




The Common Consent Argument for the Existence of Nature Spirits

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ABSTRACT

The traditional common consent argument for the existence of God has largely been abandoned—and rightly so. In this paper, I attempt to salvage the strongest version of the argument. Surprisingly, the strongest version of the argument supports the proposition, not that a god exists, but that animism is probably true and that such things as mountain, river, and forest spirits probably exist. I consider some plausible debunking arguments, ultimately finding that it is trickier to debunk the animist's claims than it might first appear. I conclude that there exists one significant argument in favour of animism that has hitherto gone unstated in the philosophy of religion.

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1. Introduction

The *common consent argument* for the existence of God is generally taken to be a failure [Reid 2015: 402]. Although once popular in the ancient world, particularly among Epicurus and his followers, the argument from common consent no longer has many serious proponents. There are several reasons for this collapse in popularity. Jasper Reid points to a collapse sometime in the eighteenth century, after the question of God's existence was no longer treated as an innate principle of the human mind, but was instead taken to be a fact established by discursive argument [ibid.: 415–22]. Given the timeline that Reid provides, it might also be reasonable to suspect that the voyages of discovery hastened this transition in so far as Europeans were exposed to the puzzling religious traditions of the Far East, many of which lacked any commitment to a god or gods. Whatever hastened the demise of the argument, it is certainly out of favour in our day.

So, just what is the common consent argument for the existence of God? And does it deserve to have been so utterly abandoned? The traditional argument is very simple. It runs thus: since almost everyone believes in some kind of god, some kind of god exists. 'Since a steadfast unanimity continues to prevail amongst all men without exception', said Cicero, 'it must be understood that the gods exist' [1896: I. 17]. Stated a little

more formally (and a little less hyperbolically), the argument looks something like this [Reid 2015: 401]:

1. Near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, has believed in a god.

Therefore, a god must exist

To the modern reader, this argument is nearly laughable. To start with the low-hanging fruit, it is invalid. The truth of the premise does not entail the truth of the conclusion. But, in addition, the argument is apparently fallacious: it is a bandwagon argument. The missing premise licensing the inference is this (obviously false) proposition:

- a. Whatever near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, believes, is true.

And, since few philosophers think that truth is decided by a show of hands, few accept the truth of (a). Our collective human ignorance has been exposed often enough to give us reason to be pessimistic about any claim like (a). Therefore, even on inductive grounds, the argument seems implausible.

But wait, there's more. The original argument is not only formally invalid and fallacious, but its only stated premise is highly dubious. The claim that near enough all people at all times have believed in god(s) seems misleading at best, simply false at worst. Sure, the world's religions share some amount of overlap that one cannot overlook. But this overlap is often vague and imprecise. In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume notes the sketchiness of the agreement between isolated religions [1757: 1–2]:

The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exception, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it has suggested.

Although one might concede that religions typically posit the existence of, as Hume put it, 'invisible, intelligent power' or 'spiritual beings' [Tylor 1929: 287] or 'intentional agency that one does not physically encounter' [Boyer 2003: 120], it seems that a specific commitment to *creator gods* or *high gods* is not at all universal to the world's religions. Moreover, it is unclear whether a commitment to gods is even the most common commitment found across a diverse range of religious cultures.

All in all, there appears to be quite a lot that is wrong with the traditional argument. It is both fallacious and grounded in faulty data. Yet, despite the obvious shortcomings found in its traditional presentation, few have taken the trouble to consider whether any salvageable version of the argument might be hiding inside the carcass of the original (examples are Kelly [2011a] and Zagzebski [2012]). This is unfortunate, as, although the argument *is* very unconvincing in its traditional form, it seems clear enough that *if* there are any truths about the supernatural that can be received by us mere mortals, and *if* we mere mortals are constituted (however poorly) to receive those truths, then we *should* expect to find some agreement about what those truths are.

My aim in this article is to salvage a defensible version of the common consent argument. Somewhat surprisingly, my efforts lead me to the discovery that the best version of the argument supports the proposition, not that a god exists, but that some version of animism is probably true. Animism is a religious tradition (held primarily by hunter-gatherer societies) committed to a belief in nature spirits, such as mountain spirits,

animal spirits, and weather spirits. It is a neglected religious tradition in contemporary philosophy of religion. That a common consent argument can be summoned for animism may seem unlikely to the reader, since the majority of religious believers are theists and only a tiny number are animists. How, it might be wondered, could animism (a minority religious opinion) be supported by any argument from *common consent*?

The reason for this surprising result is that any argument from common consent must be heedful of the way in which the agreement in question has been generated. Proselytizing theistic traditions typically generate agreement by a process of cultural diffusion. Although this can mean that such traditions become very popular, this also means that the agreement concerning the doctrines of such traditions might not be taken to be particularly strong evidence for the truth of their doctrines. In contrast, when agreement between separate knowledge communities has been generated (or sustained for very prolonged periods) independently of any knowledge of others, this is good *prima facie* evidence for the truth of the agreed-upon claim(s). Thus, while it is true that animists are in the overwhelming minority, separate animistic communities have nevertheless come to agree about important religious propositions while in a state of *extreme historical and geographical isolation* from one another.

Although I must confess to being agnostic towards animism, my agnosticism hangs barely by a thread. I am challenged by this reformed common consent argument to reassess the state of the field of philosophy of religion. Indeed, I am challenged to consider animism as a live and compelling religious option—more compelling, in fact, than any theistic one. This new argument for animism may therefore serve several important pedagogical functions. Most obviously, it will find a happy home with those who wish to defend animism against attacks from either theists or atheists. This may be increasingly relevant for indigenous groups seeking recognition of their traditional rites and beliefs, or who are seeking legal personhood status for features of their local environment.¹ Additionally, the argument may sit well with atheists who wish to argue that, in their strongest form, common consent arguments do not support theism, which is typically regarded as the strongest of all religious alternatives in mainstream philosophy of religion. There again, the argument may also have something to offer to traditional theists of mainline traditions, as it may provide some support for the claim that some kinds of spirits exist. Finally, the argument also challenges a prevailing bias in contemporary philosophy of religion, which is primarily concerned with arguments for or against theism. There is a growing awareness that the field stands in dire need of a dose of diversity in the form of arguments for or against minority religious traditions, including animism, ancestor worship, shamanism, and the like. Although there has been an increase in discussion of such unorthodox positions as pantheism, panentheism, and the like, contemporary philosophy of religion still seems to suffer from something of a god complex. ‘The discipline of philosophy of religion’ says Kevin Schilbrack, ‘needs to be more global in its task if it is to live up to its name’ [2014: 383]. The argument presented here is one small contribution to remedying that already-inexcusable shortcoming.

¹ See, for example, the New Zealand cases *Te Urewera Act 2014* and *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017*. In both cases, legal personhood was granted to sacred geographical features in accordance with the traditional beliefs of local Māori.

2. Evidentially Salient Agreement

Any argument from common consent depends on some assumptions about how agreement works as a kind of evidence. As was shown above, the traditional common consent argument assumed this obviously false principle:

- a. Whatever near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, has believed is true.

Although we might be unsatisfied with this premise, it is nevertheless a generalization of an epistemic principle that permeates our daily epistemic practice. It seems that, much of the time, we *do* take widespread agreement to justify what we already believe, or to correct us in our errors. This is especially so where our immediate *perceptual* beliefs are concerned. While I am relatively unlikely to use widespread agreement as confirmation that I am voting for the right political party, I am highly likely to ask others whether they also think that the milk in the fridge has gone off. Our olfactory organs typically generate agreement about rotten milk, but there is no single ‘political organ’ that reliably generates agreement about rotten politicians. Political beliefs appear to depend on various other theories that one might hold about economics, about social justice, about future trends, about well-being, etc. If one of these other theories changes, our vote might follow suit. In contrast, the belief about sour milk is relatively stable under various changes of higher-level theory. Importantly, observations concerning the *kinds of entities* that exist (even when such entities lie beyond what our ordinary unaided perception can detect) are relatively stable intersubjectively and this stability is seen even through changes of high-level theory [Hacking 1983: 199]. Therefore, if we want to take agreement as evidence for the truth of particular religious claims, it should be taken as evidence for the existential claims of religions, such as that gods, ghosts, spirits, or forces such as *qi* exist.

So, just what sorts of entities do religions agree exist? If we take the total population of religious believers, theism dominates. Christians and Muslims together alone account for more than half of the world’s total population, and well over half of the world’s total population of religious believers [Hackett et al. 2012: 9]. If we add believers from other theistic traditions (understood broadly), it would seem that theists soon form a reasonable majority of the world’s religious believers. Thus, if we were to decide religious truth by a show of hands, or a counting of heads, we would be forced to say that theism is correct, and that (despite their quibbles) Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Mormonism, Sikhism, and some of the Vedic traditions are on the right track. On the question of gods, the agreement numbers not in the thousands, or millions, but billions.

However, the evidential value of agreement plummets once the agreement can be traced to recent waves of cultural diffusion in the form of proselytization or other social and political influences. Such agreements, generated in this way, are not obviously truth-tracking. In contrast, when those who are agreeing are *unaware* of their shared belief, this is much more compelling evidence that the common belief might be caused by reliable cognitive faculties. Since Christianity and Islam, in particular, are proselytizing Abrahamic religions, the fact that the combined total of Christians and Muslims is greater than 50% of the world’s population is hardly evidence for the truth of theism. The agreement was not generated independently. It was not the case that, a few years ago, over half of the world’s population woke up with a distinct gut feeling (perhaps a sign of a tingling *sensus dei*) indicating that there is at least one

high god. On the contrary, over the course of multiple generations, wars were fought and taxes were levied against unbelievers. Marriages were forbidden without conversion, and orphans were adopted and schooled by righteous clerics. Entire continents were colonized. Missionaries of various traditions canvassed the globe, converting infidels with zeal. Countless minds were changed. The product of this effort has been agreement in theism, but it is not evidentially salient. As Tom Kelly artfully puts the point: ‘The intellectual case for Islam would not be any stronger today if birthrates in Muslim countries had been twice as high in past decades as they actually were’ [2011b: 205–6].

Linda Zagzebski, a contemporary defender of the common consent argument for the existence of God, accepts that widespread agreement about God is *prima facie* reason to believe that God exists, but that independent agreement would count as even stronger evidence: ‘If millions of people believe in God’ she says, ‘because they all acquired the belief by testimony from a small number of sources, the vast number of believers does not count as much as the same number of beliefs acquired independently’ [2012: 185]. She goes on to say, however, that ‘if we completely discount for dependence, there are still many millions of people who independently believe or have believed in past ages in the existence of God’ [ibid.: 186]. But this sounds unduly optimistic. Indeed, although he is sympathetic to the idea that agreement about God may provide some evidence for His existence, Kelly argues in contrast that the general lack of independent agreement is the best objection to the claim that any significant evidence is provided by the existence of common consent [2011a: 152].

What’s so great about independent agreement? Well, for one thing, looking for independent agreement is a very good way to eliminate error. Consider the case of a detective who is pursuing a blue sedan involved in a hit-and-run. The detective loses sight of the vehicle. He pulls over at the next available roadside shop, where a young woman rushes to his window. She says, hesitantly: ‘Officer, I didn’t get a good look at the car because it was traveling so fast, but I think the license plate number was TLZ130.’ The detective scribbles the plate number in his notes, and he begins to file a report. Five minutes later, a man wearing glasses arrives at the scene. He tells the detective, hesitantly: ‘Officer, my eyes aren’t so good, but I think the license plate number might have been TLZ130.’ Now the detective’s interest is piqued. Two witnesses, independently of one another, agree that the car had license plate number TLZ130. Both admit to being fallible and uncertain, but this hardly lowers the probability that they have hit the nail on the head. Despite the high probability that *either of them* might have made an error, the probability that *both of them* have made the very same error is extremely low [Hacking 1983: 201]. Indeed, the probability that both observers have converged on the same license plate number by chance alone is one in 17,565,000.

We need not use imaginary examples. Kepler, to his enduring credit, did much to justify Galileo’s claim that Jupiter had moons, by showing that the positions of the moons could be established by independent observers. Having heard of Galileo’s observations, Kepler made his own observations of Jupiter in the company of another astronomer, Benjamin Ursinus. Kepler and Ursinus wanted to check if their observations agreed, but they wanted to ensure that they would not influence each other. To that end, one man would peer through the telescope and, without a word, secretly draw what he saw on the wall in chalk. The next man would then do the same. Once both men had finished scribbling in isolation, they compared their drawings to check whether their observations matched. [Van Helden 1994: 12]. This simple procedure

ensured that any intersubjective agreement generated between the two men was not the result of social influence or authority bias. As it happened, Kepler and Ursinus agreed on the relative positions of three of Jupiter's moons, yet disagreed over a fourth. What caused the agreement in the two men's observations? A scientific realist (and every non-philosopher) would say that it was the moons themselves, operating on reliable cognitive faculties.

Science is not immune from authority biases and other kinds of herd mentality, but it is desirable to minimize these effects where possible. Consider what the illustrious astrophysicist Thomas Gold had to say about the 'mental herd behaviour' that he saw encroaching on modern science [2003: 80]:

I have wondered whether one should in fact pursue subjects with a big wall between two groups that are working in the same field, so that they absolutely cannot communicate, and see a few years later whether they come even approximately to the same conclusion.

Such an approach is clearly impractical, but the reasons that Gold had for entertaining this idea are clear enough. Isolated knowledge communities, converging on the same answers to the same questions, have a stronger case to make for the truth of the agreed-upon claims. They have controlled for mental herd behaviour, which is an off-track process.

If independent agreement is valuable evidence where matters of science and common sense are concerned, there seems little reason to doubt that it might also be valuable where matters of religious belief are concerned. If separate religious communities arrive at the same results in isolation, this is either a quirk of cosmic chance or evidence that the agreement has a common cause (which we may have reason to suspect is the religious fact upon which the believers have converged). This convergence may then be explained by appeal to reliable cognitive faculties providing us with common access to religious facts. If we are concerned that our cognition of religious facts may be error-prone, we may simply assume that there is some probability of error and include this probabilistic caution in any principle appealing to independent agreement as a kind of evidence. So understood, independent agreement may be taken as fallible *prima facie* evidence for the truth of some claim. 'The friend of the [common consent] argument' says Tom Kelly, 'should argue, not that widespread belief in God renders such belief reasonable all things considered, but rather that widespread belief in God is a significant piece of evidence in favour of the truth of that belief' [2011a: 144].

So, it seems that one problem with the traditional common consent argument is that its second (suppressed) premise does not make the crucial distinction between mere agreement and independent agreement. It is not the case that a claim that everybody believes is true (or even probably true), since such an agreement may be caused by 'mental herd behaviour'—by the social or cultural influence of the claim's original proponents—and this influence would deflate the improbability of the agreement's ever arising (and it is the improbability of the agreement which may demand an explanation in terms of reliable cognitive processes). We also have reason to think that agreement—even independent agreement—is defeasible evidence which gives, at best, probabilistic support to the agreed-upon proposition. With these two cautions in mind, we may modify the problematic missing premise. (a) then becomes (a*):

a.* Whatever near enough everyone, in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era, believes independently from the beliefs of outsiders is probably true.

Although this premise is still open to various objections, it is far more plausible than (a). If this is a better way to understand the second premise of the argument, then we have some direction to take with regard to modifying the first premise. The first premise will state, not some fact about the *overall* distribution of religious belief, but instead a fact about the common ground shared by *isolated* religious communities, whose respective doctrinal commitments have been, as much as possible, isolated from any communication or cultural diffusion from outsiders.

3. The Distribution of Agreement

The first and only premise of the traditional common consent argument is very problematic. It is totally unclear whether near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, has believed in a god, and there is some evidence that this is not true at all. The idea that theism has been the dominant tradition in near enough every historical era is particularly troublesome, since, until very recently, anthropologists have had virtually no idea about the nature of religious belief during human prehistory. We have no reason to presume that prehistoric humans (including archaic humans) had any commitments to high gods. It might very well turn out to be the case that high gods are a relatively recent addition to the religious landscape. Additionally, the idea that near enough everyone in near enough every *nation* accepts theism is also off-the-mark. In contemporary religious traditions of the Far East, such as Daoism and mainstream Theravāda Buddhism, there may exist some kinds of disembodied minds and supernatural forces, yet these religions do not obviously posit creator gods or powerful supernatural beings.

So, if we are to reformulate the first premise, we must alter it such that it describes the surprising agreement found between *historically isolated* religious traditions. Such a fact cannot simply consist in a poll of world religious belief, since popular theistic traditions have generated widespread agreement about theism by way of proselytization (often of disempowered colonized peoples, many of whom previously had no commitments to high gods). Unfortunately, in a globalized and interconnected world, it is very difficult to find examples of truly isolated groups of religious believers. The best candidates would be hunter-gatherer societies that currently have (or have had until very recently) no contact with missionaries from foreign religious cultures.

An analysis of the religious beliefs of isolated hunter-gatherer societies has recently been performed by Hervey Peoples, Pavel Duda, and Frank Marlowe. Their study analyses the religious beliefs of 33 isolated hunter-gatherer societies in (a) Sub-Saharan Africa, (b) Austronesia, (c) Far Eastern Russia, and (d) The Americas. The sample is very good for our purposes, as the religious traditions surveyed have flourished independently on different continents, having undergone extreme historical and geographical isolation.

Peoples and her colleagues assessed each religious tradition for the following seven religiosity characteristics:

1. Animism
2. Belief in an afterlife
3. Shamanism
4. Ancestor worship

5. High gods
6. Active ancestor worship (in which the spirits of ancestors engage in human affairs)
7. Active high gods (in which the high gods engage in human affairs)

So, if the reformed common consent argument were to provide support for the claim that a god exists, then the team's analysis should show that there is common consent, or a relatively high degree of agreement, about the claim that at least one high god exists across a wide sample of isolated religious cultures. Funnily enough, that is not at all what was found. Instead, the distribution of characteristics leans overwhelmingly towards animism (Fig. 1). Indeed, 100% of all 33 hunter-gatherer societies, having undergone extreme geographical and historical isolation, have animistic commitments in their religions.

In the study, 'animism' was defined in accordance with E.B. Tylor's classic definition, according to which animism is a general belief in the 'animation of all nature'. Animism includes a 'belief in personal souls' [1929: 260] as well as 'a sense of spiritual beings ... inhabiting trees and rocks and waterfalls' [ibid.]. 'Animism' writes Peoples et al., 'is the belief that all "natural" things, such as plants, animals, and even such phenomena as thunder, have intentionality (or a vital force) and can have influence on human lives' [2016: 266]. This is, however, something of an overstatement. The animist does not accept that *all* natural things have intentionality, but only that *some* do [Harvey 2005: 33]. Animism, then, is better defined as the belief that some natural phenomena have spirits or an interior life akin to our own. There may be something that it is like to be a particular boulder, or mountain, or river. And these spirits are to some degree

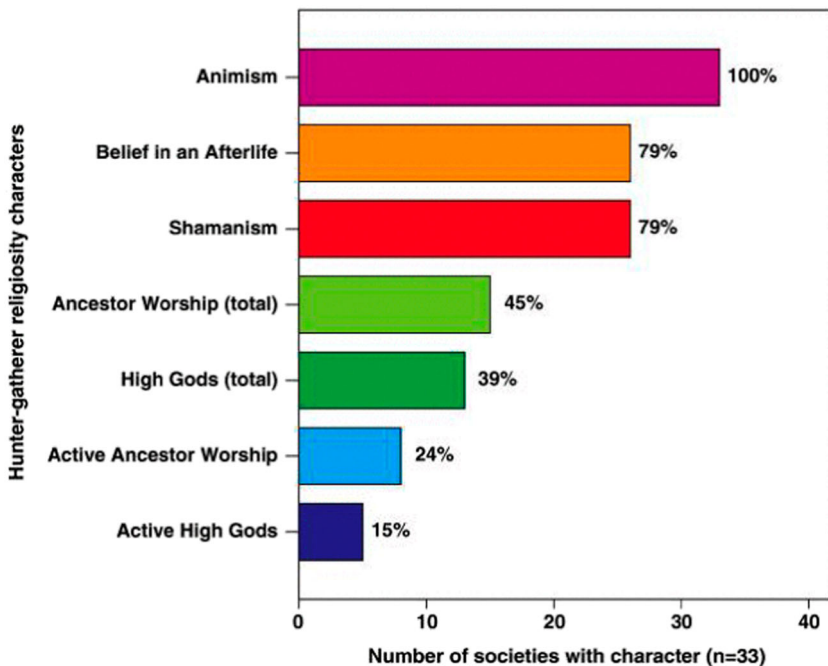


Figure 1. Distribution of hunter-gatherer religiosity characteristics in the study sample.

causally efficacious.² Animism is also associated with rituals that worship, or pay respect to, these spirits, and in which social relations such as friendship, exchange, and seduction stand between man and other aspects of the natural world. As Philippe Descola writes [2009: 151]:

In these ‘animic’ systems, humans and non-humans are conceived as possessing the same type of interiority and it is because of this common internal disposition that non-humans are said to possess social characteristics: they respect kinship rules, they obey ethical codes, they engage in ritual activity.

The animist pictures the natural world as sharing a common kind of interiority, cloaked in diverse exterior appearances. Thus, our relationship with an external nature is as social as our relationships within human communities. Isolated religious communities converge in their view that this picture is correct.

So, using this anthropological data to reformulate the first premise of the common consent argument, and inserting the previously suppressed premise about independent agreement, we can reform the common consent argument like so:

1. Near enough everyone, in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era, independently agrees that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits.
2. Whatever near enough everyone, in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era, believes independently of the beliefs of outsiders is probably true.

Therefore, it is probable that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits.

This argument is valid, not fallacious, and is grounded in good anthropological data and defensible social epistemological principles. It seems that, if there is any successful common consent argument for any religious tradition, animism is its very probable beneficiary.

One possible worry is this: if there exist major differences in the theoretical and mythological backdrops of each animist community, then presumably we cannot call this a kind of agreement at all. If a New Zealand animist takes some local mountain to be a non-human person, then presumably she will not be convinced by the claims of other animists elsewhere that *their own* mountain is. But that’s not quite right. Animism can be understood as fundamentally a *relational* epistemology, in which the individual’s identity *just is* the sum of her relations within her community, which will include relations with non-human persons [Bird-David 1999: 77–9]. If an animist from New Zealand were dropped into Montana, say, she would not necessarily *disagree* with the community in Montana that some bison were persons (despite never having seen such a beast before). It is, rather, the case that the New Zealander ‘wouldn’t know anyone around these parts’. One might remember the old adage: strangers are just friends you haven’t met yet.

² Different animist traditions will no doubt have different commitments with regard to the ways in which the spirits are causally efficacious, and these differences will likely affect the plausibility of the tradition under scrutiny. Moreover, one might think that, since we have other non-intentional explanations available to explain natural phenomena, we need not appeal to agency in order to explain such phenomena. But these different kinds of explanations (intentional and mechanistic) are not necessarily in competition. Such explanations appear to sit at very different levels. For more discussion on this point, see Dawes [2009: 39–42].

Is the data-set too narrow? We might need also to consider non-hunter-gatherer societies. We might include data points from among the theistic traditions of the Middle East. We might add an Indian tradition. We might add a Taoist. But the few examples that we can add, even if none carry any animist commitments, will have a marginal effect on the overall results. Indeed, evidence increasingly points to the religion of prehistoric *Homo sapiens* (and even of archaic humans) as being animist in character [Wunn 2000: 431–8]. Although the evidence is sketchy, it is plausible enough that animism might have dominated human religious thought in prehistory. So, if we were to include our best reconstructions of these ancient traditions among the data-set, animism will appear to be the dominant religious tradition of humanity over all times and places.

The religions of hunter-gatherer societies have been isolated from one another for long enough to discount the possibility of any recent *horizontal* cultural diffusion. However, an objection to my argument might say that animism has been inherited by each community separately, by way of *vertical* transmission. If that's the case, then the agreement found between animistic communities might be the result of a common cultural transmission, and so the agreement about animism would have been caused by the very same kind of process as the agreement about theism. There is a common cause for the agreement surrounding animism, says the objector, but this cause is not the fact that animism is true; it is the fact that the now-isolated animist communities once shared a common ancestor.

There is something to be said for this argument. Indeed, Peoples et al. conclude that the widespread distribution of animism is indeed the result of vertical transmission. However, I do not believe that such a finding, if indeed correct, is fatal to the claim that this agreement gives *prima facie* support to the claim that animism is true. The very fact that animistic beliefs have been *retained* across so many millennia is nearly miraculous. If animism has been inherited by each community from a common ancestor, and if each community has retained animism despite there existing *some* probability that the belief will be rejected, then this shows that animism has not been rejected by any of these isolated communities over what can only be described as an *unimaginably* long period (most likely, upwards of 120,000 years for the most isolated communities. To put that in context, this harks back to a period during which we still shared the Earth with our cousins, the Neanderthals and the Denisovans [Bae et al. 2017]). One explanation for this retention over such an extraordinarily long period of time might be that animism is approximately true.

4. Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

A naturalistic objection to the argument outlined above is that the agreement in question, although surprising, is not generated by a reliable cognitive faculty. Any common consent to the proposition that forests, volcanoes, and rivers have spirits might be explained by a shared and *unreliable* cognitive predisposition to, for example, overpredict agency. This chronic overprediction of agency is evolutionarily adaptive, since the negative value of the occasional false positive is minor, compared to the negative value of any false negatives. That is to say, a person who overpredicts agency might be more likely to see a lion where there isn't one, but this is a small price to pay if he is also more likely to spot a lion where there is one. As a result of this selection pressure, we humans now come equipped with what Justin Barrett has famously coined a 'hyperactive agency

detection device' (HADD, for short) [2004: 32]. So, we need not assume that there are any facts about nature spirits upon which animists have converged by using reliable cognitive faculties. Instead, we can point to some unreliable, but widely distributed, cognitive processes that we have independent reason to think might exist, such as HADD in conjunction with our Theory of Mind (ToM). We can, in short, summon an evolutionary debunking argument.

The basic structure of evolutionary debunking arguments has been presented by Guy Kahane [2011: 106] as the following:

Causal premise. S's belief that p is explained by X.

Epistemic premise. X is an off-track process.³

Therefore, S's belief that p is unjustified.

Following this structure, we might construct an argument, against the animist's beliefs in nature spirits, which runs on something like the following lines:

Causal premise. The animist's common belief that mountains, etc., have spirits is explained by HADD + ToM.

Epistemic premise. HADD + ToM is an off-track process.

Therefore, the animist's belief that mountains, etc., have spirits is unjustified.

While such an argument might be attractive, it is important to note that it forces its proponents to accept rather strong metaphysical commitments. At the very least, this debunking argument against animism requires its proponent to accept stronger metaphysical commitments than would be needed to defeat theism on the same grounds. Why so? Simply because a typical theistic claim is that at least one mind exists without a body. This is a nomologically suspect belief. If one believes (as most philosophers do) that minds are either physical or supervene on the physical, then the theistic belief in disembodied minds is apparently just plain false, and the belief's popularity requires some explanation. The HADD + ToM account is then a reasonable explanation for why human beings would often commit themselves to mistaken theistic beliefs. Such beliefs are clear-cut cases of *overprediction* of agency.

But the animist's claim is metaphysically much less ambitious than the theist's. The animist does not necessarily say that there are any *disembodied* minds, but only that some minds are embodied in surprising places, such as rivers. If the charge is made that the animist *overpredicts* agency, this requires stronger metaphysical commitments than just a blanket physicalism. It requires that we restrict the class of mind-bearing objects more narrowly than is required to reject theism on the same ground. Indeed, if we accept that HADD is just ADD plus H, and if we accept that ADD is (generally speaking) reliable when it comes to detecting agency in the natural world, then the question of whether animist beliefs are caused by an off-track process can be quite reasonably disputed.⁴ Sure, the animist might take, say, a tree to be an agent, but arguably trees are more like human beings than gods are like human beings. That is to say, trees are

³ That is to say, there is no causal connection between this means of forming a belief and the truth. The process in question is not truth-tracking, and therefore knowledge of the epistemic premise would serve as an undermining defeater for p [Kahane 2011: 105–6].

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

more like the sorts of objects that we take to be the proper objects of ADD when it is being used in optimal conditions. Animism is therefore a stronger opponent than theism, where this style of evolutionary debunking argument is concerned.

To this claim, a critic might respond that, although the animist's claims are less ambitious than the theist's, they are quite ambitious nonetheless. It seems that any metaphysics of mind worth its salt will take a claim about, say, *forest spirits* to be as much an example of overprediction of agency as is any claim about immaterial gods. The animist is, then, a stronger opponent than the theist is, only in the sense that a puppy is a stronger opponent than a kitten. But I think that the problem is stickier than this. While it *might* be the case that any metaphysics of mind worth its salt *will* exclude forest spirits with ease, it is unclear that any popular materialist versions currently *do*. As Eric Schwitzgebel has argued, spatially distributed group entities, such as nations (or, tailored for my purposes, forests or herds of bison), meet many plausible materialistic criteria for consciousness [2015: 1717]. If the criteria for consciousness that we adopt are liberal enough to cover less-contentious entities such as small mammals and highly intelligent aliens, then it seems that evolutionary debunking arguments appealing to such criteria will struggle to give any principled reason to exclude a substantial number of the denizens of the animist's worldview.

5. Theistic Debunking Arguments

The theist may wish to give a debunking argument of her own, which would run something like this: although it is true that there exist shared cognitive faculties that provide access to facts about the supernatural, the animist's faculties are malfunctioning or otherwise impaired.

What would a proponent of the traditional common consent argument say? Unfortunately, it is unclear whether Zagzebski has the weaponry to launch a theistic debunking argument against animism, as her model of rational religious belief stresses the importance of tradition and religious authority as modes of revelation in all religious communities. On her own view, she views the Catholic tradition as transmitting a 'way of living in contact with God' across generations [2012: 197–8]. She discusses the various ways in which the Holy Spirit may affect personal belief directly in the present, as well as guiding the faithful transmission of scripture from its origin to the present day [ibid.: 191–9]. But, with that said, she is clear that her purpose is 'not to endorse any particular interpretation of any particular tradition', but rather to ask 'whether it is justified to accept [religious beliefs by] authority within one's tradition, however that is understood within that tradition' [ibid.: 198]. Thus, so long as we are willing to count animist communities as having their own traditions and authorities, it seems that the case that Zagzebski advances for rational religious belief will apply just as well to the case of animism.

However, there are other models of theistic belief that might have the weaponry to launch a debunking argument against animism. Alvin Plantinga has famously argued for the existence of an innate human cognitive faculty that gives access to facts about God, which he calls a *sensus divinitatis*. According to Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis* is unreliable, as it has been corrupted by the 'noetic effects of sin'. Without the intercession of the Holy Spirit to rectify and heal the broken connection between the believer and the divine, the faculty remains impaired and malfunctioning. The faculty is reliably

activated given the certain inputs, such as the following laundry list given to us by Plantinga [2000: 174]:

The marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky;
 the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us;
 the majestic grandeur of the mountains ... ;
 the ancient, brooding presence of the Australian outback;
 the thunder of a great waterfall.

Plantinga argues that, from such experiences of the awe-inspiring grandeur of nature, theistic beliefs are spontaneously produced as outputs. I cannot help but find it ironic that the kinds of inputs specified by Plantinga are precisely the kinds of imposing natural phenomena that the animist takes as the central objects of religious focus. The animist might have good reason to suspect that it is Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* that is malfunctioning if, when he observes the majestic thunder of a great waterfall, he comes to believe that an invisible person is very powerful, while failing to fear, respect, or greet the very waterfall thundering away at him!⁵

In any case, with Plantinga's story in hand to explain the unreliable operation of the *sensus divinitatis*, the theist may construct her own debunking argument, which would look something like the following:

Causal premise. The animists' common belief that mountains, etc., have spirits is explained by the *sensus divinitatis* operating without the intercession of the Holy Spirit.

Epistemic premise. Without the intercession of the Holy Spirit, the *sensus divinitatis* is an off-track process.

Therefore, the animists' belief that mountains, etc., have spirits is unjustified.

If this argument were successful, then the agreement surrounding nature spirits in isolated hunter-gatherer societies could be explained as the result of a corrupted *sensus divinitatis*. The cognitive faculty by which the animists have acquired their belief is currently malfunctioning. It is impaired.

There is an obvious theological problem that arises. Why would a non-deceiving god cause a *malfunctioning* cognitive mechanism to generate widespread independent agreement? Typically, malfunctioning cognitive mechanisms generate disagreement in their outputs. The man who drinks too much sees snakes, but two men who drink too much do not both see snakes—the other might see spiders, or fairies, or nothing at all. It is this disagreement between the men, and between sober others, that leads us to conclude that the beliefs of the drunkard are incorrect. We take it that their cognitive processes have been impaired, not enhanced, by excessive alcohol. Such widespread independent agreement in animism could easily be mistaken as good evidence for animism. Only a deceiver god would allow this kind of misleading malfunction to occur. God's will might be inscrutable, but it is entirely unclear why a non-deceiving god would create a faculty that malfunctioned in a way that resembled proper functioning.

⁵ Some, such as Justin Barrett and Kelly James Clark, are even inclined to identify HADD+ToM with something like a Plantinga-style *sensus divinitatis*. They dispute the claim that we have any reason to assume that this faculty is off-track. However, as noted in the previous section, HADD+ToM is more likely to be reliable with respect to animism than theism. Barrett and Clark themselves note that the paradigm case of reliable exercise of ToM is 'looking at another human being in perfectly good lighting' [2011: 19]. It seems to me that there may very well be non-human persons whom we are capable of recognizing under similar conditions (e.g. looking at a tree in perfectly good lighting).

6. Conclusion

The traditional common consent argument for the existence of God is a fallacious argument that deserves to have been shunned. It appears unlikely that one can reconstruct the argument and maintain the conclusion that God exists. However, there is reason to think that independent agreement counts as defeasible evidence for the truth of some claims, and there seems to be no reason why religious claims might be exempt. When we search for examples of independent religious agreement, animism is particularly well represented among isolated religious communities through time and space. Therefore, if a common consent argument is summoned for any religious position, animism is its probable beneficiary.

While arguments in contemporary philosophy of religion focus on theism, animism has seldom received mention. Even permissive pluralists, such as John Hick, take only the ‘great world religions’ of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. to successfully direct believers towards salvation [1989: 278]. Animism is considered, in contrast, a primitive superstition. Animism and other ‘traditional lore of primitive peoples’, as Aldous Huxley put it, has a merely ‘rudimentary’ grasp of ultimate religious truth [1945: vii]. Yet animism, as experienced in the lives of believers, competes on an at-least-equal footing with the often banal commitments of other mainline theistic traditions. The anthropologist Tim Ingold has argued that animism is ‘a condition of being alive to the world, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next’ [2006: 10]. More poetically, Ingold goes on to characterize the lived experience of animism as ‘the sense of wonder that comes from riding the crest of the world’s continued birth’ [ibid.: 18]. The animist, in some particularly rich sense, *participates* in a natural world, which is responsive and communicative. Even if one is ultimately unconvinced by the animist’s claims, such a picture of the world is undoubtedly enchanting.

A reformed common consent argument speaks in favour of the existence of nature spirits, such as mountain spirits, forest spirits, whale spirits and thunderstorm spirits. If such spirits exist, we may enter into reciprocal social relationships with them. We may fear them, seduce them, or respect them. I have shown that, to reject the reformed common consent argument, one may appeal to some kind of naturalistic or theistic debunking argument. However, such arguments face their own problems. The reformed common consent argument is therefore a strong challenge to the atheist and the theist alike. The argument also challenges the prevailing view that the philosophy of religion is no more than (or should be no more than) a dichotomous exchange between the theist and the atheist. Animism can be shown to be a live religious option, having at least one significant argument in its favour. It is a tradition that has dominated human religious thought for tens of thousands of years, and yet one that remains utterly neglected in the field. I hope to have shown that this neglect is undeserved.⁶

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