Common Consent Arguments for Belief in God

Some background

"Think for yourself" is advice we expect to hear from philosophers. Philosophers are usually not impressed by appeals to tradition, or to authority, or, as we will discuss, to common consent. Arguing that "You should believe X because most people believe X," is described in introductions to critical thinking as the *argumentum ad populum* fallacy, the fallacy of appealing to the people, the masses, the majority. If you made such an argument your conversational partner would likely point out cases in which the majority believe falsehoods or say that you were confusing what ought to be believed with what is believed.

Though arguments from common consent were offered in ancient, medieval, and early-modern philosophy, an intensely negative attitude to them has prevailed for the last few centuries, especially among epistemologists. René Descartes began his epistemology by undertaking to doubt everything that he could doubt, to get down to the bedrock of what we know and how we come to know. Descartes found that one thing he could not doubt, which the very attempt to doubt confirmed, was his own existence as a thinking being: *dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum* (doubt, therefore thought, therefore being)*.* Following Descartes, epistemologists have tended to focus on how the solitary individual comes to know by using their own epistemic faculties – their own reason, imagination, memory, and sense experience.

Yet, the last two decades have seen a new focus on "social epistemology" – how being social creatures affects us as knowing creatures. Social creatures tell each other stuff. We report our experiences and feelings, express our opinions and judgments, share concepts and ideas. Whether transmitted through the medium of speech or writing or Morse code, social epistemologists call this "testimony."

Our ability to receive testimony is an important epistemic faculty. Without testimony, you would not know that the galactic center is about 28,000 light years away. It would be extremely difficult for you to come to know this fact without testimony (an astronomer's claims, books, scientific papers, etc., are all testimony). So, unless you want to become a skeptic and deny that you know most of the claims that you ordinarily take yourself to know, you must admit that testimony often does provide knowledge. Being told about the contents of other minds may rationally alter the contents of your mind.

A formula of the arguments

Social epistemology has manifested itself in the philosophy of religion as philosophers express and examine anew common consent arguments for belief in God. Here is a formula representing all these arguments:

(1) The overwhelming majority of people believe that God exists. (P)

(2) If the overwhelming majority of people believe that God exists, then this provides some reason to believe that God exists. (If P then Q)

Therefore, (3) There is some reason to believe that God exists. (Q)

Note that most arguments from common consent – especially those of contemporary philosophers – do not claim to decisively prove that you should believe in God. Though decisive arguments are nice, philosophers of religion are interested in anything that can tip the scales – any reason for or against belief in God. Let's consider the case for (1) and several different ways of justifying (2), noting some objections as we go.

Premise (1) – do most people believe in God?

Along a spectrum, a common consent argument can be vague or specific about what it is arguing for. At the vaguest end of the spectrum, arguments can be advanced for the claim that there is some or other religiously significant dimension to reality, an "ultimate reality," whether this is monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, animistic, etc. "Ultimist" common consent arguments build a very large consensus because they cast a net that catches almost every religious tradition.

A common consent argument that has a more specific target will build a narrower majority or may fail to do so at all. Clearly, a majority does not believe in the ultimate reality precisely as conceived by Thomas Aquinas or Hypatia of Alexandria, or any other very specific idea of the ultimate reality. Most common consent arguments are offered for a vague monotheism ("vanilla theism") that does not involve precise philosophical claims about God's nature, nor claims specific to one religious tradition such as purgatory or the jinn.

About 31% of the world's population is Christian and about 25% is Muslim. Adding in the Bahai, Druze, Jews, and Rastafari, we have a small majority of around 57% for the God of Abraham. For vanilla theism, many other religious traditions can be added, such as Caodaism, some schools of Hinduism, Sikhism, Yazidism, with around 80% of the world's population affirming belief in God. Somewhere between 7-13% of the world's population is non-ultimist/ agnostic/ atheist.

I note two objections to (1). First, there is the empirical issue of how accurate our data is. In many countries people have reason to carefully conceal their lack of religious belief. Survey data varies considerably depending on things like the exact wording of the questions. Gathering and agglomerating data from 195 countries is not easy. Second, our beliefs inform our actions, but in many cases the religious beliefs we profess do not seem to play this role, which perhaps indicates an absence of belief. If I believed that there was a lion behind me, I would flee in terror. If you believe that liars will be cast into a lake of fire, how could you contemplate lying? If you believe that your deceased grandparents are alive with God, why grieve them? Let's turn to some ways of justifying (2).

Premise (2) – the reliability of minds

When a process produces the right result in a high proportion of cases (ideally, all cases) it is reliable. Playing roulette is not a reliable way of making money. Watching the weather forecast is a somewhat reliable way of finding out the day's weather. Using a calculator is a very reliable way of finding out the sum of two numbers. How reliable is your mind at discovering the truth, especially the truth about ultimate reality?

To know that a process is reliable, we need some way of checking its results. In the case of weather forecasts, we check reliability by experiencing the day's weather. We access the truth in some other way, using sense experience to check the reliability of the weather forecast. Sometimes it's hard to access the truth so directly. Another way to check reliability is to compare results with other processes of the same type. I check the results that my mind spits out against the results that other minds spit out – I use testimony to check my reliability.

Suppose that in a chemistry exam I get the answer "endothermic" and you get the answer "exothermic," each of us exercising our epistemic faculties as best we can. By exchanging testimony, we learn that one of us has performed unreliably. Both of us should have somewhat reduced confidence in our answers until we can undertake more thorough checking to establish which of us performed unreliably. Suppose we learn that everyone else in the class answered "exothermic." My confidence should dramatically decrease, and yours should increase. Although it's possible that everyone else is unreliable, it's more likely that only I am. Similarly, ultimists and vanilla theists should feel more confident about their beliefs when they learn that most other minds have reached the same conclusion. While widespread agreement is not as good for checking reliability as having the exam's marking scheme, it's something. See Sébastien Réhault's article for an argument in this vein.

Checking, whether through sense experience or receiving testimony from other minds, is something that your mind does. We never get the chance to hop outside of our minds entirely and check their reliability through an unmediated access to reality. So, philosophers are troubled by skeptical scenarios. What if our reason is systematically perverted by a demon? What if we are in a computer simulation and so our senses are utterly unreliable? As our epistemic faculties are those of clever apes, what if "the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose"? (J.B.S Haldane)

Haunted by possibilities that are impossible to rule out, it seems inevitable and reasonable that you must *trust* what you cannot *know*: that your epistemic faculties are not systematically unreliable. When you have checked your epistemic faculties to the extent that you can, when you exercise them carefully and conscientiously, you should trust that they are reliable. The alternative is drowning in the mire of skepticism. Insofar as you have no reason for thinking that your epistemic faculties are somehow special, you should extend the same trust to the epistemic faculties of other people. So, generally, that someone comes to believe a claim gives you some evidence for that claim, and the more who form the belief the stronger your

evidence, as you should trust that these beliefs result from reliable mental processes. See Linda Zagzebski's article for an argument in this vein.

One criticism of these arguments is that they paint a picture of each mind independently assessing claims about ultimate reality before we all compare results. Perhaps a more realistic picture is that we receive religious (un)belief as children in a passive and uncritical way. Only later, if ever, do we bring our epistemic faculties to bear on questions like God's existence. Most people are entrenched as theist or atheist, etc., despite never having carefully examined things like the cosmological argument or the problem of evil. "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a ditch" (Matthew 15:14).

Premise (2) – induction

In the United States, 33% of the population are creationists, 31% believe in telepathy, 26% are geocentrists, 25% believe in astrology, and 24% believe in extraterrestrial visitation of Earth. Amusing statistics. Yet, these surveys reveal that the overwhelming majority do not believe in astrology, etc. The overwhelming majority are correct in all these cases, let's assume. Consider too the innumerable mundane cases in which the overwhelming majority is also correct: murder is wrong, 2+2=4, vegetables are healthy.

It seems that the category "believed by an overwhelming majority" has a high degree of overlap with the category "true." So, if you know that a belief falls into the former category, then you have some reason to believe that it falls into the latter. It's more likely that belief in God is one of the more frequent cases in which a claim is believed by an overwhelming majority and is true, rather than one of the less frequent cases in which a claim is believed by an overwhelming majority and is false. This is a case of inductive reasoning – noting patterns that hold true in most cases (or, ideally, in all cases) and using those patterns to make predictions about new cases, even when you have no understanding at all of why the pattern occurs.

One criticism here is that even small amounts of evidence against God's existence, such as the evils of our world, should make us confident about assigning God to the less frequent case of "believed by an overwhelming majority + false." By analogy, the vast majority in the category "residents of Tipperary" are in the category "Irish." Knowing that someone is in the former category, it's reasonable to believe that they are in the latter. Yet, when you overhear them speaking with a French accent, your evidence that they are Irish is easily outweighed.

Premise (2) – theological explanation

Many philosophical arguments for theism and atheism have the same structure. We come up with a hypothesis about what kind of world God would create, then we look to see whether our world is like that hypothetical world. "God would create a world without evil. There is evil in our world. So, probably, God doesn't exist." "God would create a world containing life. There is life in our world. So, probably, God exists." Here, theological claims generate empirical

predictions. Seeing the prediction borne out gives us reason to believe the theological claim, as an explanation of what we observe.

Why would God create a world in which belief in God was very common? Many philosophers have argued that God, being the best, creates the best possible world. If God exists then believing in God is good, because it's good to believe the truth. Putting these two thoughts together, a world brimming with believers is what we should expect to observe if God exists, just as we should expect to find a world containing other good things – life, intelligence, beauty, moral virtue, friendship, pleasure.

Specific religious traditions have their own theological reasons as to why we should expect to find common consent. Paul the Apostle claims that God has made humanity "that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27). If Paul's God exists, then we should expect to observe a world bursting with diverse forms of ultimism as people cast about in search of God. This is what we in fact observe. If, say, the pre-Colombian societies of the Americas were entirely irreligious then Paul's claim would ring hollow.

An argument of the same structure is found in the dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* by Cicero, a Roman "pagan" philosopher. Cicero's dialogue proved to be enormously influential on later common consent arguments, and its dramatic characters offer several such arguments. One is that widespread religious belief "is not to be imputed to chance or folly, but to the frequent appearance of the Gods themselves" (II.II). Common consent follows from a theory of ultimate reality on which there are an almost infinite number of Gods who dwell within the cosmos and often interact with us. Paul could have argued the same (1 Corinthians 10:20, 1 Enoch 6-8).

The suspicion with arguments of this structure is that our theology, of what kind of world God would create, is surreptitiously tailored to match whatever we already know to be true. In a world in which religious belief was very rare, the believers might well invent some explanation of why God willed this.

Premise (2) – inference to the best explanation

Another way of arguing for (2) is to begin with the fact that the vast majority believe in God and then to ask whether God's existence features in the *best* explanation of this fact (rather than in *an* explanation of this fact). Cicero again:

> "since it is the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, custom, or law, that there are Gods, it must necessarily follow that this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or, rather, innate in us. That opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature must infallibly be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are Gods; for in this we have the concurrence, not only of almost all philosophers, but likewise of the ignorant and illiterate." (I.XVII)

Here, two explanations of common consent are presented – education and custom, and that belief in God is natural and *innate*, a belief that comes pre-installed on the human operating system, akin to a reflex or instinct. The latter is the better explanation, according to Cicero, because it explains the constancy and universality of religious belief, whereas the effects of education and custom wax and wane over time, differ from place to place, and penetrate different parts of society to differing degrees.

Let' consider three criticisms. John Locke argued that the explanation of innate belief predicts too much consensus. If belief in God is innate, we should observe unanimity rather than a vast majority. It remains open to the defender of innate belief to respond that apparent non-believers are self-deceived believers, or that non-believers are "intellectual monstrosities" or "freaks of nature" as Pierre Gassendi argued. These responses seem implausible. Perhaps more plausible is the response that some cultures manage to suppress or erode, to uninstall, the innate belief in God. Yet, this response makes the idea that belief in God is innate stop being an explanation of widespread belief because it becomes compatible with any prevalence of belief.

Second, an additional argument is required to explain why an innate belief must be a true belief. Cicero's character assumes that "universal nature," the good and orderly cosmos in which the Gods dwell, could not be deceptive. Yet, if belief in God is innate, then plausibly it is a product of evolution by natural selection. To the extent that evolution produces beliefs, it will produce beliefs that are selective, useful for staying alive and reproducing. This is a different criterion than truth. So, innate beliefs can be deceptive. One could claim that God uses evolution as the instrument through which to produce innate belief in him, that here God makes selectivity and truth coincide. Such a claim is hard to prove, and would not show any essential connection between innateness and trueness.

Third, Cicero's character has not exhausted the possible explanations for common consent, and so is not entitled to conclude that his explanation is the best. Let's note two further explanations, though we also cannot be exhaustive or conclusive here.

Speaking of the selective-but-deceptive, some argue that religious belief originates in illusory experiences, ways in which we misinterpret our environment. One prominent example is "hyperactive agency detection." Our ancestors had to avoid dangerous animals. The cost of mistaking a snake for a stick is very high. The cost of mistaking a stick for a snake is very low. It's selective to err on the side of perceiving sticks as snakes. So, we interpret shadows in the night as threatening entities, we detect agency and mentality where there is none. In the same vein, we interpret lucky coincides as divine interventions, we perceive faces in burnt toast, etc. On this explanation religious belief is not innate, but is "learned" from the operation of some innate biases.

A more audacious explanation of common consent is that there is good and easily available evidence that God exists, and so most people correctly reason to that conclusion.

Despite our quirks and frailties, our beliefs are usually responsive to good and easily available evidence. By analogy, if 90% of people in a city believe that "it rained last night," the best explanation of this is not indoctrination, or innate belief, or misinterpretations of experience, but that they saw puddles and inferred correctly. As another Ciceronian character states:

> "what can be so plain and evident, when we behold the heavens and contemplate the celestial bodies, as the existence of some supreme, divine intelligence, by which all these things are governed?" (II.I)

See the articles of Thomas Kelly and Jonathan Matheson for discussion of the common consent argument as an inference to the best explanation.

Conclusion

Mindlessly deferring to the majority is a bad epistemic policy and is not what common consent arguments tell us to do. Whether you are convinced by these arguments or not, they illustrate that carefully evaluating the testimony of other minds is a part of being a virtuous thinker, that "thinking for yourself" does not have to mean "thinking by yourself."

Questions

1. It's possible that in the future the overwhelming majority will be non-believers. Would a "reverse" common consent argument be equally (un)convincing?

2. Are common consent arguments for ethical or evaluative claims more plausible than for factual claims?

3. Would common consent arguments be more plausible if they appealed just to a consensus of the experts? Are there any experts when it comes to claims about ultimate reality?

4. The individualistic epistemology of philosophers like Descartes became dominant during the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Should we stick with that epistemology?

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