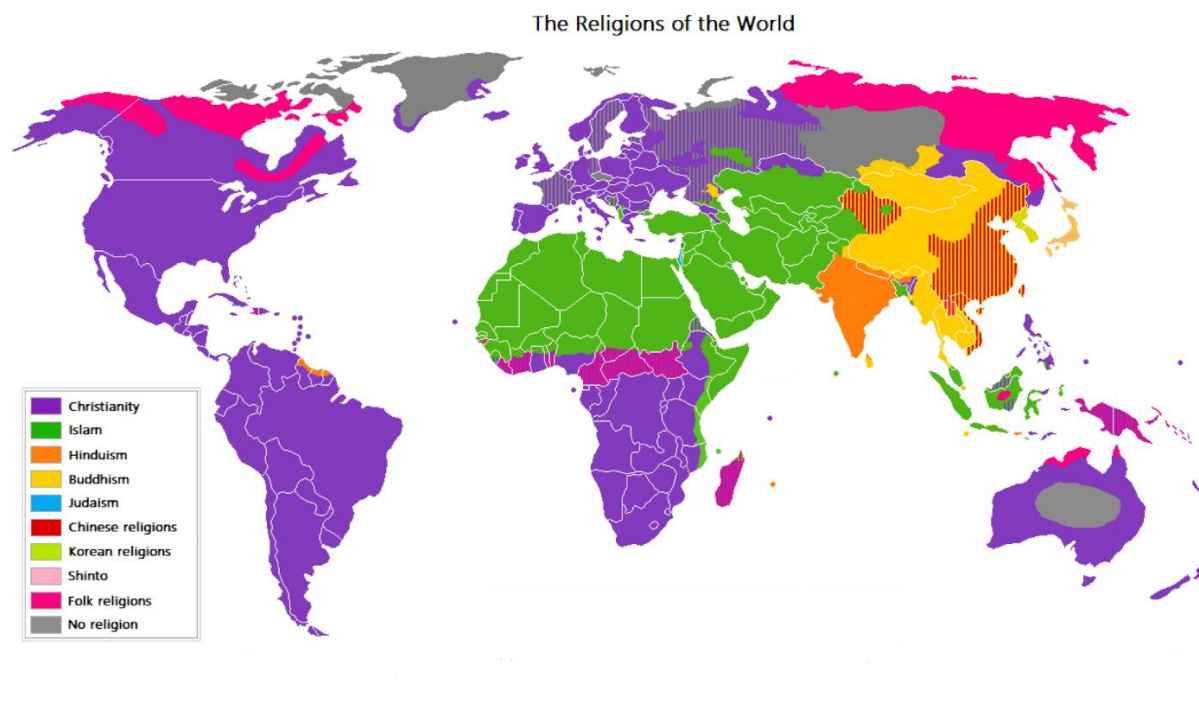


The Atheological Argument from Geography

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Occasionally, in the introductory philosophy courses I teach, a student will give an interesting argument for non-belief in God. Though I have never seen this argument in print, it seems familiar. Basically, the argument goes like this. Religious belief is largely determined by geography – where you are born and raised largely determines your religious beliefs. But believing something just because of where you are born and raised is not a reliable indication of whether that thing is true. So, in some sense, you are not justified in your religious beliefs. I will attempt a more rigorous reconstruction of this argument and offer an objection to it.

Consider the religious map of the world: [1]



Naturally, one might wonder why the map looks like this. Why are there big blocks of different colors in different parts of the world, instead of a single color covering every habitable place? Or why isn't the map just gray throughout (gray being all the colors combined)? The answer seems to be that as a religion gained a foothold in its particular place and as the population grew, that religion was transmitted, through instruction, to others (mostly children) and they were not instructed in other religions. This cultural transmission of religion is really no different than the cultural transmission of language, cuisine, and art. Many of us find it fascinating to imagine that if we were born in, say, Sri Lanka instead of Arkansas, then we'd speak Sinhalese, eat rice and curry almost daily, and practice Buddhism. And therein lies the seeds of doubt about our religious beliefs. The certainty I have about my religious belief seems to be the result of being born and raised in a particular place and time, and I could've been born somewhere else, and at a different time and, hence, had all the same certainty concerning some very different religious beliefs. I think everyone – believers and non-believers alike – would acknowledge these points. But I want to suggest that there is an atheological argument lurking in these observations. Here is the argument:

P1. Geography – where you are born and raised – greatly determines your religious beliefs.

P2. For a belief to be justified, it must be produced by a process that is "reliable" -- i.e., a process that tends to produce beliefs that are true rather than false. [2].

P3. The process of producing beliefs because of where you are born and raised is not reliable.

Con. Therefore, your religious beliefs are not justified.

This is, I think, a faithful rendering of the argument I have been hearing in my classes. And though I think this argument is interesting, there are some issues.

First, though, I think there is no sense in quibbling over the truth of P1 – that was the point of considering on the religious map of the world. And while there are serious objections to epistemic reliabilism, and different variants of it which try to answer those objections [3], no one would deny that *many* belief-forming processes are unreliable – wishful thinking, reliance on emotional attachment, mere hunch, etc... I simply want to suggest that the process of religious belief formation mentioned in P1 can be seen as unreliable in these familiar ways too.

Now, someone could argue that attaining beliefs simply because of where you were born and raised is, on the contrary, a *reliable* process. Imagine that I was born and raised in the Verdant Valley and come to believe, simply because of being born and raised there, that *the Verdant Valley is lush and green* (which is true). One should respond by pointing out that where I was born and raised has nothing, per se, to do with the justificatory status of my belief that the Verdant Valley is lush and green. No, the belief is caused by the reliable process of *perception*, not training, instruction, or upbringing. Someone born and raised somewhere entirely different from the Verdant Valley could justifiably believe that the Verdant Valley is lush and green if they used (reliable) perception in forming that belief. Religious belief, however, is not like that. Imagine that I believe in Christianity because that's what my parents taught me to believe, and that Christianity is the only real game in town around here – say in Northwest Arkansas. Now imagine that I invite three far-off friends to visit me in Northwest Arkansas – one from Sri Lanka, one from Dubai, and one from New Delhi. Do my Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu friends all become Christian converts simply by perceiving the place where I

was born and raised? No. Perception, if used at all in forming religious beliefs, is not used in the same way we use it when we form beliefs about our environment being lush and green.

Still, there is clearly a way in which religious belief formation due to geography is unreliable, and I submit that most religious believers will acknowledge this. Imagine that Steve, a devout Christian who was born and raised where Christianity is the dominant religion, came to believe in Christianity simply because it was the dominant religion in the vicinity. And imagine that Steve scoffs at the skeptical challenge that his religious belief is unjustified since the process that caused his belief in God is unreliable. But notice that Steve acknowledges that billions of people around the world – and billions more in the past – are not Christians and believe in some other religion simply because of where (and when) they were born. Steve knows that most religious believers are or were not Christians. They have their religious beliefs and, according to Steve, they are wrong *because forming religious beliefs because of where (and when) you are born is not a reliable process*. So even the religious believer admits that this process of forming beliefs is unreliable: it produces more false beliefs than true ones.

So what's the point of all this? Assuming the argument so far establishes that religious belief based on geography is unreliable, does that mean that religious believers should reject their religious beliefs and become atheists? No. Even if this skeptical argument succeeds in showing that most religious belief is formed by an unreliable process, it doesn't entail atheism. Why? Because you can imagine that geography – where and when you are born – determines one's belief in *atheism*. Though some kind of religious belief seems to be situated in every corner of the world, we can imagine that in one particular little corner of the world, atheism has been the dominant belief in the vicinity and, naturally, if you were born there then you

would be an atheist too. Doesn't that mean that your belief in *atheism* is caused by an unreliable process? We already pointed out that believing something just because it is the dominant belief in the vicinity is not a reliable indication of whether that thing is true. At best, if this skeptical argument succeeds at all, then it suggests agnosticism, not atheism.

But I don't think this atheological argument from geography does succeed. Though it is true, I think, that geography-based religious beliefs are often unreliable, and though I think it is true that many people have the religious beliefs they do *solely because* those beliefs are the dominant beliefs in their vicinity, they are probably the exception and not the rule. I am not denying that people first acquire their religious beliefs due to those beliefs being the dominant beliefs in the vicinity when they were very young. I am denying that those religious beliefs are never supplemented or supported by a truly reliable process which sustains that belief (in God) later on. Beliefs can be initially caused by an unreliable process early, and then later come to be justified by a process that is reliable. Imagine that Betty, adoring mother of Randy, refuses to believe that Randy committed a terrible crime, and imagine that Betty has been told that there is sufficient evidence to charge her son, Randy, with murder. Betty is shown the evidence, and it looks, to any objective outsider, sufficient for deciding the guilt of Randy. Now, Betty loves Randy very much, and she just can't bring herself to see that her son could commit such a terrible crime. Betty comes to believe that Randy is innocent – not because Betty has any evidence of Randy's innocence but simply because Randy is her son who she adores. Clearly, Betty's belief about Randy's innocence is unjustified. The belief is the result of a process that is not reliable (familial bias does not tend towards truth). But later, after witnesses recant their testimony about seeing Randy at the scene of the crime, and after discovery of photographs

and credit card charges placing him a hundred miles away from the crime scene at the time of the crime, Betty – who is aware of (and grateful for!) this new evidence – *now* has a justified belief of Randy’s innocence. Beliefs can start out initially unjustified due to being caused by unreliable processes and later acquire justification due to being caused by a reliable process. Why can’t the same be true with religious belief?

Now, I do not think I am sufficiently qualified to explain all the “reliable” ways one may come to have a belief in God. But since epistemic reliabilism is a guiding concept of this paper, allow me to reflect on a couple of relevant quotes from Goldman’s seminal “What is Justified Belief?”:

Consider some faulty processes of belief-formation, i.e., processes whose belief-outputs would be classed as unjustified. Here are some examples: confused reasoning, wishful thinking, reliance on emotional attachment, mere hunch or guesswork, and hasty generalization. What do these faulty processes have in common? They share the feature of *unreliability*: They tend to produce *error* a large proportion of the time. [4]

I would add to this list another: the forming of a belief simply because it is the dominant belief in the vicinity in which you were born and raised (and there is no other evidence for that belief to which you have access). Goldman continues:

By contrast, which species of belief-forming (or belief sustaining) processes are intuitively justification-conferring? They include standard perceptual processes,

remembering, good reasoning, and introspection. What these processes seem to have in common is reliability: the beliefs they produce are generally reliable. [5]

It would take us too far afield to attempt anything more than a passing explanation of how this applies to belief in God, but the basic idea is this. Belief in God is very often caused by an unreliable process – most of us come to believe in God because that is the dominant belief where we were born and raised. But later, that belief can receive support from a belief that is the result of a reliable process. Now, I do not know if any of the arguments for God’s existence are in fact products of those “belief-forming (or belief sustaining) processes” that are justification-conferring, but many philosophers *believe* they are, and many theists have probably supported their initially unjustified belief in God with these arguments.

Generally, philosophers have taken one of two paths in showing that a belief in God could be the result of a reliable process. First, one could take the more traditional path of *natural theology*. Some of these arguments attempt to deductively prove the existence of God *a priori* by examining the concept of God (Anselm’s Ontological Argument); some attempt to deductively prove the existence of God *a posteriori* (Aquinas’s Causal Argument) by positing the unmoved mover or first cause of the series of causal chains of things that come into existence. Some attempt to inductively prove *a posteriori* the existence of God by drawing an analogy between artifacts and biological organisms (Paley’s Watchmaker Argument) or by showing that the hypothesis of God’s existence best explains various features about the universe (Swinburne).

Others take a different approach. Goldman includes “standard perceptual processes” as a species of reliable belief formation, and some philosophers (Alston) have tried to show, in a clever *tu quoque* appeal, that the theist’s religious experience of God “...is importantly parallel to the experiential justification of perceptual beliefs about the physical environment,” [6] and that these experiences – like ordinary perceptual experiences – are prima facie justified in the absence of reasons to believe that they are unreliable.

I assume that many theists initially come to believe in God simply because of where they were born and raised. Even though that process is unreliable, it doesn’t follow that their belief in God is unjustified, for they could have later supported or supplemented their belief in God with a belief that is the product of one of the reliable processes cited by Goldman. If those arguments are indeed sound, then many theists have justified religious beliefs, even if that belief has its origin in an unreliable process. [7]

Notes

1. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Religion_distribution.png.
2. I am assuming something like Goldman’s process reliabilism here. See his “What is Justified Belief?” In *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979.
3. For an overview of the standard objections to Goldman’s reliabilism, and his evolution from “process” to “rule” to “virtue” reliabilism, see chapter 8 of Matthias Steup’s *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).
4. Goldman (1979), p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 10.

6. William Alston, "Perceiving God." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 83 (1986); p. 656.

7. But now we have a puzzle, and it brings us back to the religious map of the world. When you look at the map, you might naturally come to believe that people have their particular religious beliefs simply because of where they are born and raised. But we pointed out that those beliefs may have *originated* in the unreliable process whereby one believes what they do simply because of geography, but it doesn't follow that their beliefs are unjustified if they used a belief that was the product of a reliable process (sound reason and argument, good evidence, etc...) to support or supplement that belief in God. But there's something strange about that map – something we might not expect to see. Imagine two religious maps of the world. Map one shows the distribution of religions based on religious belief obtained from the unreliable process – that is, imagine a map where everyone in the world has the religious beliefs they have *solely* because they absorb the religious beliefs in their vicinity. Map two shows the distribution of religions based on the religious belief of people who first obtained their belief from the unreliable process, and *then* used some reliable process to obtain a belief that supports or supplements their initial belief. Should we suppose that those maps will look any different?

Probably not.