

have been preserved, those images have long been interrogated as representative art, which has failed to adequately resolve the issue (cf. Morgan 2018). Scholars increasingly acknowledge that the cultic image was thought to have been divinized and to have somehow materially “presenced” the deity itself, or manifested its presence, while still maintaining some degree of autonomy (Bahrani 2003; Herring 2013; Sonik 2015; Schaper 2019).

In 1987, Thorkild Jacobsen (1987, 18) proposed a philosophical foundation for this problem:

The contradiction of *is* and *is not* in the matter of the cult statue is so flagrant and cuts so deep that there must seem to be little hope of resolving it unless one goes to the most basic levels of understanding and attempts to gain clarity about the very fundamentals of ancient thought, about what exactly ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ meant to the ancients. We must consider, if only briefly, the ontology of the ancients, their ideas of what constituted ‘being’ and ‘reality.’⁴

Jacobsen’s observation that this ostensible paradox arises because of the disparity between our modern conceptualizations of ourselves and the world around us and those of first millennium BCE Southwest Asia touches on the root of the problem;⁵ but despite his methodological sensitivity, Jacobsen still frames the issue in terms of “ontology” and “being,” imposing modern philosophical frameworks where there is no indication they belong.⁶ Neither “ontology” nor “being” in today’s philosophical sense are anywhere discussed in the literature from ancient Southwest Asia related to the nature and function of divine images. It is not an ancient conceptual category; it is a thoroughly modern one, but twenty-first century scholarship continues to uncritically employ it. A notable exception that seems to me to be the most fruitful engagement with this issue from within Assyriology comes from Beate Pongratz-Leisten’s phenomenal essay, “Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia” (2011).⁷ Her approach, which has inspired my own in many ways, incorporates frameworks from the cognitive sciences to build on the theoretical model for distributed agency developed by Alfred Gell in his posthumously published *Art and Agency* (1998).

⁴ A. Leo Oppenheim (1977, 182) has written that it “is open to serious doubt whether we will ever be able to cross the gap caused by the differences in ‘dimensions.’” This book will demonstrate that there are significant strides that can be made toward crossing that gap.

⁵ By *conceptualize* and *conceptualization* I refer to the formation or interpretation of concepts using imagery and mental spaces that do not isometrically represent reality, but utilize idealized cognitive models or generalized mental representations. This will be discussed in more detail below.

⁶ Jacobsen goes on to describe ancient Mesopotamians as “*monists*” (Jacobsen 1987, 19).

⁷ Another notable exception is Stowers 2021.