

# Theism and the Thinking Mind

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I often find myself reflecting on the co-existence of rational thought and religious belief. Simply put, how is it that an intelligent person, possessed of a formidable intellect, can embrace religious belief at all? It would be easy to dismiss religion as a crutch of the weak-minded, but this is simply not accurate. How is it that this duality of the rational and the spiritual can be simultaneously maintained?

Richard Dawkins [wrote the following](#), effectively classifying religious belief as a “virus of the mind”:

A human child is shaped by evolution to soak up the culture of her people. Most obviously, she learns the essentials of their language in a matter of months. A large dictionary of words to speak, an encyclopedia of information to speak about, complicated syntactic and semantic rules to order the speaking, are all transferred from older brains into hers well before she reaches half her adult size. When you are pre-programmed to absorb useful information at a high rate, it is hard to shut out pernicious or damaging information at the same time. With so many mindbytes to be downloaded, so many mental codons to be replicated, it is no wonder that child brains are gullible, open to almost any suggestion, vulnerable to subversion, easy prey to Moonies, Scientologists and nuns. Like immune-deficient patients, children are wide open to mental infections that adults might brush off without effort.

Richard Dawkins

Taking this a step further, I find it particularly ironic that the human proclivity for religious belief may in fact be an evolved trait, once quite beneficial in terms of improving our chances for survival. Justin Barrett (Director of the Thrive Center for Human Development) coined the term “HADD” (Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device) to describe the tendency of the human mind to imbue non-living and/or invisible agents with the traits of consciousness and will. Clinical neurologist Steven Novella summarized this nicely in an [article](#) on the Skepticblog site. Some interesting bits:

Psychologists and neuroscientists in recent years have demonstrated that our brains are hardwired to distinguish things in our environment that are alive from those that are not alive. But “being alive” (from a psychological point of view) is not about biology, but agency – something that can act in the world, that has its own will and can cause things to happen. Sure, this is a property of living things, but that’s not how our brain sort things out. We can perceive agency in non-living things if they are acting as if they are agents.

According to Barrett, HADD works in part by detecting any movement that is non-inertial – something which seems to be moving of its own volition. We then assume it is acting with agency and react accordingly. This likely provided an evolutionary advantage – it is better to assume the rustling in the bushes was not the wind but a hungry tiger. So we are descended from hominids who were more paranoid and had hyperactive agency detection, because they were less likely to be eaten by predators.

We can extrapolate from “non-inertial movement”, or movement that cannot be easily explained as a passive reaction to natural forces, to more and more complex “actions.” HADD detects more than movement, it can detect a pattern in otherwise unrelated events, details that defy easy explanation, or consequences that seem out of proportion to the alleged causes. When HADD is

triggered we tend to see a hidden agent working behind the scenes, making events unfold the way they do, and perhaps even deliberately hiding its own tracks.

When HADD is triggered and we think we see the hidden agent, it speaks to us in a very primal way. For some people the perception of hidden agency becomes overwhelming, dominating all other thought processes. We know these people as conspiracy theorists. But there is a little conspiracy theorist inside each of us.

Studies have also demonstrated that HADD is more likely to be triggered when a stimulus is ambiguous – therefore it tends to be our default assumption – an object is an agent until we are sure it’s just an object. Also, in situations where we have less control our HADD becomes more active still.

Barrett and others have speculated that HADD is important to the development of religion – where God is the ultimate invisible agent. So far this hypothesis has not been significantly researched, but it does seem reasonable. Seeing natural or random events as the will of an agent is HADD.

HADD also leads to superstition – thinking that there is a cause and effect between unconnected events. The underlying assumption of superstitions is that things happen for a reason (a vague ill-defined reason, but a sense that there is a hidden agency at work).

Steven Novella

So, given all this, it seems reasonable to assume that no matter how intelligent and rational you are, in order to reject religious belief you must reject an ingrained evolutionary trait, almost akin to defying instinctive behavior. Superstition may be obsolete, but we are effectively hard-wired to embrace it.

[critical thinking](#)

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