

Article

How to Fail to Debunk Animism

Tiddy Smith

Department of Philosophy, University of Otago, Dunedin 9016, New Zealand; smithtiddy@gmail.com

Abstract: Perry Hendricks argues that my common consent argument for animism fails. The failure, he argues, comes down to the fact that there is widespread agreement in non-animism. Were animism correct, then it is improbable, argues Hendricks, that animism would ever be unpopular. Hendricks' argument is premised on several problematic assumptions, which I attempt to address. Once these assumptions are exposed, it is clear that Hendricks' argument is weaker than it first appears, leaving my position relatively unscathed.

Keywords: animism; common consent arguments; disagreement; social epistemology

1. Introduction

A couple of years ago, I presented an argument in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* which sought to defend animism. The argument was that animism (which is usually taken to be a false and superstitious way of understanding the world) had at least one very strong argument in its favour.

The argument I put forward was a form of *consensus gentium*, modelled on the traditional common consent argument for the existence of God (an argument which has found new life via discussions such as Zagzebski (2012) and Kelly (2011). But others, such as Van Eyghen (2016), have developed similar arguments relating directly to animism). My argument ran like this:

1. Near enough everyone, in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era, independently agrees that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits.
2. Whatever near enough everyone in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era believes independently of the beliefs of outsiders is probably true. *Therefore*, it is probable that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits. (Smith 2020, p. 342)

The basic gist of my argument is that historically isolated human societies converge on the view that animism is correct, while theism garners relatively less agreement between such isolated societies. That is simply a matter of anthropological consensus (see Peoples et al. 2016). So, animism is the epistemic beneficiary of surprising *independent agreement*. Of course, theism is more popular worldwide. But the dominance of theism is the result of well-known, evidentially irrelevant historical events such as colonization, the introduction of foreign viruses, economic pressures, and missionizing. For this reason, widespread belief in theism is unsurprising and hardly speaks in favour of a god's existence. On the other hand, the independent agreement that remains between animist communities is nearly miraculous and lends support to the animist's claims.

And shouldn't I be so lucky, but Perry Hendricks agrees with me! Hendricks argues that surprising independent agreement about animism would indeed raise the posterior probability of animism. However, Hendricks says, I have failed to give any extra weight to the claims of animists, since the widespread *rejection* of animism across the globe is at least as strong evidence *against* it. According to Hendricks, the current widespread *unpopularity* of animism neutralizes any strength my argument might have given to the animist.



Citation: Smith, Tiddy. 2022. How to Fail to Debunk Animism. *Religions* 13: 634. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070634>

Academic Editor: Joseph Rivera

Received: 21 April 2022

Accepted: 20 June 2022

Published: 8 July 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Although Hendricks does not present an argument for it, he goes so far as to say that he is “inclined to think [that the current unpopularity of animism] is *far* stronger evidence against animism than Smith’s evidence is for animism, and so we have good reason to reject animism, all things considered” (Hendricks 2022, p. 547). Of course, he is welcome to feel that way. But whatever his personal inclinations, the core of Hendrick’s argument is narrower and rather simple in form: “Sure,” thinks Hendricks, “*you* may have independent agreement, but *I* have the raw numbers!” Whereas I may have a rag-tag army of isolated animists, Hendricks has the full might of the non-animist mob behind him. So, this philosophical game was nothing but a tit-for-tat that ended in a draw.

Some aspects of Hendricks’ argument are quite persuasive, but I do see several fundamental flaws. Let me outline my thoughts about Hendricks’ paper which he titled “How to Debunk Animism”.

2. Hendricks and Hiddenness

Hendricks argues that if there really are things like “nature spirits” then it is strange, to say the least, that the overwhelming majority fail to think so. While his argument could have made use of some recent work on the relative non-importance of independent belief (e.g., Lackey 2013), Hendricks instead grounds his argument on a variation of Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness. For those unfamiliar, Schellenberg’s argument runs that nonresistant, nonbelievers exist. But if nonresistant, nonbelievers exist, then a loving God should have revealed himself to them. And he hasn’t. Therefore, a loving god doesn’t exist. That’s the basic idea. As Schellenberg writes:

God, if he is perfectly loving . . . will always be open to being in a personal relationship with any finite person. However, if this is the case, then no finite person will ever nonresistantly not believe that God exists. (Schellenberg 2015, p. 103)

Adopting Schellenberg’s approach, Hendricks develops what he calls “the problem of animistic hiddenness” which focuses specifically on non-believers in animism. There are some differences between the two arguments. Hendricks notes that since the omnibenevolence of nature spirits is not assumed, the notion of nonresistance is not at issue. And, cutting a fairly short story shorter, Hendricks concludes that the situation is basically the same for animism as it is for theism. If Schellenberg is right, there should not exist nonresistant nontheists if theism is true. And if Hendricks is right, there should not exist such a preponderance of non-animists if animism is true. If there were nature spirits, he argues, then “they are equally as likely to reveal themselves to past generations as they are to the current generation”. He then goes on to make the stronger claim that “it would be very surprising if belief in nature spirits was not widespread during any historical era”.

Even though his argument seems to be simpler than Schellenberg’s, Hendricks nevertheless makes several assumptions—important ones—without which his argument would fail to land. If I may clarify what I think these assumptions are, I believe we may come to some better understanding as to the strength of his argument. As I will argue, once the assumptions are unpacked, the true strength of his argument diminishes. My rag-tag army of animists survives his mob attack. There are four assumptions that I will focus on in this article. Let me list them quickly, before taking on each in turn.

The first assumption is that raw numbers matter, at least when it comes to religious belief. So, the fact that there is overwhelming agreement about *some* religious proposition is at least *prima facie* evidence for that proposition. It does not ultimately matter, Hendricks seems to think, *how* any particular agreement is generated. Where there is a widespread agreement about *x*, there is evidence for *x*. Let’s call this basic assumption the *popularity principle*, which runs that any proposition is afforded at least some *prima facie* justification if the majority believe it.

The second assumption that Hendricks appears to make has to do with the *constancy* of the behaviour of nature spirits (or non-human persons) over time. The behaviour of these religious entities should not radically change over time or place. As Hendricks

writes: “they are equally as likely to reveal themselves to past generations as they are to the current generation”. So, no matter how different modern human populations are from their primitive forebears, there would be (according to Hendricks) *no difference in the rate of communication* from non-human persons to human persons. We can call this the *constancy principle*, which runs that non-human spirits would pursue communication with humans at roughly the same rate throughout human history and prehistory.

The third assumption that Hendricks makes is that human beings are as *capable of receiving* this spiritual communication during all eras and in all places. So, whereas the constancy principle states that spirits should communicate with us at a constant rate, this principle holds that *human beings* are roughly equally receptive to this communication at all times and places. We can call this the *receptiveness principle*.

The fourth assumption is that animism is currently unpopular. Indeed, this was an assumption that Hendricks borrowed directly from me. Although it is more than fair for Hendricks to accept my own assumptions in an effort to defeat me, I will argue that this assumption is too simplistic. But in any case, Hendrick’s argument hinges on the idea that animism is a minority view, held only by a few outlier human communities (e.g., hunter-gatherers, neopagans, and perhaps a few rural Japanese farmers). I will label this assumption *Animistic Unpopularity*.

I believe that Hendricks’ argument works perfectly well if we accept these four assumptions. However, I am inclined to reject each and every one of them. All four assumptions have serious problems which I hope to outline. Most prominently, the popularity principle cannot be maintained against what are ultimately rather bog-standard philosophical objections. Indeed, most of these objections were contained in my original paper, and yet none were dealt with by Hendricks. So let’s take on that principle, the popularity principle, first.

3. The Popularity Principle

The popularity principle states that *prima facie* justification is given to a proposition about which there is widespread agreement. So, given the widespread popularity of the belief that animism is false, there is *prima facie* justification for the claim that it *is* false. Straight away we encounter a question (although not necessarily a difficult one): Precisely how much agreement is required in order to count as sufficiently widespread. 70%? 80%? Unanimous agreement? In turn, we may ask if the degree of justification given to a proposition is concomitant with the degree of agreement it generates (screening off that particular claim from any other evidence for/against it). None of this is discussed by Hendricks, so the precise nature of the popularity principle which he is defending is ultimately unclear. This muddies the water of his argument in no small way, as it is his contention that, *on balance*, the widespread unpopularity of animism neutralizes my argument from independent agreement. But without these questions about weights and measures having answers, we are facing little more than sweeping rhetorical maneuvers. A balance requires weights, and Hendricks has not done the work to show that the weights are thus and so on either side of the argument. (How many more animists, for example, would need to be recruited before Hendricks would have to eat his own hat?).

There may be good answers to the questions posed above about the popularity principle. But other problems may be unanswerable. Most importantly, Hendricks does not show how the popularity principle overcomes the sceptical view presented in my argument (Smith 2020, p. 4) i.e., that the present unpopularity of animism has been caused by off-track processes such as missionizing, war, mass conversion, tax kicks, breeding etc. Again, this is no small omission by Hendricks, who seeks to defeat my argument without addressing what is perhaps its strongest pillar.

Since Hendricks did not engage with these points, I can repeat what they were. No agreement which is manufactured by coercion can be taken as evidentially salient by honest philosophers. Most would agree that there exist at least some cases in which the conversion of animists away from their beliefs would not be seen as evidence against animism e.g., if an animist were threatened with the death penalty. So, the question of whether or not raw

numbers matter here will largely hinge on historical facts about the nature of the pressures that were faced by those who ultimately rejected animism. If the historical pressures were such that any reasonable person would yield to them, one can hardly fault the animists for so yielding (and so, one can hardly find reason to *doubt* animism because of their yielding). Overlooking such historical pressures is therefore an easy (if not positively lazy) way to justify the claim that animism is probably false.

Animist beliefs were decimated during the age of discovery (and have continued to be discouraged ever since) by a (violent) process of colonization and by the oppression of traditional cultures, languages, and religions. The introduction of foreign germs also took a devastating toll on the colonized, whose societies suffered wave after wave of decline. The superior technology and science of the invaders was often taken as evidence (by indigenous peoples) for the truth of the invaders' *religious* beliefs, despite the fact that the advanced body of technological and scientific knowledge had not been drawn from religion. For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand, indigenous Māori converted to Christianity en masse, often under the belief that the impressive medical skills of European settlers derived from magical processes associated with the cross. Interestingly, it is only since the so-called "Māori renaissance" beginning in the mid-1980s (a time during which Māori language and culture were reinvigorated) that animist commitments came to be both appreciated again and even effected by law (as in the 2017 *Te Awa Tupua Bill*).

What these historical facts present us with is a debunking argument for non-animism. The modern, widespread belief that animism is false is itself the result of off-track processes. It is not implausible that these processes would occur even given the truth of animism. Given the sorts of pressures faced by indigenous peoples to convert away from their traditional views, it is unsurprising that they did so. And if some form of animism is the ultimate truth about matters religious, then mainline believers have been seriously off-track in their beliefs for centuries.¹

So, the *popularity principle* suffers for a lack of precision, as well as for failing to engage with the debunking arguments presented in my original paper, and which are quite obviously a key feature of the argument. I agree with Hendricks that raw numbers may matter in some, or even many cases. I agree that social epistemology needs to continue to inquire as to how raw numbers matter. But I disagree that one can point to the raw numbers *in this particular case*, a case in which the raw numbers are clearly non-evidential, and claim any kind of victory. On the contrary, The arguments discussed in the section suggest that the ascendancy of anti-animism is a historical quirk of fortune, which can be explained away quite easily.²

4. The Constancy Principle

So we turn to the *constancy principle*, which states that non-human spirits would attempt to communicate with humans at roughly the same rate throughout human history. This principle can be seen at play in the following passage:

If nature spirits are similar to us, then we would expect for nature spirits to reveal themselves roughly equally to all population groups at all times: if nature spirits revealed themselves to American Indians 500 years ago, we would expect for them to also reveal themselves to current North Americans—there are not substantial enough differences between us and our predecessors to warrant such silence. (Hendricks 2022, p. 547)

Why, indeed, are the spirits so silent? The rate of communication should be relatively stable through all eras, shouldn't it? It is for this principle, as well as the next one, that we will need to develop an animist "theodicy" of sorts. We will need to explain why it seems as though nature spirits are not behaving in accordance with the principle.

Why should we assume that the constancy principle holds? Hendricks seems to think that this principle is largely common sense, although he sees some justification for the principle in my argument, since I wrote that "some natural phenomena have spirits or an

interior life akin to our own" (Smith 2020, p. 341). "So," says Hendricks, "if nature spirits exist, then there are spirits that are similar to us that occupy bodies not usually thought to have mental states, such as trees, mountains and so on" (Hendricks 2022, p. 547). The idea seems to be that if nature spirits are *like* us, then they are as communicative as we are. Thus (to provide what should be taken as an obvious caricature), if I were to raise an axe to the tree, we should expect the tree to whelp "Oi! Stop that, you fiend!" And we should expect this just because *that is how we would behave* when facing the same sort of threat. And we should expect this communication as a matter of course.

There are, it seems to me, all sorts of reasons that we might expect animistic communications to be, in the current era, not forthcoming. A major reason for this could potentially be due to our own contemporary disregard for the good of the environment, and for our taking it as a mere resource for consumption. To give a very human parallel, it may be that nature spirits have decided to cut off all diplomatic ties with human societies. We have declared our position, we have assumed the role of aggressor, and in such a situation, animistic communication channels may presently be closed off to us.

And if we (taking the natural environment to be impersonal and beyond moral concern) set ourselves in a non-communicative position with nature, I see good reason why nature herself may take the same position with regard to us. And while we largely remain committed to this stance, I see no reason why it should be nature who reaches out first to end the impasse. Hendricks anticipates this argument and gives his own view on the matter:

The way that we (modern civilization) treat the environment threatens nature spirits (if any exist) with extinction. However, the best bet for nature spirits to avoid extinction would be to reveal themselves to us, and this remains true even if they distrust us—even if they distrust modern civilization, the threat of extinction would override their distrust and make it likely that they would reveal themselves (to save themselves). And so a distrust of modern civilization will not suffice to explain animistic hiddenness. (Hendricks 2022, p. 548)

But in wartime situations, we do not expect diplomatic relations to hold in this way. Diplomatic channels may presently be closed to us. And if it is the case that nature has simply *capitulated* to our attack, then the case would be just as we find it. Nature has given up against such an overwhelming attack. Perhaps the silence that we encounter is the environment's closest approximation to a white flag. On the other hand, perhaps rivers that can no longer be swum in, perhaps disappearing lakes, perhaps a myriad of the environmental ills we presently face represent nature's last stand against our relentless abuse.

As an aside, it is difficult to understand how to interpret Hendricks' constancy principle in any way that is not cartoonishly anthropomorphic. He seems to take it that if nature spirits are so like us, they ought to communicate *in exactly the same manner*, as expressively, and as consistently, as we ourselves communicate with each other. But of course, that is not what we find. To my mind, this view of "nature's voice" simply conflates human and non-human communication in a way that can only be an Aunt Sally: a caricature of non-human persons as like the imaginary tree who might shout "Oi, stop that!"

Let's begin with some familiar cases. We experience non-human animal communications on a daily basis. We know that this communication is of a kind that is in many ways unlike human communication, and that such communication requires a certain degree of expertise and sensitivity to the creatures encountered. When the dog bares its teeth, or yawns, we know this may be construed in certain situations as a kind of threat. Yet when we humans bare our teeth, we are usually expressing affability or joy. When we yawn, there is no secret that we are tired. When the tree weeps sap, there was no sad story. The tree does not shout "Oi! Stop that!" when faced with an axe. Instead, communication between tree and human may amount to the human's applying respectful, honorific terms such as "grandfather" or "elder" to the tree, and acknowledging the tree's position as a member of the community, with the tree reciprocating in its own manner, by providing shelter or food or comfort. Dogs and trees communicate with us, but not in the precise manner of humans.

They are conceived of as persons, with cultures and communities of their own, but they are not just *more humans*.

Moreover, since we are dealing with beings who are neither omnibenevolent nor omnipotent, we are ultimately in the dark about the true communicative capabilities of these beings. This is a point that I must credit an anonymous reviewer for making. Sure, we may need to assume that the prevalence of animism among hunter gatherers (for example) has something to do with successful communication. But this assumption does not tell us much about how hard it was to achieve this communication in the first place. In addition, given the widespread destruction of natural ecosystems, the beings in question may be considerably weaker than they ever have been in the past.

So, the manner in which communication is advanced may be different enough from human communication to go unnoticed, especially by groups who have not cultivated the necessary relationships. The communications of nature are carried out in her own voice. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that the problem is not on her side, but on ours. Perhaps the natural world has been as communicative and as constant as ever, but it is we humans that fail to hear. Let us now look at that line of argument.

5. The Receptiveness Principle

Hendricks does not explicitly state the receptiveness principle in his paper, but it is an essential part of his argument. The receptiveness principle holds that human beings are as capable of receiving or are as open to communication with spirits in all eras and in all places. It is unfortunate that the only allusion to this principle is found in a footnote and credited to a reviewer:

One reviewer suggests that it's possible that we're not able to connect with nature spirits because we lack the right technique, whereas our ancestors didn't lack this technique. This is, of course, a possible explanation. But for this to challenge my argument, it needs to be *likely*, and we have no reason to think it is. (Hendricks 2022, p. 549)

But there are various reasons that we may think it likely that the receptiveness of human beings differs from age to age. This may not simply be a matter of lacking a skill, but of adopting an infected theoretical framework. In communities which raise their young to reject the idea that there are any nature spirits to communicate with, a harder time will be had communicating with such entities. The communication itself may be subtle enough to go unnoticed by modern communities, who have discarded their animist commitments. For such people, the true source of spiritual communication may be clouded. I am reminded of Plantinga's laundry list of the sorts of experiences which are supposed to trigger an awareness of a divine being: "The marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains . . . ; the ancient, brooding presence of the Australian outback; the thunder of a great waterfall" (Plantinga 2000, p. 174).

Why do these wonders of nature evoke such a response, while swimming pools, ceilings, and light bulbs fail to do so (artifacts which, as it happens, speak to the testimony of man as in the image of God)? Where lies the difference? Has Plantinga's theoretical backdrop divorced him from the immediacy of his experience: one which undeniably suggests a communion with man *and sky*, man *and surf*, man *and mountain*, and so on?

So, the theory-ladenness of observation is, as ever, problematic. Indeed, the problem of theory-ladenness is not restricted to theistic theories. The ascendancy of materialism as the dogma of the modern age must also be considered as a doctrine that could impede our communion with nature *qua* subject. Materialism is, after all, a lens through which we see only a few persons in the world.

Theories are not the only problem. As Hendricks' footnote indicates, our communicative abilities, skills, or techniques may simply be lacking at present. In communicating with non-human others, like dogs and falcons, some amount of patience and understanding is required. A degree of expertise is needed. Why would communicating with trees and

waterfalls be any different? The question needing answered is why these skills might be presently lacking in the majority of people.

One factor not discussed by Hendricks is urbanization. I find it surprising that Hendricks says, in yet another footnote, “if nature spirits exist, then we would expect them to reveal themselves to distinct populations roughly equally, since such populations are roughly equally exposed to nature” (Hendricks 2022, p. 546). Is it as simple as that? Are we all “equally exposed” to nature? A growing proportion of humans live in urban centers and, indeed, that proportion is now the majority. This trend has continued ever since the industrial revolution and counters Hendricks’ claim that we are more or less equally exposed to the natural environment as ever. Even where rural populations persist, the landscape is far from a natural ecosphere of interdependent organisms and geographical features. Instead, vast expanses of flat, felled earth are used for farming just a few agricultural commodities in close quarters. In urban settings, the environment is even further removed from the hustle and bustle of a forest or jungle. The majority of us find ourselves living—packed like sardines—inside concrete tins, travelling to and fro inside machine horses, to eat dead plants and animals neatly packaged in plastic containers (where they came from, or who they were, we know not). To say that this lifestyle has much in common with the lifestyle of the hunter gatherer (who remains an animist) is absurd. To say that this lifestyle puts us in roughly equal contact with nature beggars belief.

So, receptiveness to animist communications is a factor that needs to be considered alongside the constancy principle. Our receptiveness to communications from nature may be affected by a contemporary lack of sensitivity or expertise in dealing with such communications, and it may also be affected by the relative lack of a natural ecosphere inhabited by humans. Even if Hendrick’s constancy principle holds, modern populations may no longer be as receptive to nature spirits as they once were. And if the constancy principle fails, then we may need no rebuttal to the receptiveness principle at all, since the relative lack of communication would be explained by a lack of constancy in its rate. To sum up, the apparent silence may be *actual* silence, or it may be a cacophony of screams, which are simply falling on deaf ears.

6. Animistic Unpopularity

The last of Hendricks’ assumptions that I wish to challenge is animistic unpopularity. Before proceeding, I want to reiterate that this assumption was one that I made in my paper. However, I am nowadays inclined to doubt the universality of this claim. In particular, there is a serious problem that arises with respect to childhood animism, which is a universal feature of human developmental psychology. This fact was first noted by Jean Piaget in his 1927 work *The Child’s Conception of the World*. Since that time, Piaget’s general claim (i.e., that children have innate animist tendencies in their thinking) has been repeatedly replicated in multiple studies (see, for example, Dennis and Russell (1940), Dennis (1943), Nurcombe (1970), and Madsen (1982)).

Piaget noted four stages in the development of this animistic attitude in young children (Piaget 2007, pp. 174–87). He characterizes this attitude as the extent to which children are willing to ascribe consciousness and will (interior states) to objects that are considered by most adults to be inert. The four stages are as follows:

First Stage: Any object may, at some time or other, be the seat of consciousness, when the object displays a certain degree of activity, or when it is in working condition, or when it is the seat of some action.

Second Stage: Consciousness is restricted to things that can move, that are ordinarily in motion, or whose special function is to be in motion.

Third Stage: Consciousness is restricted to things that can move spontaneously or of their own accord.

Fourth Stage: Consciousness is restricted to plants and animals.

By around the age of 12, these animist commitments start to evaporate. The very fact that children are inclined to take as animate what most adults take to be inanimate is strong

evidence against the assumption of Animistic Unpopularity. At any given moment, the majority of the world's children operate within an assumption of animism. The fact that childhood animism is a universal feature of human cognition (i.e., holds cross-culturally), alongside the fact that such commitments apparently need to be “taught out” of the child by elders shows that animism is the default position of human thinking about the environment, rather than an exception that is held by a mere handful of contemporary hunter gatherer societies.

One might argue that Piaget and I are speaking about different things. We both use the same term “animism”, but the referents are different. For Piaget, the term seems more closely tied to notions of life, consciousness, and cognition. For me, the term relates more closely to what would usually be called “spiritual” or “soul” phenomena. Clearly, there are some differences here. But there are also commonalities. What is common to each of these views is a shared notion of *interiority* as something that only certain sorts of objects may have. This is the characterization of animism given by Philippe Descola. “Humans and non-humans are conceived as possessing the same type of interiority. [And so] non-humans are said to possess social characteristics” (Descola 2009, p. 151). This understanding of animism has deep connections with Piaget's. Indeed, consider Deborah Kelemen's famous example of how children account for the existence of “pointy prehistoric rocks”. Kelemen showed that children invoke teleological explanations for the pointiness of the rocks e.g., “so that animals wouldn't sit on them and smash them” or “so that animals could scratch on them if they got itchy” (Kelemen 2004). Both explanations are animist in Piaget's sense. In the first case we seem to have a sly and wiley rock, mounting a clever defense against pesky animals. In the second case, we are invited to view the rock as part of the material culture of animals.

Whereas I previously argued that there is surprising independent agreement across extremely isolated human communities, I now believe that the independent agreement in animism is virtually universal in human thought. It arises in every one of us from birth, and remains robust until puberty. This is a point that shares overlap with Stewart Guthrie's account of anthropomorphism as an innate feature of human thought (Guthrie 1995).

One might argue that with the *wisdom* of adulthood, animist commitments are rejected. But why not say, equally, that the child's reliable intuition of nature spirits is lost to the disenchantment of adulthood? Why not ask, as David Kennedy asks, whether “young children, because of their different situation, have some insight into nature that adults do not? Does their “folly” actually represent a form of wisdom, or at least a philosophical openness lost to adults, who have learned, before they knew it, to read soul out of nature?” (Kennedy 1989)

Around 25% of the human population at present is under 12 years old. The overwhelming majority of these children are animists, who take the world to be filled with many non-human persons. So, at any given time, there are very many more animists in the world than we typically imagine there to be.

Putting aside childhood animism, there are also animist ideas prevalent in the adult population, which often go unnoticed. The ascription of full blown personhood to fetuses and newborns is an example. And a large proportion of evangelical Christians and Muslims accept the existence of a range of spirits, some disembodied like human souls, ghosts, and demons, others embodied in human form, like angels or the possessed, still others are embodied in non-human form, such as omens embodied in birds, crying statues, and the like. Thus, the picture of humanity as largely non-animist is misleading. Indeed, a probable majority of the modern human population accepts the reality of a wide range of spiritual phenomena. For the religious population, only an austere minority is committed to the existence of a lone omnigod. If Hendricks thinks he has the raw numbers, he may want to double check.

7. Conclusions

Before I conclude, I want to note that, in his paper, Hendricks actually considered three routes by which an animist might escape his problem of animistic hiddenness. I have explored only one of the options he proposed. His first suggestion was that an animist might propose “nature spirit extinction”. According to this hypothesis, there used to be a large population of nature spirits, but there no longer are any. They have all gone like the dodo. I do not consider this argument remotely plausible or helpful because 1. The data I sought to explain is why there is surprising independent agreement about nature spirits between isolated human communities (positing that there are *no* nature spirits hardly helps here), 2. The metaphysical views of the various persisting animist societies are far too various to explore the plausibility of this view (according to believers of the Batak traditional religion *Malim*, for example, the death and dissolution of spirit is drawn-out, but inevitable. However, other animist traditions may accept eternally persisting spirits).

The other tack suggested by Hendricks that I have not explored has to do with developing a sort of “sceptical animism” analogous to sceptical theism. According to this defense, our understanding of the intentions of nature spirits is necessarily limited. I do not explore this approach because I do not believe it would not move the debate forward in a constructive way. If such an argument were to be mounted, it could only be an argument from ignorance: extremely easy to defend and virtually impossible to argue against.

As it stands, my argument is that Hendricks has failed to show the failure of my new common consent argument for nature spirits. Hendricks did not engage with any of the strong debunking arguments for non-animism that I presented. He also made several key assumptions which I believe are underdetermined by the evidence. Specifically, there is no special reason to accept the popularity principle, no special reason to accept the constancy principle, no special reason to accept the receptiveness principle, and the principle of animist unpopularity is, although one I previously accepted, ultimately not correct.

In sum, my argument survives this particular attack from Hendricks. My rag-tag army of animists stands firm against the non-animist mob. And ultimately, even if there are good reasons to think that my argument fails³, the reasons that Hendricks has provided do not contribute to demonstrating that failure.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Of course, there are still plenty of Christians and Muslims about the place. This fact alone (i.e., the persistence of the proselytizing religions well beyond the age of colonization) may lend *some* support to those religions.
- ² Note that some of the problems here can be thrown back in my face. One might ask, for example, exactly how many isolated human communities need to agree about a proposition to make that proposition more probable than not.
- ³ For example, there may be better evolutionary debunking arguments that ought to be considered. Or there may be reasons to think that there is an important lack of metaphysical similarity amongst the denizens of the animists’ various worldviews.

References

- Dennis, Wayne. 1943. Animism and Related Tendencies in Hopi Children. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38: 21–36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dennis, Wayne, and R. W. Russell. 1940. Piaget’s Questions Applied to Zuni Children. *Child Development* 11: 181–87. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Descola, Philippe. 2009. Human Natures. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17: 145–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Guthrie, Stewart. 1995. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hendricks, Perry. 2022. How to Debunk Animism. *Philosophia* 50: 543–50. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Kelemen, Deborah. 2004. Are Children Intuitive Theists? Reasoning about Purpose and Design in Nature. *Psychological Science* 15: 295–301. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Kelly, Thomas. 2011. Consensus Gentium: Reflections on the ‘Common Consent’ Argument for the Existence of God. In *Evidence and Religious Belief*. Edited by Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon. Oxford: University Press, pp. 135–56.
- Kennedy, David. 1989. Fools, Young Children, Animism and the Scientific World-Picture. *Philosophy Today* 33: 374–81. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2013. Disagreement and Belief Dependence: Why Numbers Matter. In *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*. Edited by David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 243–86.
- Madsen, Millard C. 1982. Animism and Related Tendencies in Hopi Children: A Replication of Dennis. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 13: 117–24. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Nurcombe, Barry. 1970. Precausal and Paracausal Thinking: Concepts of Causality in Aboriginal Children. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 4: 70–81. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Peoples, H., Pavel Duda, and Frank W. Marlowe. 2016. Hunter-Gatherers and the Origins of Religion. *Human Nature* 27: 261–82. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Piaget, Jean. 2007. *The Child’s Conception of the World*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schellenberg, John. 2015. *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Tiddy. 2020. The Common Consent Argument for the Existence of Nature Spirits. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98: 334–48. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Van Eyghen, Hans. 2016. Religious Belief is Not Natural. Why Cognitive Science of Religion Does Not Show That Religious Belief is Trustworthy. *Studia Humana* 5: 34–44. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zagzebski, Linda T. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.