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Many scientists claim that much religious belief is natural in the sense that it is either produced or maintained by discrete cognitive modules that are more or less universally distributed among humans. For example, a hyper-active agency detection device (HADD) automatically produces content about unseen agents in the environment, and natural ontologies sort religious concepts that are mundane from those that are minimally counterintuitive (MCI) and hence prone to easy recall. Thus, such cognitive modules play an outsized role in explaining religious belief.

Much of the philosophical literature focuses on whether such evolutionary explanations debunk religious belief. Many scholars answer yes: if religious belief is produced or maintained by cognitive modules aimed at something other than religious truth, then religious belief is produced in an unreliable way. A widely-accepted epistemic constraint on belief says that once you know a belief was produced in an unreliable way, it is unreasonable to continue to hold that belief. Hence, evolutionary explanations of religious belief debunk religious belief.

However, making a judgment about the reliability of a cognitive module requires two steps. First, we should be able to compile a set of all and only the types of propositional content produced by the module. This is a matter of determining boundaries, and philosophers call it the generality problem. Second, we should be able to compare the set of produced content against an independently verified set of facts to determine the percentage of the produced content is true. This is a matter of determining accuracy.

This paper highlights two needs from those working in cognitive psychology to solve the generality problem for modules that produce religious belief. First, researchers should make precise the propositional content delivered by any given module. For example, is the HADD module supposed to produce the intuition that something is out there and nothing more specific? Without a clear account of the nature of the propositional content, philosophers are in no position to determine accuracy.

Second, researchers should offer an account of the boundaries of the cognitive modules responsible for religious belief. A successful account will identify the full range of propositional content produced in all of the relevant environments. Additionally, this account of boundaries should be operational so that the boundaries of any given module are empirically confirmable. Without a clear account of the boundaries of the propositional content, philosophers are in no position to determine accuracy, either