

## **Agency detection/HADD**

### *General questions*

Does the ‘hypersensitive agency detection device’ (HADD) hypothesis hold positive or negative implications for particular theologies/religious positions, or perhaps for theology/religion in general? Does the HADD hypothesis sit uneasily with traditional theistic conceptions of how human beings acquire natural knowledge of God? Would accepting an evolutionary picture of the production of God beliefs seem to require at least the modification of certain traditional religious doctrines – for instance, the Christian doctrines of original perfection and the fall?

### *Summary*

According to a widely endorsed cognitive account of the production of religious belief (see also Agency detection/HADD topic in empirical summaries, coming soon) religious beliefs are generated by a mental tool which has been described by Barrett [1] as a ‘hypersensitive agency detection device.’ HADD is set off by various ambiguous environmental stimuli such as the apparently goal-directed movement of objects, etc., and when triggered, HADD produces beliefs in unseen agents who are presumed to be the causes of such ambiguous stimuli. Guthrie [2] and others (e.g., Barrett [1]) hypothesise that hyperactive agency detection would be adaptive since having a strong perceptual bias to interpret ambiguous events as caused by an agent makes it far less likely that our ancestors would have ended up as a predator’s kill. It would have been far less costly for our ancestors too have detected too much agency in their environment than too little.

### *Examples of philosophical and theological issues*

The HADD theory of the origins of religious belief can be and has been interpreted as showing that religious beliefs are nothing other than a trick played on us by evolution. Some within the Cognitive Science of Religion community as well those outside the field (e.g., the biologist Richard Dawkins [3], and philosopher Daniel Dennett[4]) have implicitly or explicitly endorsed some such view. Advocates of this position tend to appeal to considerations such as HADD’s unreliability, the mutual incompatibility of the religious beliefs produced, and the sufficiency of a psychological explanation of religious belief formation in order to defend their conclusions. If HADD is hyperactive, it will produce many false positives, giving us reason to doubt the reliability of the beliefs produced in this way; it also produces mutually incompatible beliefs across the different religious traditions; and it offers an account of the origin of religious beliefs which makes no reference to supernatural entities, but for a belief to be reliable it is normally expected that the belief will be causally connected to its referent in certain ways (for a summary of arguments which attempt to show that CSR undermines religious belief see [5]).

By contrast, some within the Cognitive science of religion community draw different conclusions concerning the implications of HADD (e.g., [1]), and the philosopher Michael J. Murray [5] has suggested that the HADD theory is not incompatible with religious claims. Murray has pointed to the importance of assessing the reliability of beliefs produced by HADD with reference to the contexts in which it is activated rather than just in general, and insists on

the point that HADD does not give rise to mutually incompatible beliefs *all on its own*, but rather produces only highly non-specific beliefs of ‘agency’ in general which are then elaborated by divergent cultural traditions. Further, he notes that the absence of a direct causal connection between religious beliefs generated by HADD and their purported referents is compatible with a view that God perhaps orchestrated evolutionary history in such a way that human beings evolved a cognitive architecture which would lead them to form beliefs in supernatural entities - religious belief would then have an *indirect* connection to its referent [see 5]. The philosopher Kelly James Clark [6] has additionally argued that far from undermining religious claims, the HADD model of religious belief formation is quite compatible with certain readings of the traditional Christian doctrine of natural knowledge of God through a *sensus divinitatis*. According to Clark, reformed epistemology and cognitive science of religion show a convergence on belief in God, since both hold that belief in God is a natural, non-inferential belief immediately produced by a cognitive faculty.

Up to this point the theistic response to anti-theistic construals of the implications of the HADD theory has come mostly from the reformed epistemology end of the discussion, but traditions of theological reflection which see a more prominent role for reason in the acquisition of religious beliefs may come to take a different view about what HADD means for theology. Also, accepting something like a HADD explanation of the production of religious beliefs would seem to require the modification of other traditional religious doctrines - in the Christian tradition, for instance, those such as the doctrine of original perfection and the fall. By contrast, the anti-theistic case also awaits a fuller treatment. These and other issues remain to be explored.

*See also*

Minimal counterintuitiveness; Cognitive science of religion and evolutionary theory (coming soon)

*Outstanding issues*

- Does HADD only explain superstition? Do the ‘supreme gods’ have a different ontogeny?
- Does the generation of religious beliefs via HADD require believers to alter their understanding of divine-human relationship?
- Is a God who generates human belief in him via HADD a deceptive God?
- Which religious doctrines may have to be modified in the light of HADD?
- Does HADD reductively explain away much/all of religion?

*References*

1. Barrett, J.L., *Why would anyone believe in God?* 2004, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
2. Guthrie, S., *Faces in the clouds: a new theory of religion.* 1993, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Dawkins, R., *The God delusion.* 2006, London: Bantam Press.

4. Dennett, D., *Breaking the spell: religion as a natural phenomenon*. 2006, New York: Penguin.
5. Murray, M.J., *Four arguments that the cognitive psychology of religion undermines the justification of religious belief*, J. Bulbulia, et al., Editors. 2007, The Collins Foundation Press: Santa Margarita, CA.
6. Clark, K.J., *Reformed epistemology and the cognitive science of religion*. forthcoming.