CAN ATHEISM BE EPISTEMICALLY RESPONSIBLE WHEN SO MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD?

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Abstract. Nowadays the argument for the existence of God based on the common consent of mankind is taken to be so bad that contemporary atheists do not even bother to mention it. And it seems very few theists think that the argument is worth defending. In this paper I shall argue to the contrary: not only is the argument better than usually thought, but widespread belief in God constitutes a *prima facie* defeater for every reasonable atheist.

'You could say it's as if we've been programmed to be collectively smart.'
James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of the Crowds*

I. INTRODUCTION

When one considers the fact that several billion of the human race believe in the existence of God or in some kind of ultimate reality, even the most ardent sceptic will admit that the testimony we have on religious belief is quite impressive. But does this mean that the massive proportion of religious belief throughout human history points to the truth of that belief? In this paper, I will try to argue for the following thesis:

(T) Widespread belief in God is a *prima facie* defeater for atheism.

(T) is a version of the Common Consent Argument for the Existence of God, also known as the *consensus gentium* argument. To make it clear, we can consider (T) as the conclusion of the following reasoning:

(1) Widespread belief in God is *prima facie* evidence for theistic belief;

(2) Atheism is the denial of theistic belief;

(3) Therefore, widespread belief in God is a *prima facie* defeater for atheism.

In other words, the epistemic status of atheism is undermined by the fact that atheists are a tiny minority in the history of humanity. The fact that atheism is the exception and religious belief the rule is a problem for the responsible atheist, who wants to believe rightly, because if almost all human beings, past, present and maybe future, have religious belief, then it is less likely that atheism is true.

In order to defend (T), I will try to argue mainly for the truth of premise (1) of the argument – providing that premise (2) is true by definition and that conclusion (3) logically follows from premises (1) and (2). The argument for premise (1) is very simple:

(1) The vast majority of people have religious belief;

(2) Therefore religious belief is likely to be true.

This argument was very popular in the past, say before the Enlightenment, but it has fallen on very hard times since then. Classical versions of the argument can be found most notably in the writings of Seneca, Cicero, and Calvin. For example, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin endorses the view that the widespread belief in God demonstrates the existence of an innate tendency to believe in God. And as far as we are entitled to attribute a theistic argument to Calvin, he seems to think that this innate tendency to believe in God is evidence for theistic belief. Here is a famous extract from the *Institutes*:

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty [...] there is, as the eminent pagan Cicero says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep seated conviction that there is a God. [...] Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all. (Calvin 1546: I, iii, 1)

Calvin's reasoning here runs on two arguments: first, it is an indisputable fact that religion is universal; second, the fact that religion is universal makes a major contribution to the epistemic status of theistic belief.

As I have said, with a few exceptions, that kind of reasoning is now viewed with contempt and suspicion. I think two main reasons explain this situation.

First, it can be explained by the progressive secularization of the Western world. As Charles Taylor has it, the secularity consists (1) in the separation of religion from public spaces, (2) in the falling off of religious belief and practice, and (3) in the move to a society where belief in God is just one option among others, and not the more natural or acceptable to embrace (Taylor 2007: 1-3). In such a context, appealing to the widespread belief in God or, even worse, to the *universality* of religion, seems far less attractive than in the times of Calvin. Religious belief just doesn't seem to be universal anymore. Therefore the common consent argument for the existence of God cannot be valid.

Second, we have inherited from the Enlightenment a rather individualistic conception of epistemology, a conception dominated by a principle known as the epistemic self-reliance principle. According to this principle, the fact that someone else believes that *p* is never evidence for *p*, or it is at best poor evidence which should not be trusted without direct access to the evidence on which these others based their belief. In other words, an epistemically responsible agent must not rely on the testimony of others, but only on her own cognitive faculties. This principle implies the rejection of any authority in the epistemic domain: only if our reason is autonomous are we entitled to believe something. This idea can be traced back at least to Descartes and Locke, and has become prominent in the writings of Hume, Kant, and Voltaire. For example, in 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784), Kant insists that we must think for ourselves as individuals and never allow others to think for us, for to rely on others is the essence of passive thinking and prejudice. The motto is famous: '*Sapere aude*!' or 'Dare to think for yourself!'. Proponents of the self-reliance principle usually admit that in some areas, for example history or geography, testimony is inevitable, but that's why we don't have knowledge or legitimate certainty in those areas and that's why those areas are not models for rational knowledge. This philosophical resistance to the testimony of others can be very strong: according to Descartes, even when the others in question are experts and agree on some proposition *p*, I cannot tell I know the proposition *p* if I only believe *p* on account of what the experts say, without doing the reasoning justifying *p* by myself (Descartes 1704: Rule 3). If we accept this principle, then a theistic argument based on the common consent of

people cannot be epistemically acceptable, because it consists precisely in relying on the authority of others.

But the stress on epistemic autonomy typical of Enlightenment epistemology usually goes with another principle, namely the evidentialist principle. According to that principle, an epistemic agent ought to believe what fits her evidence. One of the most striking formulations of evidentialism is of course that of William Clifford in 'The Ethics of Belief': 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.' (Clifford 1877) Clifford's evidentialism has been preceded notably by Hume's rule: 'A wise man [...] proportions his belief to the evidence.' (Hume 1748)

The evidentialist principle was formulated not only to express how one ought to believe *generally*, but to show that religious belief *in particular* was unreasonable or irrational (van Inwagen 1998). For it is assumed that there isn't sufficient evidence for religious belief. Notably all traditional arguments for the existence of God have failed. Therefore, the ordinary believer believes in excess of any sufficient evidence.

My aim in the following is in fact quite modest. I want to suggest that there is an epistemic tension, if not a contradiction, between the self-reliance principle and the evidentialist principle. I will largely accept the evidentialist principle, albeit in a fallibilist way. What I will contest is the legitimacy of the self-reliance principle. To the contrary, I will argue for the epistemic value of appealing to the testimony of others and more specifically to common opinion as evidence for the proposition that the majority believes. As a consequence we can examine anew the traditional common consent argument for the existence of God, not as a conclusive proof, but as defeasible evidence that the responsible atheist should take into account.[1]

II. THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF COMMON CONSENT

The appeal to common consent is natural. Intuitively, if we find ourselves in a situation where we are the only one in a group of epistemic peers to believe that a certain proposition *p* is true, we will feel a kind of discomfort or even a cognitive dissonance (believing at the same time that we *are*

[1] The conclusion I argue for here is very close to that of Thomas Kelly in '*Consensus Gentium* : Reflections on the "Common Consent" Argument for the Existence of God' (2011). This paper owes actually very much to Kelly's work on this topic.

right and that we *can't* be right since everyone else disagrees). If we will not immediately think we're wrong, on the basis of what others believe, at least we will feel the need to look afresh at the available evidence. The intuition behind that feeling has a probabilistic nature. Suppose you are in a mathematics class: all the students but you get the same answer to a particular problem. What is the chance that you are the only one to get it right? For the majority to get it wrong, the same cognitive malfunction producing the same result must have occurred many times in different minds. For one person to be wrong, a cognitive malfunction needs only have occurred once. But the latter is generally more likely. Therefore in a case of peer disagreement, it is generally more likely that the majority is right than the lonely dissenter. In such a case, the number becomes evidence for the truth of the proposition that the majority believes.

Note that in the mathematics class example, we need to rule out the possibility that the students arrived at their answer by copying from a single member of the group. In the case of copying from a single member, the evidence supplied by the fact that the majority arrived at one answer is no stronger than the evidence supplied by the fact that this is the answer arrived at by the individual from whom the others had cheated. Maybe this individual is the mathematical genius of the group, so her belief is more trustworthy than yours! But it would not be a common consent argument anymore, only a particular case of testimonial belief based on the authority of an expert. The case of copying reveals an important feature of the epistemic value of common consent: massive agreement on a given proposition is evidence for that proposition inasmuch as a significant number of people arrive *independently* at that proposition (Kelly 2011: 152). I will return later to the problem of the independence of belief when I discuss religious belief.

Despite the epistemic value we intuitively attach to common consent, appealing to popular opinion is usually held with contempt by philosophers. It even has a place of choice in the philosophical bestiary of fallacies, under the name of fallacy of *argumentum ad populum*. It is assumed that to appeal to common beliefs is contrary to the duty of the philosopher, which is precisely to undermine popular opinion and to reach (and teach) intellectual autonomy.

But exactly what is supposed to be fallacious with appealing to common consent? The first possibility, following the cartesian stance, could be to dismiss all kinds of testimonial knowledge, whether it means belief acquired through the authority of common consent or belief

acquired through the authority of a few experts. I won't take time here to argue against this broad position, which is not specifically directed against the argument from common consent. Suffice to say that this position, which can be called epistemic egoism, does not seem tenable. First, a coherent epistemic egoist will end up with very few rational beliefs, inasmuch as a considerable amount of our beliefs are acquired through the authority of others (Pouivet 2005: 26). Second, the epistemic egoist is in fact incoherent, because she cannot consistently trust her own epistemic faculties but not those of others, providing there is generally no reason to think that her faculties are more reliable or trustworthy than those of others (Zagzebski 2009: 88). On the contrary, a virtuous epistemic agent must be reminded that the outputs of others' faculties should be *prima facie*, if not *ultima facie*, trusted.

Fair enough, will say the opponent to the common consent argument, but it only means that we sometimes need to trust others to acquire new beliefs: it may be justified where one of our beliefs conflicts with the opinion of an expert or a better informed agent, but it doesn't imply that we can trust the opinion of the crowd. In other words, a virtuous epistemic agent is one who is able to tell the difference between reliable authority and unreliable authority. And as a matter of fact, the majority view is not reliable, so we should not trust it. To prove her case, the opponent to the common consent argument will probably mention a typical case like the flat earth case. For centuries, it seems that the vast majority of people believed that the earth was flat. We now know this belief is false. Therefore if we had based our belief on what the majority believed during that time, we would have had a false belief. But is that kind of example sufficient to show that the common consent argument is a fallacy? Following Michael Huemer, I will consider three ways to understand the so-called fallacy of *argumentum ad populum* (Huemer 2013: 102-105). As it will appear, neither shows that relying on common agreement is a fallacy.

First, the opponent of the *argumentum ad populum* might want to say that the very existence of widespread belief does not provide *conclusive proof* for the proposition that the majority believes. The argument would go like this: (1) there are *some* cases, like the flat earth case, in which widespread beliefs are false; (2) therefore it is not epistemically responsible to appeal to popular opinion.

This objection to the rationality of the common consent argument is not very convincing. A belief-forming method needs not be infallible to

be rational and useful. In fact, all or nearly all belief-forming methods are fallible, including sensory observation and scientific reasoning. But this does not show that we must consider observation, science and all other belief-forming methods as fallacious. There is no reason to think that what applies to those belief-forming methods doesn't apply to the belief-forming method of common consent. And to use common consent as evidence for religious belief will be no exception to that rule: it will provide only *defeasible* evidence. As Michael Williams has it, fallibilism, based on the idea that human beings are prone to errors when engaging in the pursuit of truth, is the trademark of modern epistemology (Williams 2001: 41). A modern version of the common consent argument should follow the same path.

Second, the fallacy talk might mean that the very existence of widespread belief does not provide *any evidence at all* for the proposition that the majority believes. That would mean that very widely held beliefs are correct no more often than propositions drawn at random. So a responsible epistemic agent should not rely on them.

That interpretation of the *consensus gentium* argument seems completely unwarranted. First, the existence of several errors produced by one belief-forming method does not show that method to be completely evidentially worthless. Of course, that response would not be very convincing if it appears that widely held beliefs are very often false. But, and this is our second response to this interpretation, there are remarkable correlations between popular opinions and true beliefs. For example, a small minority of people still believe that the earth is flat, that the moon landings were fake or that the American government is allied with grey aliens; the majority disagrees. Few people believe themselves to be Elvis Presley or to be made of glass, while the majority of those around them disagree. In all these cases, the majority is right and the minority is wrong. And third, as it was said earlier, taken generally it is more probable that the majority is right than the minority, because a cognitive malfunction producing the same belief is less likely to appear many times in different minds than to appear a small number of times. Therefore widely held beliefs provide more evidence than propositions held from random guess.

Now the last way to understand the fallacy could be the following: appeal to popular opinion does not provide *strong* evidence for the proposition the majority believes. That solution rules out the first solution (for a belief-forming method needs not produce *infallible* conclusions

to be rational) and the second solution (for common consent *does* produce some evidence), but it denies that common consent is really reliable when we look for truth. There could be two ways to arrive at that conclusion. First, by considering that the flat earth case and a fewer similar cases (like, for example, the case of Giordano Bruno) constitute a large and random sample of popular beliefs in which a huge percentage turns out to be false. Second, by considering, maybe on the basis of ordinary background experience and knowledge, that the flat earth case and similar cases are *typical* of the situations where a dissenter believes against a majority view. But neither of these two possibilities seems decisive.

First, we could mention several cases of popular beliefs taken from a *really* random and large sample in which a huge percentage turns out to be true. For example, that 2 + 2 equal 4, that Abraham Lincoln really existed, that human beings differ from inanimate objects, that blood has an important function in the body, that the sun is bigger than it seems, that telepathy is impossible, that birds come from eggs or that Elvis Presley is dead. And more controversially I would add some normative beliefs, like the belief that killing a child for pleasure is bad, the belief that it is better to be free than to be a slave or the belief that the Grand Canyon is sublime. Despite cases like the flat earth case, the amount of true common beliefs is impressive and it should then be regarded as evidentially relevant.

Second, if we refer to the background of our ordinary experience and knowledge, it is safe to say that the flat earth case is *not* typical of situations of disagreement between a minority and a majority. Based on our ordinary experience, a typical case of a dissenter against a majority view would be the one who believes that the moon landings were fake, that condensation trails produced by airplanes are in fact chemtrails spread by secret military agencies, or that the US government is responsible for 9/11. Based on ordinary experience, typical cases of situations of disagreement of a minority against a majority view are cases where it is highly probable that the minority is wrong and the majority right.

From all this, I conclude that the epistemic value of common consent is higher than it is usually thought and that it is evidentially highly relevant. Again, I don't speak here of conclusive proof, but of defeasible or *prima facie* evidence that can be weakened or strengthened by other pieces of evidence. When common consent occurs on a given proposition and providing the consensus arrived at is the product of at least partly

independent belief, the more likely explanation of that fact will include the truth of the proposition, because it is more probable that a cognitive malfunction occurs a small number of times in a few minds than a great many times in many different minds. Thus, a responsible epistemic agent must learn to trust popular opinion and be very careful if one of her beliefs contradicts the majority view. As a consequence the responsible atheist must admit that vastly widespread religious belief is *prima facie* evidence against her own belief.

III. THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF COMMON CONSENT FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

If what has been said previously is correct, we could construct a common consent argument for the existence of God, based on the idea that widespread belief counts as *prima facie* evidence for that belief. The complete argument would go like this:

(1) Religious belief is the majority view throughout human history;

(2) Atheism is the denial of religious belief;

(3) A false belief is essentially the product of a cognitive malfunction of some sort;

(4) It is more probable that a cognitive malfunction occurs a small number of times in a few minds than a great many times in many different minds;

(5) Therefore religious belief is *prima facie* more likely to be true than atheism.

I took some time to argue for premise (4), so I will take it largely for granted now. I won't take time to argue for premise (3): I don't think there is much turning on it here. I understand 'cognitive malfunction' in a very broad sense, including epistemic defaults for which the agent is responsible (like indifference to truth, dogmatism, or intellectual cowardice) and epistemic defaults for which the agent is less responsible or not responsible at all (like frame effects, context biases, content biases, defective cognitive faculties and so on).

In the conclusion of the line of reasoning, I emphasize that the evidence given by widespread religious belief is *prima facie* or defeasible: by itself it is not sufficient to make belief in God permissible when all the evidence is taken into account (Kelly 2010: 144). It has to be weighed

against other pieces of evidence for and against the existence of God. For example, it can be weakened by *contra* evidence given by the divine hiddenness argument or by the problem of evil, as well as by naturalistic explanations of belief in the divine. It can also be strengthened by arguments like the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, or the design argument. The common consent about the existence of God is only a *defeasible* reason to believe, but it is nonetheless a *reason*. And a reason the atheist must take seriously.

So now we're left with premise (1) and premise (2). The first one is an empirical premise. The second a logical premise.

I will begin with premise (2). Taken literally it is in fact false or at best approximate. Up to now I have talked interchangeably of 'belief in God', 'theistic belief' and 'religious belief'. In a broad sense, all these expressions are equivalent: they all point to something outside the physical universe. But in a narrow sense, 'theistic belief' and 'belief in God' have a more precise content than 'religious belief'. A theistic belief is a belief in the existence of a certain kind of person, all powerful, omniscient, perfectly good, creator and sustainer of the universe, and who takes care in one way or another of his creation, and most notably of human beings. I take 'belief in God' here to be strictly equivalent to 'theistic belief'. On the other hand, religious belief includes theistic belief and the various beliefs attached to it, like the particular creeds of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and their variants, but it also refers to the creeds of non-classical theistic religions like Hinduism or pantheism, to the creeds of non-theistic religions like the different variants of Buddhism and to all sorts of folk religions. In other words, one can have religious beliefs without believing in God or without being a classical theist, that is, while being some sort of atheist.

Literally speaking, atheism is not the denial of religious belief in general, but only of theism, which is a species of religious belief. Literally speaking, the denial of religious belief is metaphysical naturalism. Metaphysical naturalism is the claim that there are no supernatural entities or no entities that are not reducible to the entities appearing in our best scientific explanations. A religious belief implies that there is some ultimate and transcendent reality, it can be a personal god or something else, that is, a reality not reducible to the universe as it is described by the natural sciences. To be more precise, I will equate here religious belief with what John Schellenberg calls 'ultimism'. Ultimism is the view according to which there exists a reality that is ultimate

metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically (Schellenberg 2005). It identifies the most basic level of all religious beliefs, including classical theism. The argument from common consent is stronger when applied to ultimism than to theism for at least two reasons:

(1) As ultimism includes theism, there are more people committed to ultimism than to theism.

(2) Some of the more conclusive evidence against theism doesn't clearly apply to ultimism (for example the argument from divine hiddenness and the problem of evil).

In the following, and as previously, I will not clearly choose between theism and ultimism, partly because the argument from common consent remains fundamentally the same, all things being equal, in both cases. The other reason is, although this paper endorses theism, I think a religion identified with ultimism and free of the content attached to it by classical theism is a very rational option.

Finally, a few notes on the first premise of the common consent argument: it says that the vast majority of people believe in God or profess to have religious beliefs. Is that premise true? In the times of Cicero or Calvin, that premise was based mainly on the intuitions of the philosophers and theologians arguing for the argument, on the sayings of their relatives and on a few testimonies from abroad. Now that premise can be empirically tested with systematic and large surveys on the rates of belief in God in various countries worldwide. As a consequence, it is epistemically stronger than ever. I will mention two recent surveys to justify the first premise:

– According to a Gallup International Survey published in 2012, sixty per cent of the world population believes in God.
– According to a meta-survey made by the Pew Research Center and published the same year, eighty-four percent of the world population has a religion, while only sixteen percent is non-religious (which means atheist or agnostic). This meta-survey compiles two thousand and five hundred polls and surveys made in various countries worldwide.

So depending on whether you insist on classical theism or on ultimism, there are sixty to eighty percent of the world population that is religious. As I said in the beginning, the number is impressive and so it is impressive evidence for religious belief.

Although the evidence is far more shallow in that case, I think that this empirical premise should also be considered from a synchronic point of view or, maybe less pedantically, from a temporal point of view, that is, with an eye on the past. The percentage of ultimists and/or theists over the course of humanity's history is certainly much higher than just present-day ultimists and/or theists. If we include the number of religious believers of the past to the total number of believers, the argument from common consent becomes stronger, albeit defeasibly.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

I turn now to the objections that can still be raised against the common consent argument for religious belief and I try to show how we can respond to them.

The first objection points to the intellectual merits of the majority of religious believers. We could call it the IQ objection. According to it, the unsophisticated and poorly informed are overtly represented among theists and religious believers, whereas the well-educated and critical reasoners are more likely to be atheists (Kelly 2010: 149). The idea behind this is that if it is legitimate to rely upon the testimony of others, the virtuous epistemic agent is the one who discriminates between those who are in a better position to judge the proposition in question. Generally, those in a better position are those who have thought deeply on the available evidence, who are the most educated, informed and critical of the reasoners. Since the evidence provided by a small group of high-quality reasoners is supposed to be higher than the evidence provided by the cumulative opinion of a large number of people comparatively less sophisticated, and since in matters of religion, the sophisticated reasoners are mostly atheists and/or naturalists, then the stronger evidence favours atheism and metaphysical naturalism.

How can one respond to that objection? First, as it has been convincingly argued for by James Surowiecki, the *cumulative* opinion of a large number of people who are not the best informed on a given proposition often provides better evidence for that proposition that the opinion of a small number of experts (Surowiecki 2004). One of the main reasons that explains the performance of collective intelligence over the judgment of a small group of experts is the diversity of skills and information displayed by people in the larger group, which makes it smarter overall. Second, there are in fact lots of very sophisticated

religious believers. It is especially true if we consider the number of past scientists and philosophers who were theists: from a temporal perspective, there are probably more sophisticated religious believers than sophisticated atheists. Of course, the fact that they lived in a time when almost everyone was a theist may have produced a context bias that diminishes the epistemic value of their belief. Third, it can be useful to point out that the majority of contemporary philosophers of religion are theists and/or defend the rationality of religion (according to *PhilPapers Survey*, the ratio is seven for ten). We can give two possible explanations of this datum.

First, the less charitable explanation: philosophy of religion attracts mostly philosophers who happen to be believers because they're looking for a way to justify their belief. As a consequence, the fact that they find the arguments for the rationality of religion stronger than the arguments for atheism is no surprise and constitutes poor evidence for their belief. But there is a more charitable explanation: even if the domain of religion attracts mostly religious philosophers, it doesn't imply that their judgment on the epistemic value of philosophical arguments is completely obscured by their previous belief. They need not accept or reject arguments just because arguments confirm or contradict their belief. For if we would accept this thesis in the domain of philosophy of religion, we should also accept it in other areas of philosophy and distrust whatever philosophers have to say. For example, contemporary metaphysicians and philosophers of mind are mostly naturalists and they were probably naturalists before they engaged in their inquiries: does that completely undermine their alleged expertise? I don't think so. So we shouldn't apply another standard to the philosophy of religion. On balance, therefore, it seems safe to say that the IQ objection is not very strong.

The second objection I want to examine is the objection from the demographics of theism. According to that objection, the widespread belief in God is not a significant piece of evidence for theism, because theistic belief is unevenly distributed around the world (Maitzen 2006). For example, in Saudi Arabia, 95 per cent of the population are Muslim and therefore theists, while in Thailand, 95 percent are Buddhist and therefore at most 5 per cent are theists. While atheism is virtually nonexistent in Africa, South America, and the Middle East, it increases in Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia (Zuckerman 2011). It seems that the uneven distribution of belief in God is much more likely on

naturalism than on theism. Theistic explanations of that fact are not convincing, but it is easily explained by the influence of natural forces like culture, economics, and politics, which are not evenly distributed around the world. The aim of the objection is to undermine the rationality of the belief in a perfectly good personal god who would have implanted in all human beings a disposition to believe in him, provided that we don't resist him.

There are various ways to respond to the argument from the demographics of theism. First, it seems the objection doesn't apply to the common consent argument when it is applied to religious belief understood as ultimism: ultimism is really universal and evenly distributed, almost as religion is. Second, I think the objection presupposes a false alternative when it is applied to belief in God: either people come to believe in God because the belief is innate (and then it would be evenly distributed if God is good) or people believe in God through cultural transmission and social pressure (in which case we could predict that it will not be evenly distributed). But there is a third solution: people believe in God as a combined result of innate cognitive faculties (maybe implanted by God, by evolution, or by both of them) and cultural transmission and social pressure. That third solution has been convincingly argued for by cognitive scientists like Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett. For example Barrett says:

> [...] children have a naturally developing receptivity to many core religious beliefs, particularly beliefs about the existence of supernatural beings. Given a little environmental encouragement, they become believers in superhuman agency. But this natural receptivity to religious ideas is limited. Many theological ideas, of the sorts religious specialists develop and many believers affirm as part of historic creeds do not number with those children are biased to acquire. Rather, these theological beliefs (such as nontemporality, nonspaciality, and the like) are conceptually difficult for children (and adults) and require special cultural scaffolding to spread effectively. In this regard, theological ideas share much in common with other ideas generated reflectively in special cultural conditions such as those found in modern science. (Barrett 2012: 150)

One of the factors that may contribute to a natural belief in gods is the human cognitive system for detective agents and agency around us. This adaptive system is called the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD): it helped us survive in detecting predators, with nothing lost

when we attributed agency to the simple rustling of leaves. As Barrett argues, disposition to theistic belief is natural, but cultural transmission and social pressure play an important role to develop and refine the belief. But if cultural environment can modify the content of religious belief, it can also diminish it or even turn it into something else. For example, we can predict that the HADD will be less sensitive in a safer environment. That's why maybe atheism is more common in relatively affluent and safe post-industrial societies. Also, the natural disposition to explain certain events and situations by appealing to the activity of gods, can be satisfied by appealing to the causation of pseudo-agents (Barrett 2012: 212-216). Those pseudo-agents include for example Fate, Destiny, Chance, Providence, Nature, Government and State: we don't think of them as having minds or mental states, but they play the same explanatory role as superhuman agency because we sometimes treat them as quasi-agents with quasi-intentions. So we can easily imagine that in some cultural areas the reference to pseudo-agents has been fostered without significantly altering the natural disposition towards belief in superhuman agency. If we consider the example of Thailand mentioned above, where people are mostly Buddhist, the notions of Karma (the chain of cause and effect) or of Samsara (the endless cycle of death and rebirth) can easily function as pseudo-agents. Therefore, the diversity of the cultural environments surrounding belief can explain the uneven distribution of believe in God without undermining the possibility that God has implanted in us an innate tendency to believe in Him. As a consequence, despite the uneven distribution of belief, the fact of common consent is still a significant piece of evidence.

The third objection rests on the following reasoning: for massive agreement on a given proposition to be evidentially relevant, a significant number of people must have arrived *independently* at that proposition (remember the math class example and the case of cheating). But in the case of religious belief, we can assert that the convergence of belief is largely due to mutual influence and influence by common sources. Therefore the evidence given by massive religious belief is weaker than the proponent of the common consent argument claims (Kelly 2010: 152).

There are three ways to respond to that objection. First if we consider religious belief on a large scale, the mutual influence of the believers is not absolute: it is probable that a certain number of groups relatively isolated from one another nevertheless arrive at the same belief. Of

course it less true for theism than for ultimism. Second, as argued by Kelly, we should distinguish between the *acquisition* of religious belief and its *persistence*, which is impressive:

> Even in cases in which individuals initially acquire some belief from a common source, there is for each person the possibility of later abandoning it in the light of subsequent experience and reflection. In the case of religious belief, however, sufficiently many individuals do not do this that the strong supermajority persists over time. (Kelly 2010: 153)

For example, although we acquire the belief in Santa Claus and the belief in the tooth fairy because they are taught to us by our parents when we are children, we are a super strong majority to abandon such beliefs independently. On the other hand, although the proposition '2 + 2 = 4' is learnt from others and not independently, we massively persist in that belief over time, not because we have been influenced by others, but because it still seems true to us in light of subsequent experience and reflection. Finally, the fact that this proposition is true is the best explanation of the fact that it is widely held. The same could hold for religious belief. Thirdly, following the cognitive science of religion, we can distinguish between our natural tendency to believe in superhuman agency and later refinements of that belief inside a particular tradition: if the latter is acquired through cultural influence, the former is clearly largely autonomous. In other words several billions of human beings throughout history have probably arrived independently at the same belief, namely that there exists an ultimate reality that transcends the physical universe and that is responsible for the way things are. What has been acquired from mutual influence is all the later religious refinements that effectively vary from one culture to another.

CONCLUSION

My question was: can the atheist be epistemically responsible when so many people believe in God? My response is yes, provided she takes the fact of widespread religious belief as serious evidence for that belief and as a defeater for her belief. Of course that evidence is defeasible: it is added to the total evidence available, but it does not swamp any other evidence we can reach. If the atheist thinks the evidence of massive religious belief can be defeated by other pieces of evidence (like, for example, the problem of evil, the divine hiddenness argument, or the argument

from the demographics of theism), nonetheless she will be confronted by a huge challenge: to explain convincingly how is it possible that several billion human beings, belonging to such different cultural backgrounds, have been trapped in such an illusion, while a few epistemic elite were able to escape and to switch off their natural tendency to believe in God or in some kind of ultimate reality. If collective intelligence has proven to be effective in several areas and if religious belief is almost universal, then it seems reasonable to trust the common judgement of mankind on this subject and to be sceptical about the atheist stance.

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