Dualism, Disembodiment and the Divine: Supernatural Agent Representations in CSR

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# Abstract

The authors argue that contrary to the current trend in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), supernatural agents are not intuitively represented by the folk as disembodied minds as the theory of intuitive dualism suggests. Instead, it is argued that a thesis of social embodiment regarding those representations is wholly compatible with the growing body of empirical evidence. Once researchers stop looking for embodiment in mundane biological processes and focus on social relationships, the signs of embodiment will appear.

# Keywords:

Dualism; disembodied minds; supernatural agent representations; social embodiment; theory of mind; cognitive science of religion

A Cautionary Tale

There is no shortage of works touting the successes of the cognitive science of religion (CSR). The idea that we can understand our great cultural artefact, religion, through understanding the human mind is an appealing one. Advances in psychology, in conjunction with the cognitive turn across numerous disciplines, finally encouraged scientists to crack open the skull and peer into the black box. What they found was evidence of a host of interconnected mental mechanisms developed throughout human evolution which together produce the religious mind.

We too celebrate the success and promise of CSR, but we will not be adding to its praises here. Ours is a cautionary tale.

It is commonplace in CSR literature to read that supernatural agents are believed by the “religious folk” to be disembodied beings − that is, entities without any physical form. This is due to the widespread acceptance of the claim that humans are intuitive dualists with respect to themselves. Although this claim comes in a variety of strengths and mixtures, the common ingredients are one part immaterial essence, and one part disposable body-bag (c.f. Astuti & Harris 2008; Bering 2006; Bloom 2004; Cohen et al. 2011). Accordingly, the CSR literature claims that supernatural agents, including those humans who have died and are believed to exist in the afterlife (hereafter, afterliving deceased), are intuitively represented by believers to consist only of the former without any need of the latter, given that numerous cross-cultural studies have shown that participants strongly favour mental states and processes over mundane biological states and processes for supernatural agents.

Both intuitive dualism and disembodied supernatural agent claims are accompanied by a great deal of empirical evidence. In this chapter, we are not going to dispute the empirical evidence which has given rise to these claims. Instead, what we hope to expose for the reader is that these claims are based on problematic interpretations of the current evidence. Additionally, we hope to illustrate that the claims bear little resemblance to the vast cross-cultural anthropological evidence.

A Focus on Intuitive Representations

The questions in CSR are not whether supernatural agents exist, and if so whether they are disembodied, but rather how are supernatural agents represented in the mind of the believer. It is also important for a researcher to distinguish between what the believer might state about the nature of supernatural agents in accord with doctrine or reason, and how they intuitively represent those same agents. For instance, because Christian theology mandates that God is a disembodied being to maintain perfection, that does not mean that God is intuitively so represented by the believer (Boyer 1996; Guthrie 1993; Barrett & Keil 1996; Barrett & VanOrman 1996; Slone et al. 2007). Likewise, because the believer may reason that those in the afterlife are disembodied because they have shed their mortal coil, that does not necessitate that the afterliving deceased are intuitively represented that way by the believer (Hodge 2011, 2016). Even though the believer might explicitly claim that supernatural agents exist as disembodied beings, that does not mean that the believer intuitively represents them as such.

The focus on intuitive representations is vital for the researcher. Without it, the researcher may allow the believer’s religious doctrine or reasoning to infiltrate his assessment of what is intuitive. For instance, the researcher may assume that the believer must represent the afterliving deceased as disembodied because she has borne witness to the dead body. This leads us to our next issue.

Imagined vs. Physical Body

This point is especially pertinent to representations of the afterliving deceased, but it also applies to representations of supernatural agents generally. Having a physical body is not requisite for having an imagined body. A few examples will help illustrate our point. We can easily imagine a loved one’s face even though she is not physically present. We can have imagined representations of Sherlock Holmes even though he does not physically exist. We can imagine our deceased grandparents holding each other’s hand and smiling even though we know their corpses are lying *in situ* underground. We can easily imagine God as an old man with long white hair and a beard even though He is disembodied per Christian doctrine.

In the same manner by which we can call to mind an image of a living loved one who is not within our immediate presence, we can call to mind an image our deceased loved one even though we know that her physical, inanimate, insensate corpse has been abandoned. This in no way inhibits us from providing them an imagined body (Hodge 2011, 2016). Thus, simply because one believes in life after the death of the physical body, it does not mean that she must, or even does, represent the afterliving deceased as disembodied. The believer may well understand (at least reflectively) that the supernatural agent does not have a physical body either by circumstance or doctrine, but that does not prevent her from providing a supernatural agent with an imagined one.

Invisible vs. Disembodied

There is a difference between being invisible and being disembodied. This is not a pedantic point. Instead, it often comes as a surprise to those unfamiliar with the history and philosophy of dualism (Hodge 2011).[[1]](#footnote-2) To illustrate this point, think about the Greek hero Perseus who used an enchanted helmet provided to him by Pallas Athene to help him slay the Gorgon Medusa. Whenever Perseus (or anyone) donned the helmet he became invisible for as long as he wore it. Now, we can easily understand and imagine an invisible Perseus wearing an invisible helmet on his invisible head and wielding an invisible sword and shield with his invisible hands. What we cannot understand or imagine is a disembodied Perseus wearing a helmet, or wielding a sword or shield, since disembodied beings have neither head nor hands.

While supernatural agents of all types are frequently described as being invisible, or visible to only a few, that does not entail that they are represented as disembodied by the believer (Nikkel 2015: 632f.; Hodge 2011: 370). On the contrary, many supernatural agents from a myriad of religions across time and space are described as having distinctive and elaborate bodily features. We will discuss this in much more detail below.

It is also important to realize that imagining oneself having a disembodied experience is not the same thing as imagining oneself as disembodied—i.e., imagining yourself leaving your physical body and taking on a different perceptual view, which may include you perceiving your own abandoned physical body, is different from imaging you, yourself, with no body whatsoever. While it is clear that the former is easily imaginable, it is not so clear that the latter is imaginable or conceivable (c.f. Blose 1981; Sorabji 2006: 305; Tye 1983). This distinction is particularly important when trying to understand near-death experiences (NDEs). Even though the subject reports to have left her body, she still expresses how she experiences and interacts with the world in embodied terms (Osis & Haraldsson 1997: 170-172; Zaleski 1987: 193). Therefore, while NDEs provide tentative support for out-of-(physical) body experiences, they do not support a claim that NDE patient represents herself during the experience as disembodied.

Three Problems with the Concept Mind in CSR

The CSR puts a lot of emphasis on the concept MIND when describing supernatural representations. However, there are three problems with the concept MIND and how it is used in CSR’s claims about supernatural agents: First, there is no consensus on a universal concept MIND between researchers nor across cultures; second, even if it were established that there is a universal folk concept MIND, researchers may be overattributing it because of a misinterpretation of theory of mind (ToM); third, even if there is no such misinterpretation, researchers still fail to acknowledge a growing body of research that demonstrates how the folk differentiate between the brain, the mind and the soul.

Regarding the first, MIND varies across the disciplines of philosophy and psychology, as well as across cultures. For instance, the mind in the philosophical position of Cartesian substance dualism contains thought and perceptions, but does not include the emotions or desires which are said to originate and reside in the body. Not only does this put the mind outside of any specifically religious context, it also (contra Bloom 2004, 2007) puts it outside of both the empirical evidence and the folk usage and understanding. The empirical evidence gathered about how the folk intuitively think about the recently deceased shows clearly that emotions and desires are among the strongest element that continue, whereas perception is much more limited in type (visual and auditory over tactile, olfactory and gustatory) and context (Astuti & Harris 2008; Bering 2002; Bering, Blasi, & Bjorklund 2005; Cohen et al. 2011; Hodge 2012; Huang, Cheng, & Zhu 2013). Thus, to the extent that the folk might be said to believe that *the* mind continues for the afterliving deceased, it is not a Cartesian mind (Hodge 2008, 2016). Moreover, there is no cross-cultural agreement on a universal concept MIND (c.f. D'Andrade 1995: 158-169; Wierzbicka 1989) nor is it clear that all cultures even have a concept MIND (Lillard 1998). Worse, even if we were to take the mind to be the center of those states and processes which survive the death of the body as determined from our experimental evidence, there is no known religion that has such a freestanding disembodied entity (apart from Scientology without heavy-handed interpretation).

Regarding the second problem, researchers may be overinterpreting ToM. This occurs in two steps, but first let us be clear as to what ToM is. ToM is the intuitive ability to understand and attribute intentional, content-bearing, representational mental states and processes to ourselves and others. Creatures endowed with ToM asses what another individual perceives, believes, knows, desires and feels to understand and predict that individual’s behavior. Thus, through ToM we assign these mental states and processes a causal role in an agent’s behaviour (Bradford, Jentzsch, & Gomez 2015; Griffin & Baron-Cohen 2002). The act of assigning and assessing another’s mental states and processes is often referred to as mindreading (Nichols forthcoming; Bloom 2004: 14-24). What should be gleaned here is that there is nothing in ToM that requires attributing a mind to agents − one simply attributes mental states and processes in the form of *specific* beliefs and desires, etc.[[2]](#footnote-3) To have ToM, one is not required, much less needs, to have a concept MIND. In other words, a concept MIND is not required to mindread. Nevertheless, many researchers in CSR seem to claim that because we use ToM to assess and assign mental states and processes to supernatural agents we are assigning to them a mind (Barrett 2004: 95ff.; Bering 2010: 22f; Bloom 2007; Boyer 2001: 144, 155; Hood 2009: 105). So, the first issue of overinterpretation of ToM is the move from “the agent that has mental states and processes” to “the agent has a mind.”

The second step in overinterpretation of ToM occurs when the researcher in CSR moves from “the agent has a mind” to “the agent *is* a mind.” In other words, the whole of an agent’s essence and identity is her mind and her mind alone; she is her mind, and *only* her mind. Therefore, a body (physical or otherwise) is not needed to be an agent. An agent may have a body, but it is entirely accidental to her essence and identity. The motive behind this interpretive overstep is twofold: Bloom’s (2004) theory of intuitive folk Cartesian substance dualism, and the empirical evidence gathered about how individuals intuitively think about dead agents. We will address the former now, but defer the latter to section seven.

Bloom (2004: xiii, 3-34; 2007: 149) argues that intuitive Cartesian substance dualism arises from a clash between two distinct systems that govern human thought from an early age (perhaps even from birth). Humans, even from infancy, mentally treat physical objects differently than they do psychological entities (i.e., humans). In accord with Bloom (2007: 149), we concur that this is a non-controversial psychological fact. Where Bloom utilizes this fact controversially is to assert that we humans are Cartesian substance dualists, separating the world into physical objects and immaterial minds. For Bloom, the whole of a person’s essence and identity is contained solely in the immaterial mind (i.e., the soul) which can be completely divorced from the body. This is where Bloom transgresses far past the evidence and yet goes even further to claim that we treat humans as *only* immaterial minds wholly separate from their bodies. This theory, widely cited and accepted in CSR, is rife with difficulties in application to both living and deceased humans as well as to supernatural agents (Chandler & Dunlop 2015; Hodge 2008; Nikkel 2015; Barlev, Mermelstein, & German 2016).

Yet, even if researchers overcame these first two problems, there is still the third. Those that wish to claim that the mind is identical to the soul overlook the growing evidence that the folk do not equate the mind and the soul. To the folk, the soul has a different ontogenesis and function than the mind (and the brain is different still than both). In various studies participants significantly judged that the mind likely exists, that its existence is limited to the natural life cycle, that it performs largely cognitive functions and that it changes over one’s lifespan. The soul, however, whose existence is not at all a certain for participants, was believed to extend beyond the life cycle (in both directions), perform spiritual functions and remains stable across one’s lifespan (Astuti & Harris 2008; Richert & Harris 2006, 2008; Richert & Smith 2012). Thus, even if researchers can overcome the first two problems related to the concept MIND, there remains a seemingly irreconcilable third.

The Elephant (Head) in the Room

The strongest evidence against the folk holding a dualistic, disembodied representation of supernatural agents *qua* minds comes from the vast anthropological record. For instance, consider the Hindu god Ganesh: while a disembodied god might make sense, a *disembodied* elephant-headed god does not. If Ganesh were an anomaly among the cross-cultural catalogue of gods, then he might be the exception to the rule. That, however, is simply not the case. Since ancient times, humans have depicted gods by word and image in embodied form. Whether it be the gods of ancient Hindus, Mesopotamians, Greeks, the Jews, or the contemporary gods of the Quechua, Shintoism, or Buddhism. These depictions are not the least bit controversial either among academics or lay people. The vast majority of gods across the vast majority of religions are represented as embodied. The major exception to this trend is the doctrinal conception of the Abrahamic God, who is without form (Nikkel 2015; Barrett 2004: 77).

One of the earliest cognitive theories regarding supernatural agent representations was Guthrie’s theory of anthropomorphism (1980, 1993). The key idea here is that humans are hypersensitive to agency in our environment, and often incorrectly attribute human psychological and physiological features to objects (anthropomorphism) and human agency to events in our environment (animism). Much of Guthrie’s work in CSR, and those by later scholars (Barrett & Richert 2003; Boyer 1996, 2001; Westh 2011) focused mostly on how human psychology, specifically human(-like) mental states and processes, were attributed to supernatural agents more so than physical features. Eventually, as folk dualism became more accepted in CSR, researchers started to ignore physical attributes of supernatural agents almost entirely (Barrett 2004; Bering 2010; Pyysiäinen 2009, 2013; Tremlin 2010).

Surprisingly, however, very little research into whether embodied features are attributed to supernatural agent representations has been done. Early research by Barrett and colleagues (Barrett 1998; Barrett & Keil 1996) did find cross-cultural evidence for some physical and temporal property attributions to God. But, most recently, Shtulman and Lindeman (2016) cross-culturally tested the extent to which human physiological and psychological properties were attributed to supernatural agents. Specifically, in comparison to human psychological properties, they asked participants whether a god can eat, reproduce, grow old; whether the god had internal organs and bones; and whether a god can exert force; and whether he has a weight and height that can be measured. Their significant finding here was that participants far more easily and rapidly attributed human psychological properties (i.e., beliefs, desires and emotions) to supernatural agents over those physiological properties. The authors interpret these findings as evidence that humans’ supernatural agent representations are that of disembodied minds.

That interpretation, however, overlooks a third option when it comes to embodied representations of supernatural agents. Students of mythology, theology and philosophy will know that, since ancient times, humans are believed to occupy the place on the ontological hierarchy between beasts and gods (Hodge In review; Zeitlin 1991: 27-49). We share our carnal biological natures with the beasts, and our social natures (governed by rationality) with the gods. As Aristotle (*Pol*. 1. 1253a) succinctly put it, we are “social animals.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Thus, we share our mundane biological attributes with the beasts, but share social natures with the gods. And we do expect the gods to interact with us. As Boyer (2001: 138) argues, our social interaction with supernatural agents is a “constant source of intuitions and reasoning.” Gods do not need internal organs to interact with us, yet that does not suggest that they are disembodied. On the contrary we tend to attribute to supernatural agents whatever body parts is needed for the interaction being imaginatively represented. Hodge (2012) has called this imaginative representation *social embodiment*.

Evidence for the social embodiment thesis was gathered by De Cruz (2013). In contradistinction from Guthrie’s (1980, 1993) anthropomorphism thesis that suggests all human physiological features could be attributed to supernatural agents *and* Bloom’s (2004, and by extension, Shtulman and Lindeman 2016) disembodiment thesis, De Cruz’s structured imagination task demonstrated that participants imaginatively represented supernatural agents as embodied to the extent that made social interaction possible. Gods did not need internal organs, but they did need hands, eyes, mouths, etc., to interact socially with their creations.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The social embodiment thesis remains faithful to the anthropological evidence while at the same time explaining the current experimental findings on how humans represent supernatural agents. What it also suggests is that as long as CSR continues to look for signs of embodiment for supernatural agents in mundane biological features and processes, the disembodied findings are likely to continue. If, however, they turn their attention to how supernatural agents are thought to interact with each other and with us, an embodied representation will appear.

The Afterliving Deceased

The supernatural entities often held as exemplar of immaterial psychological entities in CSR are the afterliving deceased. After all, they have “left” their bodies behind; they *must* continue to exist as purely mental entities—that is, disembodied minds. Regardless of whether the afterliving are *reasoned* to so exist, we claim that is not how they are *intuitively* represented by the believer.

We say this even while acknowledging that numerous experiments, all with similar results, have been conducted into how participants intuitively think about the recently deceased, and that they have strongly favoured the continuation of mental states and processes for the deceased over mundane biological states and processes (e.g., Astuti & Harris 2008; Bek & Lock 2011; Bering 2002; Huang, Cheng, & Zhu 2013; Misailidi & Kornilaki 2015; Pereira, Faísca, & Sá-Saraiva 2012; Slingerland & Chudek 2011). Our dispute is not with the findings: it is with the narrowness of experimental methodologies and the interpretations of the findings.

The major indicator that something has gone wrong with the dualistic interpretation of the experimental data is the anthropological record. Across time and cultures, humans have represented the afterliving deceased as embodied in their mythologies, artistic representations, funerary rites, theologies and more (Hodge 2008). Reconciliation of the dualistic, disembodied interpretations of the experimental evidence with the long history of embodied representations in the anthropological evidence is impossible at worst or tortured at best (Hodge 2008; Nikkel 2015).

Slowly, however, cracks in the intuitive dualism theory are beginning to show. Some studies are demonstrating category and contextual effects on participants’ continuity responses for the afterliving deceased which are incongruent with intuitive dualism (Bek & Lock 2011; Misailidi & Kornilaki 2015; Lane et al. 2016). Other studies are abandoning mind-body dualism, even if they are falling back into other dualisms (Astuti & Harris 2008; Cohen et al. 2011). And yet others are demonstrating that some intuitive representational embodiment remains (Watson-Jones et al. 2016). To date, these newer findings have remained in-step with the social embodiment thesis (Hodge 2008, 2011, 2012, 2016).

The same holds for the afterliving deceased as we discussed with supernatural agents. We need not imagine them with bones, internal organs, or needing to defecate. We need not represent the afterliving deceased being sleepy, or with a sense of smell (under most circumstances). We leave behind those beastly biological features at death. But, we cannot deny that it is intuitively natural for us (“the folk”) to imagine them looking down on us smiling, greeting those who join them in the afterlife with tears, laughter and hugs, and walking arm-in-arm into the eternal sunset. Our supernatural agent representations easily accommodate such divine social interaction. In fact, we suggest that this imagined, socially embodied representation *may be* the elusive soul.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Contrary to the ubiquity in CSR of claims that supernatural agents are disembodied, there is substantial reason not to treat it as scientific consensus. There is still much more research to do. Aside from hashing out some of the conceptual confusions we have raised here, very little empirical evidence has been collected about the representations of deities. Moreover, we suggest that CSR look beyond the mundane, biological states and processes when looking for signs of embodiment. Supernatural agent representations may be both physically and biologically disembodied, while remaining imaginatively and socially represented as embodied. This will put supernatural agent representations in CSR back in step with its own empirical evidence, but more importantly the vast archaeological, historical, and anthropological evidence.

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1. When presenting these arguments publicly, Hodge has received numerous comments from readers and audience members who expressed epiphanies at this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This means that the person using ToM need not have the general conceptual categories of MENTAL STATES and PROCESSES. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. It was the highly complex political (in a loose sense) sociality of humans that Aristotle and others stated we shared with gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. De Cruz also found that supernatural agents were represented with hair and beards. These provide two social elements: an indication of gender and age, and a stable embodied representation for identification. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This solution would also do away with a need for any dualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)