



How to Debunk Animism

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Abstract

Tiddy Smith argues that common consent amongst geographically and historically isolated communities provides strong evidence for animism—the view that there are nature spirits. In this article, I argue that the problem of animistic hiddenness—the lack of widespread belief in nature spirits—is *at least* as strong evidence against animism that common consent is evidence for it, meaning that the evidence for animism that Smith provides is (at least) neutralized.

Keywords Animism · Common consent · Nature spirits · Skeptical theism · Divine hiddenness

1 Introduction

The common consent argument for theism tries to go from the fact that theistic belief is widespread to the conclusion that theism is (at least probably) true. Tiddy Smith (2020) argues that this argument fails on multiple accounts. However, he thinks that there is one type of common consent argument that does not (at least obviously) fail: he claims that there is a serious version of the argument that supports the truth of animism—the view that there are spirits in nature (e.g. mountain spirits and river spirits). Indeed, he argues that the very part in which the common consent argument for theism flounders is where the common consent argument for animism flourishes: it—animism—is ubiquitous among historically and geographically independent population groups, whereas theism is not. In this article, I first explicate Smith’s argument for animism. After this, I argue that a variation of the problem of divine hiddenness—a problem thought to threaten theism—is a serious threat to animism. In essence, the problem is that if animism is true—if there are nature spirits—then we would expect

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belief in nature spirits to be widespread in all ages. But it is not, and this is strong evidence against animism—*at least* as strong as any support it gains from common consent.

2 The Common Consent Argument For Theism

The common consent argument for theism (roughly) purports to go from the ubiquity of belief in God to the existence of God. Smith characterizes the argument as follows:

1. Near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, has believed in a god.
2. Whatever near enough everyone, in near enough every nation, in near enough every historical era, believes, is true.
3. Therefore, God exists (2020: 335).

Smith is not impressed by this argument: he rejects both premises (1) and (2). He rejects premise (2) since various occasions of collective human ignorance show it false. And he rejects premise (1) since “a specific commitment to *creator gods* or *high gods* is not at all universal to the world’s religions.” (2020: 335) In other words, while religion is universal, *theistic belief*—belief in a creator God—is not universal. And so there is no common consent about God’s existence, and so the central claim of common consent argument for theism is false. So, both premises of the argument are false, and hence the common consent argument for theism fails.

But the failure of the common consent argument for theism does not mean that all common consent arguments fail. Indeed, Smith constructs and defends a common consent argument for *animism*—the view that there are “nature spirits, such as mountain spirits, animal spirits, and weather spirits.” (2020: 335–336). How does common consent support animism? As follows. ‘Separate knowledge communities’—communities that are historically and geographically independent—have affirmed animism, and this, Smith thinks, is good evidence for it. Of course, animism currently is very unpopular. However, this does not undermine the fact that separate knowledge communities have affirmed animism. In his words, 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.” (2020: 336). Basically, Smith thinks that if separate communities converge on religious beliefs, it is evidence that the religious belief is true, and this holds even if the religious belief is not currently popular. What undergirds his view here is the following principle:

P: Whatever near enough everyone, is near enough every isolated community, is near enough every historical era, believes independently from beliefs of outsiders is probably true. (2020: 339)

If belief in animism satisfies (P), then we will have good evidence for animism. Smith argues that despite animism being unpopular currently, it satisfies (P): we have evidence that animism is ubiquitous in many different historically and geographically isolated societies, and contemporary societies that reject animism are *not* isolated communities historically or geographically: they have been influenced by various traditions, cultures, and beliefs that have been passed down to them. Smith states the common consent argument for animism as follows:

4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Therefore, it is probable that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits. (2020: 342)

So much for the common consent argument for animism. While the argument makes some controversial moves, I will—for the sake of argument—grant Smith the truth of all his claims: I grant that independent convergence of beliefs is strong evidence for them—strong enough to justify belief in the object of convergence; I grant that (P) and (5) are true; and I grant that (4) is true. Where does this take us? I will argue below that this does not take us very far, since we have counterevidence that is *at least* as strong as whatever evidence common consent provides for animism.

3 The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

Non-resistant non-believers are people who do not believe that God exists and are not resistant to having such belief. For example, someone who wants to believe in God yet, due to a lack of evidence or cognitive malfunction, does not believe is a non-resistant non-believer.¹ Schellenberg (2015) argues that it is *necessarily true* that God would not allow there to be non-resistant non-believers. He says.

God, if he is perfectly loving...will always be open to being in a personal relationship with any finite person. However, if this is the case, then no finite person will ever non[-]resistantly not believe that God exists—if a person does not believe in God, it will be due to her resistance to God. But the non-belief of some persons is non[-]resistant, and so God does not exist. (2015: 103)

¹ There is some dispute about whether there are any non-resistant non-believers. I will not enter that dispute here.

Few philosophers have gone along with Schellenberg here: there have been many reasons given for God allowing non-resistant non-belief that seem *at least possible*.² But this does not eliminate the problem of divine hiddenness, since it can be reformulated in a probabilistic way which carries more plausibility. For example, Leon puts forth the following version of it:

1. If [God] exists, then we'd expect that God would meet all the prerequisites for all those who would want a voluntary relationship with him.
2. One of the prerequisites is to let others...reasonably believe...if they wish, that he exists.
3. But this condition hasn't been met: there are non[-]resistant non-believers. By contrast, we would expect the data of non[-]resistant non-belief if [non-theism] were true. For on that hypothesis, there is no God that is seeking a relationship with us.
4. Therefore, [non-resistant non-belief] provide[s] some evidence against [God]. (Rasmussen & Leon, 2019: 207)

The gist of the argument is that non-resistant non-belief is more likely on non-theism than it is on theism, and so we have (at least some) evidence against theism.

So much for divine hiddenness. In the next section, I will (try to) exploit the reasoning behind the problem of divine hiddenness to debunk animism.

4 The Problem of Animistic Hiddenness

The problem of animistic hiddenness is the problem generated by the current widespread lack of belief in nature spirits.³ So, while the problem of divine hiddenness focuses on non-resistant non-believers, the problem of animistic hiddenness focuses merely on non-believers in animism—non-resistance is not required for this argument. The basic idea is this: we know that, currently, animism is—per Smith's own admission—an unpopular position. However, this fact is much more likely given the falsity of animism than it is given the truth of animism: if animism is true and (at least some) rocks, mountains, rivers, and so on have causally efficacious spirits, then we would expect belief in such spirits to be widespread *at all times*: if there are nature spirits, then they are equally as likely to reveal themselves to past generations as they are to the current generation. Indeed, it would be very surprising if belief in nature spirits was not widespread during any historical era. But if animism is false, then it's not surprising that belief in nature spirits is currently unpopular. Since this fact—the current widespread lack of belief in nature spirits—is

² E.g. Crummett (2015), Howard-Snyder (2016), and Rea (2009).

³ I focus on the current lack of belief in animism. However, the problem can just as easily be formulated in terms of the uneven distribution of belief in nature spirits: if nature spirits exist, then we would expect them to reveal themselves to distinct populations roughly equally, since such populations are roughly equally exposed to nature.

much more likely given the falsity of animism than it is given the truth of animism, we have strong evidence against animism.

Why think current widespread lack of belief in nature spirits is much more likely given the falsity of animism than it is given the truth of animism? First, we should think this because nature spirits are not held to be wildly different from us—at least according to Smith. Nature spirits, though occupying different bodies than us, are held to be persons like us: he says that animism is “better defined as the belief that some natural phenomena have spirits or an interior life akin to our own.” (2020: 341) So if nature spirits exist, then there are spirits that are similar to us that occupy bodies not usually thought to have mental states, such as trees, mountains, and so on.⁴ But if nature spirits are similar to us, then we would expect for nature spirits to reveal themselves roughly equally to all population groups at all times: if nature spirits revealed themselves to American Indians 500 years ago, we would expect for them to also reveal themselves to current North Americans—there are not substantial enough differences between us and our predecessors to warrant such silence. And second, there is good reason for them to reveal themselves to us: we are more actively destroying the environment than our ancestors, and nature spirits occupy (or *are*) parts of the environment. If such spirits revealed themselves to us, then it would make it much more likely that we would cease environmental destruction, and these spirits would then have a greater chance of surviving. So, animism makes it very unlikely that there would be a current widespread lack of belief in nature spirits. However, if animism is false, this is not surprising: since there are no nature spirits, it is not surprising that currently many people lack belief in them. And so we have strong evidence against animism: there is a widespread lack of belief in animism, and this is much more likely given that animism is false than given that it is true.

This evidence *at least* neutralizes Smith’s evidence in favor of animism: while geographically and historically isolated cultures converging on animism is evidence in its favor, the current rareness of belief in nature spirits is at least as strong evidence against animism and common consent does not justify belief in nature spirits.⁵ (Indeed, I am inclined to think it is *far* stronger evidence against animism than Smith’s evidence is for animism, and so we have good reason to reject animism, all things considered.)

5 Animistic Theodicy? Skeptical Animism?

One way to address the problem of animistic hiddenness is to mimic the way in which theists respond to the problem of divine hiddenness: produce a theodicy. That is, if the defender of animism can provide a *good reason* for why nature spirits have not revealed themselves to more people in the relevant manner, then they will have answered the problem of animistic hiddenness and will have regained the evidential

⁴ Of course, as Smith makes clear, animism does not entail that *all* trees, mountains, etc. have spirits.

⁵ Another way to put this: suppose that Smith’s evidence makes animism 3 times more likely. My claim is that the problem of animistic hiddenness makes animism *at least* 3 times less likely.

highground—animism will still have evidence in its favor that is not counterbalanced by the evidence of the problem of animistic hiddenness.

How ought the animist to proceed here? One way would be to *exactly* mimic the theists: an animist might appropriate a theodicy for theism. However, it is very unlikely that any theistic theodicy will work for animism: the project of a theodicy for theism is to show why a *perfectly loving God* would allow non-resistant non-belief. But nature spirits are not thought to be perfectly loving; they are held to be similar to us in terms of their interior life, but their exact character is left underdetermined. So, what a perfectly loving God would do does not tell us how nature spirits would behave; since nature spirits are not perfectly loving, we cannot simply transfer over God's reason for remaining hidden to them.⁶

In light of this, there are (at least) two ways for the animist to proceed. First, the animist could appeal to other (good) reasons for nature spirits remaining hidden, and second, the animist could—if the first option fails—make a move similar to that of skeptical theism.

As for the first option, it is difficult to see what these reasons could be. However, I will briefly consider two possibilities: nature spirit extinction and distrustfulness of modern civilization. Let's start with extinction. The idea here is that while nature spirits *used* to exist, they currently do not—nature spirits have gone extinct. This is why they revealed themselves to American Indians but have not done so to current North Americans. If correct, this would no doubt explain the contemporary lack of popularity of animism. However, this explanation does not seem terribly likely: we are given no reason to think that nature spirits have gone extinct, nor is it clear what reason there could be for thinking this. Indeed, if nature spirits were able to inhabit mountains (etc.) long ago, they equally should be able to do so now. So, this explanation is not very likely, and it does not make for an adequate animistic theodicy.

Alternatively, it might be argued that nature spirits distrust modern civilization, and that's why they don't reveal themselves to us. There are two problems with this explanation. First, for this to be a successful animistic theodicy, we'd need to be given good reason to think that these spirits would distrust modern society. But it's hard to see what good reason there could be for thinking that.⁷ And second, as mentioned in Section 4, the way that we (modern civilization) treat the environment threatens nature spirits (if any exist) with extinction. However, the best bet for nature spirits to avoid extinction would be to reveal themselves to us, and this remains true even if they distrust us—even if they distrust modern civilization, the threat of extinction would override their distrust and make it likely that they would reveal themselves (to save themselves). And so a distrust of modern civilization will not suffice to explain animistic hiddenness: there's no reason to think it's likely, and even if there were, it (nature spirits' distrust of modern society) would be overridden by the threat of extinction.

⁶ Similar things can be said about omnipotence and omniscience (God has these properties, whereas nature spirits aren't thought to have them).

⁷ Perhaps there is a good reason for thinking this. I leave it to animists to produce the reason.

In light of the above failures, perhaps the animist could mimic skeptical theism here. Skeptical theists argue that our lack of knowledge of a morally justifying reason for God allowing evil is not good reason to think that there is none. And so our lack of knowledge of a morally justifying reason does not make it likely that there is no such reason.⁸ Perhaps a skeptical animist could, in turn, respond that our lack of knowledge of an explanation for nature spirits not revealing themselves is not good reason to think that there is no such explanation. The problem with this response is that nature spirits are not like God: they are not radically different than we are. And so we can expect reasons for the hiddenness of nature spirits (if any there be) to be recognizable by us. However, we do not recognize such reasons, and so it is likely that there are no such reasons——skeptical theism and the moves it makes is not available to the animist.⁹

6 Concluding Thoughts

It should be clear that I've not considered every possible theodicy an animist might give. I leave it to animists and their sympathizers to bring forth any good animistic theodicy I've overlooked. However, one thing worth emphasizing is that I've not argued that it's *impossible* that there are nature spirits in our world; I've not argued that the current lack of belief in nature spirits is *incompatible* with their existence. Instead, I've argued that it——the current lack of belief in nature spirits——is *evidence* against animism. And this means that producing an animistic *defense* (i.e. producing an explanation for animistic hiddenness that is logically possible) doesn't solve this problem.¹⁰ In other words, my claim is that we have evidence against animism that *at least* neutralizes the evidence Smith claims in its favor. (Again, I think this evidence is strong enough to justify thinking animism is false.) And producing a possible reason for nature spirits to remain hidden doesn't undercut or otherwise counter this evidence. In light of this, animists and their sympathizers ought to focus their attention on defending or constructing explanations of animistic hiddenness that are *likely*, not merely possible.

⁸ See e.g. Bergmann (2001) and Hendricks (2020).

⁹ A reviewer points out that the fact that nature spirits (if they exist) are like us doesn't entail that their intelligence doesn't vastly outstrip ours. For example, a three year old is like an adult, but an adult is vastly more intelligent than a three year old (at least typically). But if their intelligence is vastly greater than ours, then considerations pertaining to skeptical theism might apply. However, for this response to cut ice, we need to be given good reason to think that nature spirits——if they exist——would have intelligence that vastly outstrips our own. Again, I leave it to animists and their sympathizers to show this.

¹⁰ For example, one reviewer suggests that it's possible that we're not able to connect with nature spirits because we lack the right technique, whereas our ancestors didn't lack this technique. This is, of course, a possible explanation. But for this to challenge my argument, it needs to be likely, and we have no reason to think it is.

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