does not mean that we can’t rely on it at all. In some cases, there is nothing else. This is the case with the supernatural. The rational way to respond to the religion-as-fiction hypothesis is to seek out observations that realism is better at accommodating. It is appropriate to judge the issue using the likelihood principle. Scott’s criticisms miss their target and undermine neither contention.

Notes

1. Michael Scott ‘Do religious beliefs aim at the truth?’, *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005), 217–224. All numbered references in the text are to this article.
2. Brian Zamulinski ‘Religion and the pursuit of truth’, *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 43–60.
3. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God*, rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 277.
4. *Idem Simplicity as Evidence of Truth* (Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 1997), 19.
5. Zamulinski ‘Religion and the pursuit of truth’, 48.
6. Brian L. Keeley, ‘Of conspiracy theories’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (1999), 123.