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Many recent scientific theories of religious belief conclude that a lot of the action happens and stays below the level of consciousness. Religious 'beliefs' are argued to be shaped by evolutionary pressures and higher order more complex beliefs are argued to be merely a small subclass of the religious beliefs people hold. Justin Barrett claimed that evolutionary pressures shaped people's intuitive beliefs, which in turn put heavy constraints on people's higher order beliefs (Barrett 2004). A group of theorists argue that a 'belief' in big punishing gods was adaptive for our human ancestors because it allowed for better cooperation and less free-riding (e.g. Norenzayan 2013).

I will argue that the 'beliefs' or intuitive beliefs these authors are discussing are better characterized as subpersonal or subdoxastic states. The terms were introduced by Stephen Stich (Stich 1978) and Daniel Dennett (Dennett 2010) to distinguish psychological states that have a proximate role in the formation of beliefs whilst not being beliefs themselves. I will argue that the states under discussion should not properly be called beliefs because they lack a broad inferential potential and mainly because they (usually) remain unconscious.

Next, I will argue that arguing that religious belief happens to a large extent on the subpersonal level raises a number of worries for the theories that do so. Zoe Drayson warns of misconceptions surrounding the personal/ subpersonal distinction. Drayson argues that subpersonal explanations are limited since they only provide information about the explanandum's (in our case religious beliefs) componential features and not about its antecedent history (Drayson 2012). Causal claims about religious beliefs on the basis of the theories mentioned above are therefore difficult. She also warns against considering subpersonal and personal states as distinct metaphysical states (Drayson 2012). I will argue that this worry is best interpreted as the claim that the subpersonal is an aspect of a psychological state. Both worries conclude that the scope of subpersonal explanations of religious belief is limited. First because it allows no causal conclusions and second that it only explains one aspect of religious belief.

These worries have important implications for the use of subpersonal theories for philosophical questions surrounding religious belief. Due to limits in presenting causal antecedents, reliabilist debunking arguments become difficult. Reliabilist debunking arguments claim that religious beliefs are not rational because they were produced by an error-prone mechanism (e.g. Wilkins and Griffiths 2012; Nola 2013). Since subpersonal explanations do not address the causal antecedents of a belief, their claim is not warranted.

The fact that subpersonal explanations only address an aspect of beliefs warns theorists in the field against hubris. For example some have claimed that their theories explain religion. An example is Pascal Boyer whose main book is titled 'Religion Explained' (Boyer 2002). A more complete explanation will require more on the other aspect(s) of religious belief.