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Clark's "God and the brain: The rationality of belief" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Clark, K. J. (2019). *God and the brain: The rationality of belief*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 232 pp. \$25.00. ISBN: 9780802876911

Belief in God (gods, the divine, the supernatural, the unseen, etc.) is a tricky thing. What kind of reasons should we be able to offer for our beliefs? What role does faith or trust play? There are, of course, no easy answers here. However, in the absence of easy answers, Kelly James Clark seeks to bring some clarity to questions concerning the basic rationality of religious beliefs. Clark is an analytic philosopher, and this is the mode in which he operates in the book as he examines arguments against the rationality of belief and discusses the epistemic notions of “warranted” and “justified” beliefs. However, his arguments take on an interdisciplinary character as he draws on recent research in cognitive science to support the idea that religious beliefs are a normal and rational part of the mind’s proper functioning.

Clark’s approach is both a critique of Enlightenment rationality and the epistemic despair of postmodernism. In this sense, he is continuing the postfoundationalist project of Reformed epistemology initiated by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. This project sought to establish belief in God as a “properly basic” belief – a belief which should be considered rational without requiring evidence. In fact, Clark calls his stance on the rationality of religious belief the “Reid-Wolterstorff-Plantinga view,” a designation which also acknowledges his debt to the 18th century “common sense” philosophy of Thomas Reid. While he articulates the basic stance of Reformed epistemology, Clark contributes to the project by marshalling arguments from the cognitive science of religion to support it. He cites extensive newer research into the cognitive science behind religious belief to argue that our belief forming mechanisms are both natural and generally reliable. This being the case, we should trust our naturally formed beliefs about God, gods, or the supernatural until they are demonstrated to be false. Clearly frustrated with evolutionary accounts of human development that attempt to explain away religious belief, Clark attempts to demonstrate that evolution, theistically understood, can actually help to support the rationality and reliability of such beliefs.

There are a number of other fascinating features of the book, including Clark’s controversial (though thoroughly qualified) claims linking atheism and autism.

Chapter 8, “Googling God” should be of particular interest to librarians. Clark illustrates the limits of what a Google search for “belief in God” can actually tell us and draws the parallel between biases implicit in Google’s algorithms and the biases in our own minds as we form beliefs. His point is to call for epistemic humility – and this is one of the major themes of the book – but he also illustrates the need for information literacy. *God and the Brain* is an accessible exploration of some important themes at the intersection of philosophy of religion and cognitive science. Clark is adept in his handling of these disciplines, and this book should find a home in any library that supports a philosophy program.

Reviewer

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