



Confirmation Bias and the (Un)reliability of Enculturated Religious Beliefs: Comments on “The Atheological Argument from Geography”

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I was drawn to this paper because the initial premise in the argument developed by Merrell (2019) is one that my program—with a heavy focus on world cultures and religions—sometimes generates in our student. The premise is that geography greatly determines an individual’s religious beliefs. The author goes on to flesh out the atheological argument which concludes that since geography is not a reliable belief-producing mechanism, geography-generated religious beliefs are not justified. The author then proceeds to question this conclusion by suggesting that most religious adherents do not have those beliefs *simply* due to geography. Rather, the initially unjustified beliefs are later reinforced arguments that provide the proper justification of said beliefs. In other words, since religious beliefs are generally epistemically reliable after all, the argument from geography fails.

I think that the initial premise of this argument from geography is quite strong. Moral and religious beliefs are similar in the way that they are formed—both are generally acquired through enculturation—and moral psychologists compare the brain’s capacity to adopt these beliefs with the capacity for language. Humans are born with certain preferences or moral intuitions—a natural desire for cooperation, fairness, and in-group loyalty—but these intuitions can develop in many ways (just as we are born with the capacity to mimic a large range of phonemes). And to perhaps stretch the analogy a bit, just like it is more difficult for a person who has only been exposed to and consequently learned one language as a child to learn others later in life, moral-religious beliefs become solidified very early and are quite difficult to change. Consider a large, multigenerational study by Richard Shweder that compared Hindus from India and Judeo-Christian families from Hyde Park, Chicago. Shweder (1987) found that by age five the moral and religious beliefs of children were generally consistent with the beliefs of their culture,¹ and adults in both cultures tended to view their beliefs as universal and unalterable.² The difference between children and adults was that the adults could give a more coherent explanation of their beliefs.

But this is not news to the author: his map makes clear the role enculturation plays in moral-religious belief acquisition. So what about the rebuttal to the argument from geography, i.e., that most adults hold justified or reliable beliefs? This may be true of philosophers—Jonathan Haidt (2001, p. 819) admits as much in a seminal article³—but empirical research questions the reliability of most people’s moral and religious reasoning. Various forms of implicit bias tend to guide us. In Haidt’s infamous example, he offers subjects (a) moral stories—such as siblings sleeping together—that challenge our moral intuitions. When asked if the incest case is morally wrong, most people say that it is. When asked to provide reasons for their answer, most people struggle, since in Haidt’s example, the siblings were consenting adults on vacation who used multiple forms of protection and appear unharmed psychologically. Yet subjects state that it is just wrong! This has come to be known as “moral dumbfounding.”

Haidt is a moral sentimentalist who argues that these beliefs are generated by socially cultivated intuitions, and that most individuals (philosophers might be an exception?) then generate *post hoc* reasons in support of their intuitions. Social intuitions drive moral and religious judgments; reasoning follows in support. Perhaps the author will object that these examples are very different from normal instances of religious belief, but I would only point to religious beliefs about abortion, homosexuality, and capital punishment as examples of emotionally driven religious beliefs. Political bias lends further evidence. For example, Studies suggest that “when confronted with information about their candidate that would logically lead them to and emotionally aversive conclusion, partisans arrived at an alternative conclusion” (Westen et al., 2006, p. 1955). (An example was Bush’s statements about WMDs.) Partisan reasoning about disturbing facts or statements largely activates different brain regions than cold reasoning or explicit emotion suppression. In a similar vein, other studies suggest that *disconfirmation* bias also enters into political decision-making process, as subjects actively look for and give greater weight to evidence that support prior beliefs, and give less weight to and more quickly dismiss evidence that does not support their beliefs (Taber et al., 2009).

Perhaps the author could point back to studies like Shweder’s, which suggest that people can give *reasons* for their religious or moral beliefs. But notice again that the reasons are heavily constrained by socially cultivated beliefs formed at a very early age. This brings us back to the two main claims of the paper. I think that empirical evidence strengthens the argument from geography. But what about the final claim that these

beliefs are generally epistemically reliable (i.e. that the two maps would look the same)? I have my doubts about this claim. While I do think that most people have *reasons* for their religious beliefs, I'm not sure that most people are willing to genuinely re-evaluate their beliefs in light of contradictory evidence.

Notes

¹ The researchers state, “what one feels ‘lowered’ *by*, empathy *towards*, disgust *at*, pride *in*, or outrage *about* (that is to say, how moral sentiments are directed) is related to a judgment, not necessarily conscious or even verbally accessible, that bears many of the markings of received understandings by five years of age” (Shweder et al., 1987, p. 60).

² Two example cases are, “A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week”; or “A widow and an unmarried man loved each other. The widow asked him to marry her (the widow)” (Shweder, 1987, p. 41). Americans overwhelmingly believe that a person (including a widow) should be able to eat whatever she wants, because that is her right as an autonomous individual. Indians, on the other hand, believe that it is wrong because a widow should be dedicated to her deceased husband (now a god) and should not do anything to disrupt that dedication: “Hot foods will distract her. They will stimulate her sexual appetite. She will lose her sanctity. She will want sex and behave like a whore” (Shweder, 1987, p. 43).

³ Haidt (2001, p. 819) specifically claims that philosophers are one of the only groups that are reliable reasoners.

Works Cited

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