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## Book Review

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James Cresswell, *Culture and the Cognitive Science of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2018), xiii + 142 pp., \$49.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0367363383.

I can claim some small degree of expertise in the field of the cognitive science of religion (CSR), and would suggest that my primary interests are in cultural evolution and evolutionary psychology. The author claims, quite explicitly, that the premises, methods, and goals of CSR are flawed, and proposes an alternative. With this in mind, I must imagine that I am exactly the person James Cresswell wants to read his book. I find myself in a difficult position in reviewing this book, however, as his description of those in the field is of homogenous straw-men, committed to a picture of humans with modular *stone-age* minds, which are extremely promiscuous in detecting and attributing an agency—or mind—as an explanation for an outcome (usually termed hyperactive agency detection); while the researchers of the field care not a wit for the content of culture itself beyond what is memorable due to programmed preferences for certain kinds of stimuli. The difficulty for me, then, is fairly critiquing this book, but without the luxury of time or a sufficiently long reference list.

Cresswell is a cultural psychologist of a very particular kind. I hope it is a fair characterization to say that this term, in this context, is of a psychologist who believes that a sincere (and often qualitative) investigation of the content of culture will reveal a more authentic understanding of human psychology. Moreover, that culture (and the use of language within) is how we ultimately come to be human. On the surface of it, these premises are not entirely objectionable. The issue is that Cresswell suggests the premises and intentions of CSR are so fundamentally flawed that they do not meet basic requirements for ‘truth’. As such, an entirely new approach is required. The goal of CSR, as Cresswell characterizes it, is to understand mind and cognition with reference to ‘universal cognitive features’. This approach is not merely one valid approach among many, but an affront to generating real knowledge. His claim, and his quest are, to put it mildly, hubristic. It is not merely that CSR might benefit from the inclusion of his suggestions, but that his suggestions are one of (if not the only) way to fix the field. This is not to deny that some ‘researchers in CSR are sophisticated scholars in their own right’; it is that what is needed is ‘a paradigm of cognition that both sidesteps the need for domain-specific processing and [which] offers an alternative view of the evolution of human cognition’ (p. 67).

I’m sorry to say that this book was a frustrating read. As much as I sincerely approached it with an open mind—and happily realized that I was exactly who Cresswell hoped to be his audience—I became increasingly jaded with his inaccurate and dated descriptions of the field, as a homogenous group united by a profound inability to recognize the value of culture itself. This was made all the more frustrating

because his examples and anecdotes were drawn from such a limited, Western, Christian context that it was difficult to believe that ‘culture’ was his primary topic of interest. Indeed, at one point, he describes a young boy—Victor—who wished for the street lights to come on to scare away the shadows. Cresswell argues that a proponent of CSR would suggest that Victor, *in principle*, should believe that a supernatural entity controls the lights, because humans are unflinching, hyperactive detectors of agency. Cresswell points out that Victor correctly identifies that human artefacts are controlled by humans, not gods.

Perhaps more concerning is how Cresswell defines the minimum standards for studying religion. He proposes three criteria for ‘truth’. Cresswell draws heavily on William James in shaping his thoughts, and suggests that one of the primary problems CSR faces is that the things that researchers in the field find interesting, the observations they make, and background assumptions they hold, are entirely bereft of utility for the believer (who are implicitly but unwaveringly Christian). Thus, for ‘truth’ in research one must demonstrate that one’s work must ‘fit in life’ both for the believer and for the scholar (p. 13). For something to be true it must ‘resonate with the rest of life’ (p. 13). Second, that one’s work must ‘fit with a community’. The author argues: ‘One cannot have a belief that is true on one’s own because it must fit with communal standards’ (p. 15). Third, one’s work must be ‘generative’, and while this, superficially, seems valid, what Cresswell means is that ‘for a belief to remain true, it must generate something for us as we move forward such that it makes future activities smoother’ (p. 16). Unfortunately, Cresswell makes no attempt to discuss the nature of capital-T Truth, or to discuss the importance of one’s explanations having a veridical approximation (and here I choose to ignore the question of utility to believers, even if there is some merit to the argument). No discussion is given on how two scholars might reconcile differences on the same, or even different, topics of study.

It is difficult to critique aspects of this book further, without deep diving into specific examples. In Chapter 4 (a turning point in the book, in my reading) Cresswell grossly redefines the process of natural selection (by liberally quoting Evan Thompson) in such a way as to betray a profound misunderstanding of natural selection and human evolution. He critiques the legitimately problematic metaphor of ‘following coded instruction’ for human development, and suggests (through Thompson) that the superior metaphor is ‘laying down a path walking’ (p. 72). Children do not develop or exercise Theory of Mind, but rather ‘fall into synchronicity with the realities and [specific others] who are also part of such realities’ (p. 68). In Chapter 5, Cresswell explicitly calls out Gervais and Norenzayan (2012) for committing ‘epistemic violence’, failing to develop ‘phronesis’ (i.e., wisdom), and ‘depart[ing] from the good, [and] eroding excellence in practice’ (p. 91). Methodological criticisms aside, the claim that Gervais and Norenzayan are so devoid of virtue appears to rest on the fact that Cresswell is uncomfortable with the findings and the degree to which they fit with his strangely insulating definitions of ‘truth’. Chapter 6 was a verbose exercise in apologetics, ultimately arguing that ‘rational sets of facts’ must be ‘grounded in unseen realities’ (p. 114).

This book was challenging, but not in a way that aided my understanding of the topic. Each chapter required considerable unpacking, and the rechecking of fairly basic epistemological and technical assumptions. Do we, as a field, really believe the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) is a central tenet of religion? I recently

read Kevin Laland's book, *Darwin's Unfinished Symphony* (2018), and my understanding of cultural and social learning in humans was challenged productively, as Laland began his discussion by ignoring humans and discussing fish. He built the argument from the ground up. Similarly, I recently read the woefully under-cited manuscript 'Is Child Death the Crucible of Human Evolution?' (Volk and Atkinson 2008), which makes a compelling argument that scholars in evolutionary fields need to consider children well before they consider other topics, such as mate choice. These authors hoped to profoundly challenge core assumptions of evolutionary psychology. Children, far more than adults, are really where the action is at, they argue. One need not agree with everything in either of these examples, though my point is that work like this is challenging, and aids understanding. Cresswell's work urges an extreme and unjustified narrowing of scope (even if he suggests it is an expansion).

Cresswell can be seen setting himself up for a knock-out blow, which he ultimately fails to land. He suggested that assumptions of 'naturalism'—that it is fruitful to demarcate aspects of the world into smaller, empirical chunks—should be entirely replaced with an understanding of dynamic systems, that no part of the system is hierarchically more important than any other. And yet, we should pay attention to language in particular because it is a window into psychology. This is immediately contradictory, even if the suggestion that language holds qualitative clues to culture and psychology has value. Unfortunately, this book was a gish-gallop of straw-men and well-dressed suggestions. I was, with effort, able to discern signals from the noise, though the endeavour was frequently unrewarding.

My actual experience of reading this book was not as harsh as this review suggests, but word limits and time constraints prevent further discussion. Cresswell should be commended for putting his thinking down in ink and making his case publicly. We would all be better scholars if we were to revise and argue for the standards we hope to see in scholarship, even going so far as to go on record for our own accepted standards of truth. Nonetheless, I (personally) was unable to extract actionable value from the book. I found myself frequently wondering how familiar Cresswell was with foundational texts and theories, such as dual-inheritance theory, work on social learning strategies, the study of cumulative culture, cultural evolution, comparative and non-human studies of psychology, and, to be blunt, any work that discusses non-Western cultures. I cannot endorse Cresswell's claims that he is revolutionizing the field of CSR, and the few points of merit to the work are embedded in such a way that extraction is difficult, even if those criticisms are valid.

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#### References

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