

## The cognitive science of religion and theism again: a reply to Leo Näreaho

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**Abstract:** In this article we respond to Leo Näreaho's critique of our position on the relationship of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and theism, arguing that he misrepresents our position and assimilates our views to ones we do not in fact hold. The central issue we address has to do with how Näreaho construes what he takes to be our commitment to a 'world-view neutrality' thesis regarding the 'assumptions and results' of the new bio-psychological theories of religion (in the case at hand, CSR). We suggest that Näreaho has misconstrued us on what the neutrality thesis actually is and what follows from it. We conclude that his own proposal for compatibility is not an alternative to ours but rather one permissible metaphysical reading of CSR among others.

Leo Näreaho has written an important and thought-provoking article on the relationship of the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and theism, which successfully, in our view, identifies difficulties to which certain ways of construing the compatibility of CSR and theism are exposed. However, it seems to us that he somewhat misrepresents our own position and assimilates our views to ones we do not in fact hold. Instead of engaging directly with Näreaho's own proposal for the compatibility of the CSR and theism, we take this opportunity to clarify our position.

Näreaho suggests that our case for the compatibility of CSR and (classical) theism is problematic. The central issue we want to address has to do with how Näreaho construes what he takes to be our commitment to a 'world-view neutrality' thesis regarding the 'assumptions and results' of the new

bio-psychological theories of religion (in our case, CSR). On his construal, this neutrality thesis, which he imputes both to us and to certain others,<sup>1</sup> entails that scientific theories do not make strong ontological assumptions and that theism does not have clearly identifiable empirical consequences. He takes it that this world-view neutrality thesis is our main argument for the compatibility of CSR and theism. The problem with this, he argues, is that CSR does indeed make metaphysical assumptions and theism is committed to some form of causal commerce between God and the world. Therefore, the neutrality thesis has the undesirable consequence that the theist has either to go against CSR or claim that there is no divine action at all.

Näreaho thinks that our problems stem from giving a central role to non-reductive naturalism in our argument, which forces what he calls an 'ultimate metaphysical separation of God and the world'.<sup>2</sup> This, according to him, makes it impossible for us to be committed simultaneously both to a classical conception of divine action and to non-reductive naturalism. Finally, he suggests an alternative construal of the compatibility of CSR and (panen)theism which makes appeal to a conception of God as the 'structuring cause of the world'. In what follows, we want to suggest that Näreaho has misconstrued us on what the neutrality thesis actually is and what follows from it.

### **The CSR and metaphysics**

First, we wish to clarify that we do not go so far as to say that classical theism is compatible with the 'assumptions' as well as the 'results' of CSR if 'assumptions' here is meant to refer to the metaphysical add-ons which individual CSR researchers (or commentators) may choose to append to thinner reports of the bare empirical results of CSR. The compatibility of theism with such assumptions needs to be decided on a case-by-case basis. For instance, CSR researchers like Scott Atran (2002), Pascal Boyer (2001), and others seem to think that it is an assumption of CSR that the factors which account for how religious beliefs and behaviour are sustained and transmitted are *exclusively* natural in the sense of having a physical explanation. Such an assumption does not seem to be compatible with theism, or at least, the kind of theism we are interested in. What we are claiming here is that research programmes such as CSR are not necessarily linked with such reductive naturalism, even if many CSR researchers themselves are committed to such assumptions. This is why we have been at pains to argue in recent articles that no particular assumptions of this sort (naturalistic, theistic, etc.) are entailed by the empirical findings of CSR just as such.<sup>3</sup> Although we agree with Näreaho that there is no neat separation between science and metaphysics, we nevertheless claim that the CSR's empirical *results* are compatible with several metaphysical assumptions.

We therefore deny Näreaho's claim that CSR 'should be seen as part of a larger *naturalistic* research programme', in which, as he says, human minds, language, and culture must be seen as 'hav[ing] their origin *strictly* in natural processes'.<sup>4</sup> We don't see any necessity in this. We can put the issue in the following way. Imagine that for everything that happens in the world there is a set of causes that are sufficient for that event to happen. Let us further call the totality of these causes the *causal nexus*. On reductive naturalism, all the causes in the causal nexus are something like microphysical facts and facts that supervene on those facts. Consequently, on reductive naturalism the causal nexus of religion (religious beliefs, behaviours, and experiences) would be constituted by such facts. But this is what we want to deny: to assume that such facts fill up the whole causal nexus is a metaphysical add-on to the CSR and is not entailed by the empirical results themselves. As Näreaho himself says, there are 'assumed naturalistic connections'<sup>5</sup> of the CSR. However, we have argued that these are only assumed and nothing more.

Notice how Näreaho sets up what he sees to be the *prima facie* challenge of CSR to theism: 'If bio-psychological theories of religion offer us the *ultimate – naturalistic* – explanations of religion, how could theistic claims concerning the supernatural reality be true?'<sup>6</sup> Certainly we agree that *prima facie* this does indeed look like the challenge CSR poses to theism, and this is an impression encouraged by CSR researchers like Atran and Boyer as well as by commentators like Dawkins and Dennett.<sup>7</sup> But our recent articles have argued that *ultima facie* this is not in fact how things stand. As Näreaho notes, CSR claims to discover 'the cognitive structures or mechanisms in the human mind that are responsible for sustaining and transmitting religious beliefs and – consequently – religious behaviour'.<sup>8</sup> This is indeed what CSR does do. However, we have suggested that statements like these can be misleading in so far as they are often read naively as implying the explanatory completeness of CSR. In order to avoid possible misunderstanding of this sort, it is important to remember, as authors like James Laidlaw have insisted, that the CSR is informative merely about the generic natural underpinnings of human religiosity.<sup>9</sup> Cognitive mechanisms explain all sorts of human tendencies and biases, which predispose us to be religious, and such factors have a role in the causal nexus in the sense just defined. But the rub is that just by themselves they don't explain very much – and just by themselves they would not singlehandedly produce the religious cultures, doctrines, beliefs, and behaviours we see around us today.

These points about the scope of the CSR should be borne in mind when Näreaho makes claims like the following: 'HADD [hypersensitive agency detection device]. . . makes an important contribution to explanations of representations of various religious agents',<sup>10</sup> 'all these (and other) mechanisms have a central role in explaining the distinctive beliefs and practices of religions'.<sup>11</sup> We insist that 'important' and 'central role' need to be carefully qualified here in view of the

scope of CSR explanation, the non-necessity of a reductive naturalistic reading of the findings, and the availability and merits of an *explanatorily pluralist* reading of scientific theories.<sup>12</sup> Our point is that the ‘naturalistic’ explanations of the CSR – when stripped down to their bare empirical claims – do not present us with reasons for thinking that they exhaustively explain everything about religious phenomena, that is, that they fill up, as it were, the entire causal nexus with respect to human religiosity. Therefore, there is space for God to enter the causal mix.<sup>13</sup>

### **World-view neutrality?**

Let us now turn to how Näreaho defines ‘world-view neutrality of theories’, or ‘neutrality thesis’:

The cognitive science of religion is world-view neutral with respect to theism when the truth of the former is consistent with the core propositions of the latter, especially with the existence of God.<sup>14</sup>

Now, we do indeed maintain that the truth of the CSR is consistent with the core propositions of classical theism. However, we do *not* make a ‘non-overlapping magisteria’-type claim about neutrality here. Näreaho seems to think that we affirm the compatibility of the CSR and theism on the basis that the CSR does not make metaphysical assumptions and theism has no empirical consequences.<sup>15</sup> This is not our argument. Our reason for thinking that the CSR and theism are compatible does not have to do with scientific and metaphysical theories being somehow different in kind. In fact we think scientific and metaphysical theories lie on a continuum, and both are explanatory. For instance, we think that if CSR-type explanation did fill up the causal nexus, this would be incompatible with traditional theistic ideas about divine intervention. So, on our view, there is no a priori reason why metaphysical views and scientific views could not be in conflict. Indeed, as Näreaho points out, scientists often make metaphysical claims and those claims are further supported (or undermined) by scientific evidence. Similarly, theistic claims could have empirical consequences. We find it surprising that Näreaho misunderstands us here. He effectively acknowledges our actual view when he notes us as saying that CSR may have relevance for theism ‘if it leads to a modification or even a rejection of some non-essential beliefs of the theistic view’<sup>16</sup> – which, indeed, we have argued in some cases it does.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Näreaho seems simply to bracket this as though it were inconsequential for his presentation of our position.

But more importantly, by ‘truth of CSR’ we mean something more modest than what Näreaho means, since he seems to think that CSR is and must be indissociable from a ‘naturalistic research programme’ which entails (in his mind) that CSR explanations of religious belief, behaviour, and experience fill up the whole causal nexus. The point of our argument about ‘broad naturalism’<sup>18</sup> was

the following: no one, even the naturalist, ought to believe that CSR (or CSR-type) causes exhaust the whole causal nexus. So our argument was not that everybody, including the theist, should adopt some form of metaphysical naturalism, but rather that reductive materialists and theists (and everybody else) should be *explanatory pluralists* about science. Explanatory pluralism affirms that there could be various kinds of scientific causes, theories, and explanations that do not neatly reduce to physics or one another. This is why we misunderstand them if we take them automatically to rule out the possibility of other factors being involved in the causal mix.<sup>19</sup> Our explanatory pluralism is the reason why we say that reductive naturalism is a strictly optional metaphysical add-on to which CSR is not committed, and which CSR findings to date certainly do not imply.

In light of this, it should now be obvious why Näreaho's claim that 'much depends on how we understand the role of a theistic God vis-à-vis the world' is actually irrelevant for our position, since it does not matter very much for our stance what the God-world relationship is like. Perhaps God doesn't intervene, or perhaps he does and he does so, say, by exploiting ontological openness, or performing miracles. Our point is that the CSR findings present us with no reason to think that we have a sufficient and exhaustive naturalistic explanation of religion. In this case, the CSR certainly cannot be recruited as evidence that we live in a naturalistic, causally closed universe. Say, for the sake of argument, that there were other, independent reasons for thinking that the universe is causally closed. In that case, the assumption of causal closure would indeed suggest that traditionally conceived divine intervention is 'problematic', as Näreaho says. But CSR provides no grounds for supposing that causal closure is the case.

Näreaho rightly notes that a metaphysical naturalist thinks that 'all the basic entities of the world (if such exist) are physical... the world is ultimately composed of physical properties and powers'.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to point out that the theist must reject materialism as 'the *ultimate* metaphysical view of reality' (our italics). We don't disagree. However, Näreaho claims that we hold a view according to which 'broad naturalism' and theism are compatible, where he takes 'broad naturalism' in a non-explanatorily pluralist way. To some extent this misunderstanding is our fault, since we might not have been sufficiently clear as to what 'broad naturalism' actually does in our argument. As explained above, our argument is that (regardless of theism or naturalism) the explanatory pluralist view is the most plausible as to how scientific explanations work and relate to each other. So we agree with Näreaho that emergent (or non-reductive) materialism, *taken in a non-explanatorily pluralist sense*, is not compatible with the truth of theism, but we deny that this was our position.

Näreaho also states that if we hold CSR as world-view neutral regarding theism, we must also accept that it is world-view neutral regarding metaphysical naturalism. This is what he calls the 'first aspect' of the neutrality thesis. And indeed we do, but not for the reasons Näreaho imputes to us. Again, we do not

think that it is a priori impossible for scientific and theistic claims (core ones or otherwise) to come into conflict; we just don't see that they do in fact come into conflict. In addition to the aforementioned scope-related reasons we have for thinking this, as well as our views about the merits of explanatory pluralism, we have also extensively argued that various debunking arguments from the CSR to atheism fail.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, we agree with Näreaho that scientists would have to change their commitments to *metaphysical* naturalism if new knowledge incompatible with naturalism came to light. As Näreaho states, correctly in our view, commitment to methodological naturalism does not mean that one could not arrive at metaphysically relevant conclusions. For instance, if the evidence for supernatural finite spirits (poltergeists, ancestor spirits, for instance) mounted up, a metaphysically naturalist explanation of religion – which builds on (quite thin) CSR explanations of natural determinants in religious belief/behaviour formation and transmission – would have to modify its claims. So, we want to commit ourselves to a form of methodological naturalism according to which it is merely a useful heuristic in empirical research to assume that what one is investigating might be natural. It may even be warranted, for heuristic reasons, to continue to exclude non-natural entities from hypothesis formation, even if we knew with certainty that a God, gods, or other non-natural beings existed and had causal commerce with the physical world. But in any case, this issue is without consequence for our claim about compatibility, which is Näreaho's chief interest in this article.

So it seems clear that Näreaho misconstrues us in imputing to us this 'first aspect' of what he calls the neutrality thesis. Let us now turn to what he calls its 'second aspect', where he looks at whether influence could run the other way (that is, from metaphysics to scientific theories/findings). Again, we think that he misrepresents our position here. First he considers the case of something like Intelligent Design, where the metaphysical commitments of the researchers influence how they frame their scientific hypotheses. Näreaho states here that, in this case, 'biology would no longer be metaphysically neutral *in regard to naturalism* (which is materialistic by its ontology)'.<sup>22</sup> Presumably he means here that 'methodological naturalism' would be compromised, which should be 'ontologically as neutral as possible'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed we agree here.

Note also that (*pace* Näreaho) we can happily grant that there is no reason why metaphysical theories must be neutral regarding the CSR. We just think it is the case, as things stand, and given the explanatory scope of present-day CSR, and the availability and merits of explanatory pluralism about science, that theism (or naturalism) exercises no top-down constraining influence on the CSR theory, just as the latter exercises no bottom-up constraining influence on the core claims of theism (or naturalism). So we also submit that Näreaho misconstrues us in imputing to us this 'second aspect' of what he calls the neutrality thesis.

In sum, we do accept that the CSR is more or less neutral regarding theism, and vice versa, but we do not accept a ‘neutrality thesis’ in the sense Näreaho imputes to us. It therefore follows that his subsequent efforts to show that the ‘neutrality thesis’ is incompatible with classical theism, especially with respect to traditional conceptions of divine action, criticizes, in so far as it is successful, a position which is not ours, and therefore misses its target.

However, we do think that *if* a classical theist makes the set of assumptions Näreaho (erroneously) attributes to us, their position does indeed become ‘problematic’ in just the ways Näreaho outlines. In this respect we are fully in agreement with him. If a classical theist claims that there is an a priori reason why scientific and metaphysical theories can have no implications for each other, this would presumably lead to difficulties if, for example, persuasive empirical evidence mounted up in favour of finite supernatural entities causally interacting with humans and the world. By contrast this isn’t a worry for us, since our parsing of the CSR theory interprets it as quite ‘thin’ explanatorily, and quite generic in scope. We would therefore maintain that it would not be the case that a cognitive scientist of religion would have ‘dramatically [to] modify – to weaken – the role of cognitive categories in explanations of religious phenomena’<sup>24</sup> were empirical evidence of the above sort to become available. This is because the exaggeration of the role of these cognitive mechanisms (we say) is only a result of naturalistic metaphysical add-ons in the first place.

### **Religious experiences and divine action**

Näreaho’s erroneous assumptions about our stance surface particularly clearly in his example of mystical experiences.

He argues as follows:

- (1) The CSR researcher, qua theist, ‘cannot regard any naturalistic – any “immanent” – theory as sufficient for explaining mystical experiences’.
- (2) A ‘complete’ explanation of a (genuine) mystical experience, for a theist, must involve the experiencer’s direct contact with God as an ingredient.
- (3) (1) is ‘in conflict with the second aspect of the neutrality thesis’, i.e. that ‘theism as a world-view is neutral with respect to bio-psychological theories of religion’.

Therefore

- (4) The neutrality thesis fails.

But as we have stated, Näreaho’s ‘neutrality thesis’ misrepresents us. So his argument here misses our point, although it may be valid against other forms of pro-theistic argumentation in these discussions.

We agree with Näreaho that it is problematic to argue, as he at least presents Murray and Barrett as doing, that God orchestrated the evolutionary process from the beginning in order to bring about mystical experiences. Murray and Barrett, he suggests, seem content to say that God does not act causally in the world in any direct way in creating religious beliefs and experiences. In the terms introduced above, they are content to hand over the entire causal nexus to natural causes and maintain that CSR-type mechanisms might exhaust the (at least proximate) causal nexus in the case of all human religiosity.<sup>25</sup> Although Näreaho does not realize it, we are actually in agreement with him against Murray, Barrett, and others (or, at least, the position he attributes to them) on this. As we have discussed elsewhere, the main problem in these views is that they rule out direct contact with God and make him a *deus deceptor*.<sup>26</sup> So there is no disagreement here between Näreaho and us.

However, we take issue with Näreaho where he says: ‘Suppose that God interferes with the processes of the physical universe – either by breaking the laws of nature or by guiding evolution teleologically. This undermines the basis of scientific research and leads to a dilemma.’<sup>27</sup> We disagree with this for the following reasons. First, the options for divine action are not exhausted by miracles or directed evolution. Second, we don’t need to assume the causal closure thesis tacit in Näreaho’s argument, since the theory and findings of the CSR (as opposed to metaphysical add-ons) do not entail it. Third, we don’t see why miracles, directed evolution, or the other available options (ontological openness, for instance) pose a threat to scientific research. As stated above, methodological naturalism need be no more than the employment of a useful heuristic. The scientist may believe that God is intervening in the natural order, but she does not need to employ ‘intelligent design’ as her heuristic. Why, on the basis of the above, should God’s activity suddenly and necessarily need to be ‘taken into account in scientific theories’?<sup>28</sup> It is true, as Näreaho says, that our position on God’s activity in the world is ‘not completely clear’ in the articles he cites.<sup>29</sup> This, however, is because it was not our concern to be clear about this, since it was orthogonal to our point – in fact, as already noted, our position is compatible with all sorts of stances on the God-world relation, including intelligent design, non-interventionist theism, classical theism, and panentheism. From our perspective, then, Näreaho’s own proposal for compatibility is not an alternative to ours but rather one permissible metaphysical reading of CSR among others.

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## Notes

1. E.g. Barrett (2007), Murray (2007), Murray (2009), Murray & Goldberg (2009), Clark & Barrett (2010), Barrett et al. (2010).
2. Näreaho (2013), 1.
3. E.g. Leech & Visala (2011a), (2011b).
4. Näreaho (2013), 2 (our italics).
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* (our italics).
7. Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006).
8. Näreaho (2013), 1.
9. Laidlaw (2007).
10. Näreaho (2013), 1–2.
11. *Ibid.*, 2. In fact, it is precisely the *distinctiveness* of religious beliefs and behaviours – if by 'distinctive' we understand their particularity – which these theories *don't* explain. Here we are sympathetic to the critiques of authors like Laidlaw (2007) and Day (2007).

12. We might also add in passing that Näreaho's claim (2013, 2) that 'there is a considerable amount of scientific (empirically testable) evidence available for the cognitive mechanisms mentioned above' is very contestable. A currently unpublished article by Knight, Cohen, and Barrett, which assesses the empirical support of core CSR theories, surprisingly concludes:

it is evident that the development of the field of CSR has been affected by its fast rate of growth. Attempts have been made to provide a theoretically integrated picture before sufficient evidence has been gathered to support its assumptions. Of the eight topics reviewed, perhaps three (Afterlife beliefs, God concepts, and Teleo-functional reasoning) could be said to have received significant levels of empirical confirmation; the other five are not as strongly supported. (Knight et al. (forthcoming))

In light of this point, it seems that more theoretical claims have been confidently stated than the evidence would justify and that the CSR is very much work in progress rather than a verified theory or a discipline.

13. More specific arguments for explanatory pluralism can be found, e.g., in Visala (2011) and Visala (2013).
14. Näreaho (2013), 3.
15. We agree with Näreaho that metaphysical claims are non-empirical. But (although he does not see this) we also agree with him that they are explanatory, and that 'it is not reasonable or even possible to isolate science and its results from metaphysical questions in such a radical way' (Näreaho 2013, 5). We are happy to agree (and have never argued otherwise) that scientific theories can have implications for metaphysical ones, and vice versa.
16. Näreaho (2013), 3.
17. See Leech & Visala (2011a).
18. We use the term 'broad naturalism' as an umbrella term for various forms of non-reductive and emergent materialism.
19. Visala has defended explanatory pluralism extensively in Visala (2011) and (2013) on the basis of, e.g., Craver (2007) and Horst (2007). Horst's (2011) argument for the possibility of libertarian free will is a close parallel to what we would argue for the possibility of direct divine action in religion. On Horst's view, even an exhaustive future neuroscience would not be enough to rule out the possibility of other causal factors (e.g. agent causes) being involved in the causal nexus. This is even truer given the current neurosciences. Our case for the incompleteness of CSR is still more plausible than Horst's parallel case for neuroscience, since CSR is arguably a much less empirically supported and theoretically well-developed area than the contemporary neurosciences.
20. Näreaho (2013), 4.
21. Leech & Visala (2011a), (2012).
22. Näreaho (2014), 4 (our italics).
23. *Ibid.*, 5.
24. *Ibid.*, 6.
25. Barrett (2007) and Murray (2007), (2009) may not actually hold this view. On a more charitable reading, they might be construed as exploring the reasonableness of theism on the assumption that CSR-type causes were the whole proximate causal story about religion, i.e. as offering a defensive 'even if ...' argument. On this construal, they would not be committed to this latter assumption.
26. Leech & Visala (2012).
27. Näreaho (2013), 9.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*