



“Resuscitating the Common Consent Argument for Theism”

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Abstract

The common consent argument claims that widespread belief in God is good evidence for God’s existence. Though taken seriously throughout the history of philosophy, the argument died in the 1800s. Our philosophy of religion textbooks ignore it. In this paper, we hope to resuscitate it drawing upon the demographics of religious belief, the cognitive science of religion, and contemporary epistemology. We develop and defend two common consent arguments, which maintain that widespread belief in a High God is good evidence for theism over metaphysical naturalism.

Keywords Common Consent Argument · *Consensus Gentium* · Religious Agreement · Theism · Naturalism · Cognitive Science of Religion

INTRODUCTION

The common consent argument claims that widespread belief in God is good evidence for God’s existence. Though taken seriously throughout the history of philosophy, the argument died in the 1800s (Edwards 1967; Reid, 2015). Our philosophy of religion textbooks ignore it. When discussed today, it is usually dismissed as unsalvageable (Smith, 2020) or worse a textbook logical fallacy. Even the few philosophers friendly to the argument express doubts about its cogency and refrain from a full-blooded defense (Kelly 2011; Zagzebski 2011; Matheson 2021).

Why has the common consent argument fallen off the map? Consider three factors. First, it could be partly due to the increasing secularization in Western countries: belief in God just doesn’t seem as common as it used to be. Second, it could be due to the fact that philosophers “have inherited from the Enlightenment a rather indi-

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vidualistic conception of epistemology,” which tells us to think for ourselves and discounts the evidential value of other people’s testimony (Réhault, 2015: 183–184). Finally, it could be that the common consent argument is simply a bad argument and that contemporary philosophers have come to recognize it as such. We doubt this last explanation.

In this paper, we hope to resuscitate the common consent argument by drawing upon the demographics of religious belief, the cognitive science of religion, and contemporary epistemology. Specifically, we develop and defend two common consent arguments, which maintain that widespread belief in a “High God” is good evidence for theism over metaphysical naturalism.

TWO COMMON CONSENT ARGUMENTS

We know that widespread agreement does not entail or conclusively prove the truth of what the agreement concerns. After all, strong majorities have believed in such things as geocentrism and the moral permissibility of slavery. But could agreement nevertheless constitute (defeasible) evidence? Consider two motivating cases.

The Recycle Bins: Suppose you walk outside in the morning and observe that 90% of your neighbors have put their recycle bins at the curb. You initially thought that recycle pick-up was scheduled for tomorrow, not today. Should you revise your view? Yes. The common consent of your neighbors constitutes good evidence (Kelly 2011: 138).

Math Class #1: Suppose we are in a math class of 20 students. The class is assigned a non-trivial math problem and after a couple minutes each of us arrives at an answer. Suppose you discover that I independently arrived at the same answer you did. Should my agreement with you make you more confident in your original answer? Yes. Suppose you discover that 18 out of 20 students (90%) independently arrived at the same answer. Should you become even more confident in your original answer? Yes. When the 2 dissenting students (10%) discover that nearly everyone disagrees with them, they should become less confident in their own answer.

Agreement can constitute strong evidence. It can even do so for claims that have a low initial probability. For instance, philosopher Johan De Smedt had the following experience when he was working as a guard in a museum:

“On September 11, 2001, he overheard museum visitors talking about planes that had flown into the World Trade Center. Some time later, other visitors mentioned other attacks as well. Although it sounded highly implausible at the time, he formed the defeasible belief that terrorist attacks had actually taken place. This belief was solely based on common consent since...he had no access to news media to check the truth of these claims. As this belief turned out to be justified, it seems that common consent, in the absence of any other evidence,

can provide strong defeasible evidence for a given hypothesis, even if that hypothesis has an initial low *prima facie* probability.” (De Cruz and De Smedt 2015: 184–185).

Thomas Kelly observes: “It is clear that, at least outside of the philosophy seminar room, we regularly treat the beliefs of others as evidence for the truth of what they believe, revising our own views in the light of what they think, and that (often enough) it is reasonable for us to do so.” (Kelly 2011: 138). But even inside the philosophy seminar room, we regularly treat widespread intuitions and beliefs (“common sense”) as evidence for our views in ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics (Zagzebski 2011: 32). As William Lycan observes, “philosophy always and everywhere depends on [intuitions]” (2019: 3).

As the examples above indicate, common consent can constitute good evidence across various domains, including the perceptual, empirical, mathematical, and philosophical domains. Does common consent regarding God constitute good evidence for God? In this paper, we develop the following two arguments for thinking so.

Common Consent Argument #1

- (1) There is widespread belief in a High God.
- (2) *Common Consent Principle* (CCP): Widespread belief that *p* is defeasible evidence that *p*.
- (3) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is defeasible evidence that a High God exists. [From 1 and 2]
- (4) There are no undercutting defeaters of this evidence.
- (5) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is good evidence that a High God exists. [From 3 and 4]
- (6) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is good evidence for theism (which asserts there is a High God) over metaphysical naturalism (which asserts there are no supernatural agents).

Common Consent Argument #2

- (7) There is widespread belief in a High God.
- (8) Widespread belief in a High God is more surprising given naturalism than theism.
- (9) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is evidence for theism over naturalism.

Both arguments invoke the concept of a “High God,” which comes to us from the anthropology literature. The concept can be traced back to the 1800s: anthropologists used it to describe the supreme creator God of various indigenous cultural groups that they encountered. In the empirical literature, the concept follows anthropologist Guy Swanson’s classic definition: a *High God* is a supreme spiritual being who “created all reality and/or is reality’s ultimate governor” (Swanson 1960: 209–210). Of course, to create or govern all of reality this supreme god must be super-powerful and super-knowing, so High Gods are understood to possess these supernatural attributes to a high degree. High Gods are often contrasted in the empirical literature with

“small gods,” highly limited supernatural agents who lack creator status. Belief in High Gods often coexists with belief in small gods such as demons, angels, ancestor spirits, and nature spirits. Belief in a primary High God can also coexist with belief in lesser deities whose superhuman powers fall somewhere along the spectrum. Belief in a High God is thus compatible with polytheism (many gods) and does not strictly entail monotheism (only one god).

Why cast the arguments in terms of a High God rather than the “omni” God of theism? Because the numbers count in the epistemology of agreement. For example, in *The Recycle Bins* case the more neighbors who placed their bins at the curb this morning, the stronger your evidence that recycle pick-up is today. And belief in a High God is more common than content-rich belief in a theistic God who is strictly speaking omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, morally perfect, eternal, necessarily existing, and so on. Thus, evidence from common consent is stronger for a High God than a theistic God. However, evidence for a High God constitutes evidence for theism (which asserts there is a High God) over its main rival metaphysical naturalism (which asserts there are no supernatural agents).

IS THERE COMMON CONSENT?

Both of our common consent arguments hinge on the following empirical premise: there is widespread belief in a High God. Is this premise true? We must consider the demographics of religious belief.

Billions and billions of people have believed in a High God. Of course, we have no precise numbers and there are methodological obstacles to acquiring reliable numbers.¹ But the empirical evidence indicates that around 90% of the world’s current population believes in a High God. For example, sociologist Phil Zuckerman (2007) concluded from his meta-analysis of the survey evidence that around 90% of the world believes in God. Later he conceded that his estimate was probably too low (Zuckerman, 2020: xii). A more accurate and updated estimate, Zuckerman suggests, is provided by sociologists Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013), who review the global survey evidence and conclude that around 93% of the global population believes in God: 7% either don’t believe in God or don’t know whether there is a God.

Social scientists consult various sources of sociological evidence, such as national and international surveys. For instance, consider the *data of religious affiliation*. An estimated 55% of the global population belong to Christianity and Islam. The number of believers in a High God runs much higher than 55%, for most ordinary Hindus (15% of the global population) believe in a High God, and many folk religionists (6% of the global population) and religiously unaffiliated people (16% of the global population) do so too (Hackett and Stonawski 2017). That is, the vast majority of people have a common core belief in a High God, despite diverse beliefs about who such a god is more specifically. Of course, some unaffiliated people do not believe in

¹ We don’t have survey data for every cultural group and there are low response rates. Moreover, some surveys are taken in political/cultural climates with penalties for religious affiliation (e.g. China) or non-affiliation (Zuckerman 2007: 47).

a High God (e.g. atheists and agnostics), and some religious traditions appear not to affirm a High God—for example, Theravada Buddhism, some pantheistic traditions of Hinduism, Daoism (0.1%), Jainism (0.1%), and Shintoism (0.1%)—but their numbers are comparatively small (Johnson, Zurlo, and Crossing 2018). Given the data on religious affiliation, a reasonable estimate is that around 90% of the world believes in a High God. This convergence is projected to continue into the future, given the continued growth of the human population and the growth of Christianity and Islam in the so-called “global south” where the largest human populations currently reside, namely in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Hackett et al., 2015).²

Common consent regarding a High God also extends back throughout recorded history, though the past is harder to discern than the present (Norenzayan et al. 2016: 47, 50). What about prehistoric humans? Some empirical theorists and philosophers have claimed that prehistoric humans did not believe in a High God (Marsh 2013; Norenzayan 2013). But the evidence for this claim is rather flimsy and the cognitive science of religion appears to disconfirm it, as we have argued elsewhere (Braddock 2022). The overall balance of empirical literature and testimony indicates that the jury is still out on what prehistoric humans believed about gods. Moreover, prehistoric humans compose a vanishingly small fraction of the human race. The overwhelming majority of humans (99.9%+) have lived since the agricultural revolution about 12,000 years ago, with the vast majority having lived at the tail end of history when the Abrahamic religions have dominated (Braddock 2018: 190–191).

Given the empirical evidence and testimony of social scientists, a reasonable estimate is that around 90% of the world believes in a High God. This convergence extends back throughout known history and is projected to continue into the future. What are the implications of this common consent?

COMMON CONSENT ARGUMENT #1

Consider our first common consent argument:

Common Consent Argument #1

- (1) There is widespread belief in a High God.
- (2) *Common Consent Principle* (CCP): Widespread belief that p is defeasible evidence that p .

² Two observations are worth making. First, most religiously unaffiliated people are estimated to be in China (51% of China’s population), but religious affiliation is notoriously difficult to measure in China—for example because of government-enforced penalties for religious affiliation. There is no data available about the rates of conversion, and some scholars have argued that Christianity is growing rapidly in China. So there may be many more religious believers in China than the affiliation data indicates. This is worth noting because China’s population of 1.4 billion people makes it the world’s most populous country and thus a major influence on global estimates of religious affiliation (Hackett and Stonawski 2017: 41; Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013). Second, the category of “religiously unaffiliated” people is quite heterogeneous and has sometimes been misinterpreted to indicate the absence of belief in God. A substantial proportion of the unaffiliated believe in God even though (for various reasons) they don’t associate with institutional religion (Hackett et al., 2015: 231–245).

- (3) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is defeasible evidence that a High God exists. [From 1 and 2]
- (4) There are no undercutting defeaters of this evidence.
- (5) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is good evidence that a High God exists. [From 3 and 4]
- (6) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is good evidence for theism (which asserts there is a High God) over metaphysical naturalism (which asserts there are no supernatural agents).

We empirically motivated premise (1) in the previous section. Now we must support premise (2):

(2): *Common Consent Principle* (CCP): Widespread belief that p is defeasible evidence that p .

Why think this epistemic principle is true?

First, CCP explains our epistemic practices and intuitions about a wide range of cases (see Sect. 2 of the present paper).

Second, CCP coheres with the epistemology of disagreement. Learning that the vast majority of people *disagree* with you about some matter should give you pause. Widespread disagreement with you is evidence that you are making a mistake—for example, you are missing evidence that other people have or you are misinterpreting the evidence that you do have. From this it would reasonably follow that learning that the vast majority of people *agree* with you about some matter should boost your confidence. Widespread agreement with you is evidence that you are *not* making a mistake: all else being equal, you are probably on the right track (Matheson 2021: 297).

Third, there is an impressive correlation between the class of widespread beliefs and the class of true beliefs. We could compile a rather long list: for example, $2 + 2 = 4$, humans have hands, the earth has one moon, other minds exist, child killing is generally wrong, etc. In contrast, it is difficult to identify a long list of widespread but false beliefs. For example, most people don't believe in astrology, geocentrism, a flat earth, etc. The strong correlation between widespread beliefs and true beliefs motivates CCP: if we know that a belief is widespread, we have (defeasible) inductive reason for thinking that the belief is also true (cf. Réhault, 2015: 187–188).

Epistemological clarifications are necessary. First, CCP is making a claim about evidence, not sufficient or all-things-considered justification. Just because you have evidence for something doesn't mean that you should believe it. For example, suppose you saw the housekeeper commit the crime but everyone else thinks the butler did it. The common consent evidence for the butler hypothesis is rebutted by your insider evidence against it. So too common consent evidence for a High God could be rebutted by powerful evidence against God's existence (e.g. an argument from evil). That is, even if common consent is evidence, we might not be justified in believing in God once we take into account all the evidence. Second, evidence from common consent varies in strength: the numbers court, expertise counts, and the "independence" of belief formation counts. These epistemic factors can potentially conflict, which raises questions about their net impact. Third, CCP recognizes that the evidential

value of common consent can be undercut (or neutralized) by other information that we have. For example, evidence from common consent could be defeated when the expert minority disagrees with the numerical majority.

Now consider premise (4):

(4): There are no undercutting defeaters of this evidence.

An *undercutting defeater* of the common consent evidence would be a cogent reason for thinking that it is not good evidence (i.e. that it is weak evidence or no evidence at all). There are three main potential undercutting defeaters of the evidential value of common consent: the expertise objection, the debunking objection, and the independence objection.

The expertise objection

Suppose you learn that 90% of humans believe in creationism as an explanation of the origin of species. Would this agreement constitute good evidence for creationism? No. Why not? Because the expert scientific minority disagrees with the numerical majority.

The Expertise Objection claims that common consent regarding a High God is not good evidence because the expert minority disagrees with the numerical majority (Kelly 2011: 149). For example, Richard Dawkins suggests that atheism is the predominant view among highly educated, sophisticated Westerners like himself (2008: 128).

But who are the experts on this matter? That is, who is better positioned to know whether a High God exists? If evidence for God includes religious experience, intuitions, and basic explanatory reasons, it seems that educated nonbelievers have no epistemic advantage over ordinary believers (e.g. my grandfather) with respect to having such forms of evidence.

If evidence for God includes philosophical, historical, and empirically-based arguments, then believers are well-represented among those familiar with the relevant evidence, such as scholars in the fields of philosophy, history, and the relevant sciences. Though most philosophers identify as atheists, surveys indicate that most philosophers of religion (more than 70%), who specialize in evaluating arguments and evidence regarding God's existence, are theists (Bourget and Chalmers 2014; De Cruz and De Smedt 2016). A survey of *The American Association for the Advance of Science*, the largest scientific society in the world, found that more than 50% of scientists believe in God or a higher power (Kohut et al. 2009). Other surveys show similar results (Larson and Witham 1997), including surveys of scientists from other countries (Ecklund et al. 2019). Believers are well-represented historically too in these disciplines. In the history of philosophy, most philosophers have believed in a High God, including the most important philosophers (Miguel 2020). In the sciences, the clear majority of Nobel Prize winners between 1901 and 2000 identified as Christian and thus the majority probably believed in God. An additional 20% of winners were Jewish, some of whom believed in God, though some clearly didn't (Beit-Hallahmi 2015: 77–79; Shalev 2010; Sherby 2002).

The burden of proof is on the objector to show that nonbelievers (as a whole) have an epistemic advantage over believers (as a whole), specifically with respect to assessing the existence of a High God. This is a difficult burden to discharge. There are plenty of well-informed, highly educated, intelligent believers in a High God.

The debunking objection

When you learn that 90% of humans believe that p , this consensus provides you with good evidence for p . But suppose you find out that the consensus was produced by unreliable cognitive mechanisms (e.g. wishful thinking)—that is, mechanisms that are not likely to lead to true beliefs. In this case, common consent would no longer be evidence for p .

The Debunking Objection claims that common consent regarding a High God is not good evidence because this convergence is the result of unreliable cognitive mechanisms. The objection can be formulated in different ways because different mechanisms could be plugged in, such as wishful thinking or the cognitive mechanisms described by the cognitive science of religion (Van Eyghen 2020).

Debunking objections to common consent face major obstacles. Consider the biggest two obstacles. First, debunkers need to identify the unreliable mechanisms and show that they are plausibly exclusively responsible for forming and sustaining widespread belief in a High God. After all, if other mechanisms such as reasoning or cultural processes are playing a role, they could mediate and correct for the distorting influence of unreliable mechanisms. For instance, Joshua Thurow claims that theistic arguments and religious testimony help explain why people believe in God (Thurow 2022). If believers in God base their belief (in part) on such reasons or grounds, then it's not clear that their belief-forming processes are unreliable: for example, nothing in the cognitive science of religion shows that theistic arguments are bad arguments or that religious testimony is unreliable. Later in the paper, we empirically motivate Thurow's claim that theistic arguments and religious testimony play a contributing role.

Second, debunkers must show that the operative mechanisms (whatever they are) are unreliable with respect to belief in a High God. This is difficult to show without begging the question against theism. If God exists and designed human cognition, then it's reasonable to think that widespread belief in a High God is reliably formed by the mechanisms endowed to us by God. C. Stephen Evans makes this point:

“[T]he cognitive scientists who believe that we humans are hardwired to believe in God think this hardwiring came through an evolutionary process.

If, however, we think of evolution as the process by which God created humans and gave them the qualities they need to know God and relate to him, then... God controls the entire process, including the process of evolution. There is no unguided evolution and thus no reason to think that the moral and religious beliefs we are hardwired to hold are unreliable. ... It is only when evolutionary theory is incorporated into a naturalistic metaphysical view that it seems to rule out God. But to appeal to evolutionary theory *interpreted naturalistically* to rule out theism is a classic instance of begging the question. Of course, if we

start by assuming that God does not exist and that evolution is unguided, we will have reason to doubt our natural religious beliefs.” (Evans 2018: 207, 212)

The Debunking Objection faces major obstacles. It is not a promising avenue for resisting the common consent argument.

The independence objection

The Independence Objection claims that widespread agreement regarding a High God is not good evidence because it is not independent agreement. This is the main objection to the common consent argument, as friends and critics of the argument have recognized (Kelly 2011; Smith 2019). Accordingly, it deserves extended discussion.

The standard wisdom in epistemology is that for agreement to be evidentially significant the agreement must be formed “independently” rather than (say) formed as a result of social indoctrination, coercion, or blindly trusting prestigious individuals or the social majority.

Consider Alvin Goldman’s motivating case of the guru with slavish followers:

Guru: “Whatever the guru believes is slavishly believed by his followers. They fix their opinions wholly and exclusively on the basis of their leader’s views. Intellectually speaking, they are his mere clones... If two or more opinion-holders are totally *non-independent* of one another, and if the subject knows or is justified in believing this, then the subject’s opinion should not be swayed—even a little—by more than one of these opinion-holders. As in the case of a guru and his blind followers, a follower’s opinion does not provide any additional grounds for accepting the guru’s view (and a second follower does not provide additional grounds for accepting a first follower’s view)...” (Goldman 2001: 99)

“Independence” seems necessary. That is, agreement is evidentially significant for us only if we are justified in believing that the parties have arrived at their agreement through appropriately independent processes. But religious agreement appears to lack this independence. Religious agreement appears to be the result of people trusting prestigious individuals or the social majority, where belief in God is passed on from generation to generation by parents, religious teachers, society, and the state. For this reason, even philosophers friendly to the common consent argument express doubts about its agency. For example, Thomas Kelly:

“In the case of the actual history of religious belief, what we find is not independent convergence but rather a convergence that is largely due to mutual influence and influence by common sources. In this respect, the case of religious belief is akin to a case in which students arrive at the same answer by copying from someone they trust. After all, no one thinks that the intellectual case for Islam would be any stronger if birthrates in Muslim countries had been twice as high in past decades as they actually were.” (Kelly 2011: 152)

However, it has proven challenging for epistemologists to spell out the required sort of independence. Jennifer Lackey (2013) has argued that some types of belief dependence do not defeat the evidential value of common consent—that is, the numbers still matter, even if belief in God is dependent in various ways. For instance, the mere fact that belief in God is *influenced* by other people presents no problem. Agreement among scientists is evidentially significant, even though scientists communicate and influence one another. Agreement among jurors in a trial is evidentially significant, even though the jurors deliberate together to reach their verdict. So the question is this: which type of dependence defeats the evidential value of common consent (an epistemological question) and is widespread belief in a High God dependent in this way (an empirical question)? The philosophical literature offers us two leading candidates and thus two different formulations of the independence objection to the common consent argument.

First, consider *common source dependence* as an undercutting defeater:

Widespread agreement is not evidentially significant when the agreement is largely dependent upon a common source or a small number of sources (e.g. testimonial sources) (Kelly 2011: 152; Zagzebski 2011: 33).

According to this principle, agreement among the guru’s followers is not evidentially significant because they are relying on a common source (the guru). Tiddy Smith invokes this sort of dependence in his formulation of the independence objection:

“For the most part, the spread of religion occurs by word of mouth. And this is just the problem. For if 19 out of 20 people believe in a divine being, this fails to count for much once we learn that the 19 base their shared belief on what one or a couple of other people told them. This is not independent agreement. And without independent agreement, raw numbers don’t count for much.” (Smith 2019: 85)

Second, consider *non-autonomous dependence* as an undercutting defeater:

Widespread agreement is not evidentially significant when the agreement is largely due to people uncritically (non-autonomously) accepting the beliefs or testimony of other people (Lackey 2013; Smith 2019).

According to this principle, agreement among the guru’s followers is not evidentially significant because they are merely parroting the guru, uncritically accepting whatever he tells them.

Jennifer Lackey helpfully distinguishes between autonomous and non-autonomous dependence. *Non-autonomous dependence* “involves a subject blindly relying on a given source of information, much like a very young infant accepts whatever her parents tell her. There is no critical assessment of the source or the information in question...” (Lackey 2013: 253). In contrast, *autonomous dependence* “involves a subject exercising agency in her reliance on a source of information, critically assess-

ing its reliability, monitoring for defeaters, and comparing the content of the belief that she forms with her background beliefs.” (Lackey 2013: 249).

Non-autonomous dependence defeats the evidential value of common consent. But autonomous dependence fails to do so. To appreciate this important point, consider cases.

First, consider a case of non-autonomous dependence:

Math Class #2: Suppose we are in a math class of 20 students. The class is assigned a non-trivial math problem and after a couple minutes each of us arrives at an answer. Suppose you discover that I arrived at the same answer you did. But then suppose I give you some new information: “I have a confession to make. When you weren’t looking, I just uncritically copied your answer.” Should my agreement with you make you more confident in your original answer?³

My agreement with you should not make you more confident. Why? Because my agreement with you was not formed on the basis of my own evaluation or evidential processing. I just copied your answer. That is, the *only reason* why I believe your answer is correct is because *you* believe it is correct. Thus, my agreement with you lends no additional credibility to your answer. Suppose you discover that virtually everyone else in the class did the same thing and uncritically copied you. The fact that everyone agrees with you in this case does nothing to boost the credibility of your original answer. The lesson: non-autonomous dependence defeats the evidential value of common consent.

Now consider a contrasting case of autonomous dependence:

Math Case #3: Suppose we are in a math class of 20 students. The class is assigned a non-trivial math problem and after a couple minutes each of us arrives at an answer. Suppose you discover that I arrived at the same answer you did. But then suppose I give you some new information: “I have a confession to make. When you weren’t looking, I looked at your answer and copied it *because* your answer seemed to make mathematical sense to me and *because* you’re pretty good at math.” Should my agreement with you make you more confident in your original answer?

It seems my agreement with you should make you more confident. Why? Because my agreement with you is based on my autonomous assessment of your answer and your reliability. Suppose you discover that 90% of the class did the same thing and copied you for the same reasons: your answer seemed to make mathematical sense to them and they think you’re pretty reliable at math. The fact that nearly everyone agrees with you on this basis should boost your confidence even more. What should the 10% of dissenting students do when they discover the situation? They should become less confident in their own answer (all else being equal). The lesson: autonomous dependence fails to defeat the evidential value of common consent.

³ See Kelly (2011: 152) for discussion of a similar case.

Only non-autonomous dependence defeats the evidential value of agreement. Accordingly, some philosophers frame the independence objection in terms of this kind of dependence. Tiddy Smith does so:

“Unfortunately, the mass conversions of colonised peoples between the first and twenty-first centuries, although producing an extremely widespread belief in some kind of a god, had little if anything to do with a critical evaluation of the evidence. Establishing your religion through acts of war, terror, bribery, theft, rape, breeding, or enslavement might gain you the raw numbers, but it does not grant you any intellectual respectability....The problem with the argument is that although the belief in gods is widespread, it did not arise *independently*...” (Smith 2019: 84; also see Smith 2020).

Now let us assess both versions of the independence objection. First, we must observe that for the objection to be successful, we must know (or justifiably believe) that common consent is largely due to people relying on common sources or largely due to people uncritically accepting the beliefs and testimony of others. But we know no such thing. In fact, the empirical evidence points in the opposite direction. That is, both versions of the independence objection present a simplistic (empirically false) picture of the psychology of belief-formation, at least for the vast majority of adult believers.

Consider the first version of the independence objection. Is widespread belief in a High God due to people trusting a common source or a small number of sources (e.g. original testifiers in a testimony chain)? It appears not. The empirical literature indicates that belief in a High God is cognitively natural and arises across cultures and history. Evidence for this is provided by the cognitive science of religion.

The cognitive science of religion (CSR) seeks to explain religion, including its hallmark feature of belief in supernatural agents (Barrett 2011). Drawing from developmental psychology, anthropology, and the cognitive and evolutionary sciences, theorists in this discipline have cogently argued that the human mind is naturally disposed to believe in supernatural agents. But not just any supernatural agents will do. Rather, we are disposed to believe in supernatural agents with certain attributes rather than others. Our disposition is content biased rather than content neutral. How should this content bias be characterized? Much of the CSR literature indicates that humans are naturally disposed toward High Gods or at least very similar supernatural agents. As we summarize elsewhere:

“humans are disposed to believe in non-human, invisible, disembodied, immortal, super-powerful, super-knowing, super-perceiving, infallible, morally interested, punishing/loving, causally active, and minded agents (with beliefs, desires, intentions, character, and free-will) who possess creator or designer status” (Braddock 2018: 178).

For instance, developmental psychologists have documented experimental evidence that children across cultures are naturally disposed to see the world as designed by a powerful intelligent agent (Kelemen 2004). Humans seem naturally bent toward

High Gods, which could help explain why around 90% of the global population believes in a High God.⁴

We must distinguish between belief in a High God and the refinement of that belief within cultural traditions. While refined beliefs (e.g. in a specifically Christian trinitarian God) are largely due to common cultural-historical sources, CSR tells us that widespread belief in a High God is partly due to our natural cognitive dispositions, which indicates that it is suitably independent rather than traceable to a common source. This point is perfectly compatible with recognizing that cultural factors can reinforce (or undermine) belief in a High God.

Now consider the second version of the independence objection, which invokes non-autonomous dependence as a defeater. Is widespread belief in a High God due to people uncritically trusting whatever they're told, like blind followers of a guru? It appears not. The empirical literature indicates that most adults (and older children) form and/or sustain their belief in a High God in part on the basis of their natural cognitive dispositions and their autonomous evaluation of evidence and testimony. In terms of our case analysis, widespread belief in a High God is more like *Math Class #3* than *Math Class #2* or Goldman's *Guru*. Thus, common consent regarding a High God appears to be suitably independent rather than the result of non-autonomous processes.

Our natural cognitive dispositions play a role, as we have discussed. But our autonomous evaluation of evidence and testimony also plays a role. For instance, Thurow (2022) observes that believers in God often believe partly on the basis of theistic arguments or explanatory reasons—i.e. God's existence seems to explain or make sense of things like the existence and orderliness of the cosmos, the appearance of design, the nature of humanity, the moral law, the experience of miraculous events, ordinary religious experiences (e.g. sensing God's presence in prayer), and why our hearts are restless until they rest in God:

“[R]eligious believers think that their beliefs make sense of human life. God's creative activity makes sense of why the world exists and why, as Augustine is famous for saying, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. ... And these ways of making sense of human life all involve reasons for thinking God exists. As philosophers, we might say they constitute a “best explanation”-style argument for God's existence. Ordinary folks, of course, do not talk this way, but nevertheless, they have such an argument as the things that God “makes sense of” are reasons that can factor into a best explanation-style argument. And they can believe, at least in part, on the basis of those reasons, as there is a common human experience of becoming more confident in a proposition when we see how it makes sense of the world. It shouldn't then be surprising, I

⁴ The CSR literature does not say that humans *inevitably* will believe in a High God, for two reasons. First, our cognitive dispositions do not *by themselves* produce religious belief: some environmental or cultural input is necessary, though it need not be a special experience or extensive teaching. Second, countervailing influences such as cultural factors and personal psychological factors (e.g. motivated disbelief) can work in the other direction and lead humans to alternative religious beliefs or worldviews that do not affirm a High God. For example, our disposition to believe in a High God might be overridden or resisted because we have been taught by our parents, teachers, society, or the state that there is no such god.

suggest, that a religious believer's belief is based at least in part on her sense of how it makes sense of human life." (Thurrow 2022: 135).

Thurrow points out that ordinary believers (e.g. my grandfather) need not be able to articulate or defend such reasons in order for their belief to be based (partly) on such reasons (2022: 135).

Is there empirical evidence for Thurrow's claim that explanatory reasons play a role? Consider self-reporting data. When asked why they believe in God, many people report such reasons. For example, my students do so. For an empirical study, psychologist Frank Sulloway and Michael Shermer conducted a random sample survey of about 1,000 Americans and asked them two questions:

"Do you believe there is a God (a purposeful higher intelligence that created the universe)?"

"In your own words, why do you believe in God, or why don't you believe in God?"

The most common reasons respondents gave for why they believe in God were the following:

1. Good design/natural beauty/perfection/complexity of the world or universe (28.6%).
2. Experience of God in everyday life/God is in us (20.6%).
3. It is comforting, relieving, consoling, gives meaning and purpose to life (10.3%).
4. The Bible says so (9.8%).
5. Just because/faith/need to believe in something (8.2%).
6. Raised to believe in God (7.2%).
7. God answers prayers (6.4%).
8. Without God there would be no morality (4.0%).
9. God has a plan for the world, history, destiny, and us (3.8%).
10. To account for good and avenge evil in the world (1%).

(Shermer 2003: 272–273).

In this survey, around 70% of believers in God appealed to explanatory reasons, experience, and testimony to explain why they believe in God (i.e. reasons #1, #2, #4, #7, #8). Of course, it is possible that their reported reasons are not their *actual* reasons for believing. But given the prominence of such grounds in religious traditions and the relevant empirical literature, it would be surprising if the self-reporting data were way off track.

Religious believers also believe on the basis of testimony, for example from family, teachers, tradition, and Scripture. Developmental psychologist Paul Harris assembles evidence showing that children learn about God through the testimony of parents, teachers, and peers (Harris 2012). Adults often believe in God on the basis of testimony too (see e.g. Shtulman 2013).

Do religious believers gullibly trust whatever they're told about God, as Richard Dawkins suggests (Dawkins 2008: 205–206, 218)? Perhaps small children do.⁵ But even if some of us *initially* acquire our belief in God as small children by blindly trusting the say-so of our parents, later on we appear to sustain that belief on other (autonomous) grounds and sometimes give up the belief upon further reflection. Consider an analogy: a small child may initially acquire her belief that $2+2=4$ by blindly trusting her parent's testimony but later on she will likely sustain her belief on other grounds—for example, because $2+2=4$ seems obviously true or because she's received testimony from people she judges to be reliable. The same goes for our basic historical beliefs, scientific beliefs, and religious beliefs too (cf. Kelly 2011: 153).

The empirical literature indicates that humans (including older children) are not as gullible as some scholars have thought. For instance, Hugo Mercier (2020) reviews a wealth of empirical evidence showing that “instead of blindly following prestigious individuals or the majority, we weigh many cues to decide what to believe, who knows best, who to trust...” (Mercier 2020: 14). Mercier and Sperber et al. (2010) observe that humans are “epistemically vigilant”—we are equipped with cognitive mechanisms that we use to help us detect and sort out reliable from unreliable testimony. For example, we are disposed to check testimony for whether it coheres with our background knowledge: we notice when testimony clashes with our prior beliefs and tend to reject the testimony, unless the testifier provides us with good arguments or has proven reliable. We also monitor the reliability of testifiers: we favor testifiers with a good track record, more experience, benevolent intentions, and no incentive to deceive us. Finally, we are disposed to check whether the testimony is supported by majority opinion. Rather than blindly following the crowd, we assess the value of the majority opinion based on the “size of the majority in relative terms (the degree of consensus) and absolute terms (group size), competence of the members of the majority, and degree of dependence between their opinions” (Mercier 2020: 74). We use these mechanisms of epistemic vigilance virtually all the time and across domains, including the religious domain.

Summing up our response to *The Independence Objection*: the vast majority of adults (and older children) form and/or sustain their belief in a High God in large part on the basis of their natural cognitive dispositions and their autonomous evaluation of evidence and testimony. Thus, common consent appears to be suitably independent.

COMMON CONSENT ARGUMENT #2

Turn now to our second common consent argument:

Common Consent Argument #2

- (7) There is widespread belief in a High God.
- (8) Widespread belief in a High God is more surprising given naturalism than theism.

⁵ Even small children as young as 5 years old are fairly discerning about who they should trust, though they can be more easily deceived than older children (Heyman and Legare 2013).

(9) Thus, widespread belief in a High God is evidence for theism over naturalism.

We empirically motivated premise (7) earlier. Now we must support premise (8).

Common consent given naturalism

If naturalism is true—if there is no High God or anything like a High God—how likely is it that 90% of the world would persistently converge on belief in a High God? It seems that the outcome could have easily been different: cultural-historical processes could have easily led humans to alternative religious beliefs. Why think so? The dominant view in the empirical literature is that cultural processes determine the specific content of our religious beliefs: though our natural cognitive dispositions bias us in certain directions, cultural processes largely fill in the details of our religious beliefs (Gervais et al. 2011). But our understanding of cultural processes is that they are fairly contingent and can easily lead humans in all sorts of different directions (see Braddock 2021: 183–185 on this type of contingency). For example, if cultural conditions had been somewhat different, Christianity and Islam could have easily failed to emerge, spread, or persist, while religions or secular worldviews not affirming a High God could have flourished in their place. The contingency of cultural history is evidenced by the fact that cultures have gone in all sorts of different religious and secular directions. Thus it is surprising to find 90% of humans persistently converging upon belief in a High God. At least, it is surprising given naturalism, since naturalism claims there is no God guiding or constraining the direction of cultural history.

Why think that the cultural processes shaping religious belief are fairly contingent and can easily lead humans in all sorts of different directions? First, consider the religious and ideological diversity we find across history and cultures. The cognitive science of religion tells us that humans have cognitive biases that dispose us to believe in gods. But if we have the same biases, why don't we believe in the same gods? The ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus—why does nobody believe in Zeus anymore? Gervais and Henrich refer to this as *The Zeus Problem* (Gervais and Henrich 2010). The answer is that cultural processes shape the content of god beliefs and are fairly contingent. Gervais and Henrich propose that cultural context biases (such as conformity bias and prestige bias) can explain why people believe in specific gods (or no gods at all) and can explain the distribution and diversity of such beliefs. Second, consider the fact that a culture's religious beliefs can change relatively quickly over time. Why is that? Plausibly because cultural processes are shaping religious beliefs and are fairly contingent (Gervais and Henrich 2010).

The main objection to our argument is this: we have a convincing naturalistic explanation that would lead us to expect widespread belief in a High God. Different naturalistic explanations could be plugged in to do the job. For instance, philosopher Alvin Goldman invokes psychologist Ara Norenzayan's cultural evolutionary explanation to argue that common consent regarding a High God is expectable given naturalism and thus no evidence for theism over naturalism (Goldman 2019: 168–174). First, we'll consider Norenzayan's cultural evolutionary explanation. Second, we'll

consider cognitive explanations, which emphasize the role of cognitive and content biases.

First, consider Norenzayan's cultural evolutionary explanation, also known as the *Big Gods Theory* (Norenzayan 2013; Norenzayan et al. 2016). Norenzayan's theory seeks to explain the cultural prevalence of belief in "Big Gods"—i.e. "powerful, omniscient, interventionist, morally concerned gods" (Norenzayan 2013: 7–8). The puzzle he addresses is this: the overwhelming majority of us live in big societies and believe in a Big God—why is that so? What explains the rise of large-scale cooperation and the cultural prevalence of Big Gods? He proposes a cultural group selection hypothesis: after the agricultural revolution gave rise to sedentary and larger groups (some 12,000 years ago), belief in moralistic High Gods proliferated by cultural group selection because it enabled humans to sustain cooperation in larger groups. Cooperation is costly and the temptation to free ride is stronger in larger groups where it is easier to get away with it and remain anonymous. Thus, groups that believed in powerful, all-knowing, morally concerned gods who monitored and enforced cooperative behavior were more likely to exhibit such behavior ("watched people are nice people"), live in larger groups, outcompete other groups without such beliefs, and thus culturally transmit their beliefs on down to others. Norenzayan's hypothesis is that this cultural group selection process explains the prevalence of Big Gods.

Is Norenzayan's theory a good explanation of the spread of Big God beliefs? There are various challenges to it in the empirical literature. For example, alternative beliefs not involving Big Gods (but still involving the expectation of monitoring and accountability) could have efficiently promoted cooperation, such as karmic beliefs (e.g. in Buddhism and Hinduism). So why should we expect Big God beliefs rather than alternative beliefs to spread? It is not clear (Johnson 2015).

Even if Norenzayan's cultural evolutionary explanation were true, would it lead us to *expect* widespread belief in a Big God? It appears not because his theory (as he clarifies in Norenzayan et al. 2016) does not purport to be an exclusive explanation of the spread of Big God beliefs. He claims to have identified one influential process that helps to explain their spread, while granting that other cultural-historical processes have played an influential role, such as the historical processes involved with the rise and spread of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. But this brings us back to cultural contingency: cultural-historical processes are fairly contingent (given naturalism) and can easily lead humans in all sorts of different religious and secular directions. Could religions which do not affirm a Big God have easily spread? In fact, they have spread. Could the world have easily gone in a more secular direction? In fact, it has gone in that direction in some societies. Given naturalism, it seems that cultural processes could have easily taken large-scale cooperative societies away from belief in Big Gods and toward alternative beliefs. So even if we accept Norenzayan's hypothesis that cultural group selection has played an influential role, a *more comprehensive* explanation (inclusive of fairly contingent cultural-historical processes) would not lead us to expect widespread belief in a Big God rather than alternative beliefs.

But even if Norenzayan's theory were true and exclusive, widespread belief in a Big God would still be *more* surprising given naturalism than theism. For in either case (naturalism or theism), cultural evolution would presumably still be operative.

The difference is that theism would add an additional factor to the mix: an all-powerful benevolent creator who can be expected to disclose himself to humans. The cultural evolution of widespread belief in a Big God would thus be *more likely* given theism than naturalism.

Second, we should also consider cognitive explanations, which are popular in the cognitive science of religion (Barrett 2011). According to these theories, the cultural prevalence of certain god concepts is not due to the fact that they promote cooperation. Rather, we are cognitively disposed to accept such concepts. Accordingly, such a theory could be invoked to argue that our cognitive and content biases would lead us to expect widespread belief in a High God.

Could cognitive explanations show that common consent is expectable given naturalism? It appears not, for two reasons. First, though our cognitive dispositions appear to bias us toward High God concepts, CSR theorists agree that they are not the whole story: cultural processes largely determine the specific content of our god beliefs. But this brings us back to the cultural contingency point: cultural-historical processes are fairly contingent (given naturalism) and can easily lead humans in all sorts of different directions, including directions away from belief in High Gods. Second, even if (hypothetically) our cognitive dispositions robustly determined that we would believe in High Gods, a further question arises: should naturalists or theists be more surprised by this outcome? Braddock (2018) argues that the evolution of cognitive dispositions favoring belief in a High God is more likely given theism than naturalism.

Common consent given theism

Given theism, however, we should not be surprised by common consent. We should positively expect it. According to theism there is a loving (omnibenevolent) God who made human beings and desires to be in relationship with them. Accordingly, we should expect such belief to be widely accessible, including accessible to those who are not highly educated, intelligent, or familiar with sophisticated arguments (Evans 2010: 12–17).

This expectation is theologically supportable. The Christian tradition maintains that God desires relationship with human beings and has endowed humans with a natural (albeit vague) awareness of himself. Thus, we would expect belief in a High God to be widespread and persistent over the course of human history. For example, consider a classic passage from Scripture:

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” (Romans 1:19–20, ESV).

Consider *The Hiddenness Objection*: if theism is true, we would expect belief in a High God to be *more* widespread than it is, perhaps even universal (Matheson 2021: 300–301). There are various responses that theists could give to this objection. Consider three strategies of response. First, one strategy of response to develop hid-

denness theodicies and identify plausible reasons for why God might be “hidden” to some extent (to whatever extent he is). Second, another strategy is to defend a limited form of skeptical theism: we’re not in an epistemic position to predict that God would ensure universal belief (100%), as opposed to ensuring the wide accessibility of belief. If explicit (conscious) belief in God during one’s earthly life were necessary for salvation and flourishing in the afterlife, then perhaps we would expect belief in a High God to be more widespread than it is. But such a belief requirement is implausible (Braddock 2018: 192–195). Third, a final response is to offer tradition-specific reasons for why we should expect belief in a High God to be limited. For example, the Christian tradition tells us that in virtue of our fallen nature we are to some extent prone to idolatry (Romans 1:21–24). The Apostle Paul tells the Greek philosophers in Athens that God created humans “having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17: 26, ESV). Such doctrines and Scriptural passages would lead us to expect our awareness of God to be limited and distorted to some extent.

CONCLUSION

Though the common consent argument died in the 1800s, it should be resuscitated. Our arguments show that widespread belief in a High God provides good evidence for theism over naturalism. Of course, we should consider other evidence too (e.g. the nature of the cosmos, the moral law, the problem of evil), for it is only rational to assess theism and naturalism in light of our total evidence. We leave open the question of where the overall balance tilts.

Could common consent regarding other matters supply additional evidence? For example, there is widespread belief in life after death (Johnson 2016: 76–86). Should naturalists or theists be more surprised by this cognitive outcome? Common consent arguments deserve serious consideration and perhaps a chapter in our philosophy of religion textbooks!

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