

obscure our attempt to identify influences underlying their transmission, change, and elaboration (Boyer 2012).

Until reflective explanations become salient (usually because of strong social institutions), deity concepts tend to develop and circulate on the “folk” level, and to be more closely tethered to intuitive reasoning. Additionally, reflective explanations are often situationally emergent and contingent on power structures. Those explanations may become authoritative and govern subsequent accounts, or they may be altered or abandoned because of changing circumstances, but deity concepts cannot escape the gravitational pull of intuitive reasoning.<sup>25</sup> To use the most salient *reflective* explanations to account for the production, elaboration, or transmission of the concept is to put the cart firmly before the horse. Unfortunately, that has been the trend in many scholarly accounts of deity and divine agency.<sup>26</sup> The cognitive science of religion, on the other hand, gives significant weight to the *intuitive* explanation. This is thought to hit closer to the cognitive roots of cross-cultural patterns of thought and behavior, and this makes for a more solid foundation for explanation than does privileging the far more socially and historically contingent reflective structuring of knowledge. I am by no means suggesting that these cognitive roots are the only relevant sources of explanation, that they should always take unilateral priority over those more socially contingent modes of knowledge, or that the latter do not merit study in their own right. I am suggesting those roots have been neglected for far too long, and that they can facilitate a great deal of progress.

One of the outcomes of the priority of our intuitive cognition is that our minds mediate our perception of the world around us, and this extends to our senses (it’s what makes most optical illusions work), but even to how we *think* about ourselves and the world around us (cf. Ramachandran 2011). This leads to an important insight: our perception and experience of the world is the result not just of the passive processing of stimuli, but also a projection of experience. Our minds

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intuitions are actually the same intuitions responsible for our conceptualizations of ourselves and the rest of the world around us. The assumption that there are intuitions unique to religion is a distorting framework.

<sup>25</sup> Justin Barrett and Frank Keil (1996, cf. Barrett 1999), for instance, have shown that when reasoning about the activity of deity, people most commonly default to a thoroughly anthropomorphic conceptualization, which is more intuitive. When primed regarding the particular theological orthodoxies they endorsed, the appeals to anthropomorphism were reduced.

<sup>26</sup> It seems to me this is particularly common in the study of early christology. This scholarship frequently gives priority of place to rationalizations attributed to the authors of the biblical texts, which serves the interests and power structures of scholars operating within the perception of a shared tradition. This seems to me to be a brand of what is referred to in the study of religion as “protectionism.” For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon, see Young 2019.