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A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience

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For Virginia, my favorite interlocutor of all

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> Ananda: "And what, Lord, is the benefit and reward of concentration?"
> Buddha: "Knowledge and vision of things as they really are."

"The Benefits of Virtue,"
Anguttara Nikâya 182

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Chapter 1
The Diversity Problem

Abstract For people with no religious beliefs, it is not clear what reasons can be given for why they should convert to any particular religion, particularly in the face of many competing claims. This book will employ William Alston's doxastic-practice epistemology to argue that religious experiences can be grounds for rational religious belief, and that the evidence provided by Theravada Buddhist meditation provides better evidence than Christian religious experiences.

Keywords William james · Religious experience · Religious diversity · Pascal's wager · William alston · Doxastic practice · Theravada buddhism

I, like many of my classmates in college, up through graduate school, grew up in middle-class, mostly Christian America. We took the general truth of Christian doctrine for granted, at least when we were young. Our picture of the world, even after some of us abandoned Christianity, was a largely Christian one. We saw ourselves as faced with a choice between Christianity and unbelief. To be sure, some included Judaism or Islam in their range of choices, some began in Judaism or Islam, but we all agreed that we must either accept a broadly monotheistic view, or reject it; *tertium quid non datur*. We were aware of the existence of Buddhism, and Hinduism, and a few other possible religious views, but for most of us, they did not present for us as psychologically possible choices—"live options," in James's terminology. Imagine now a young Thai student, pursuing higher education in philosophy. Her life history is significantly different from mine and my peers'; she grew up making periodic trips to the temple, taking vows before images of the Buddha, and taking for granted that she had lived past lives, and would live more lives in the future. Her religious life revolves around providing support for the monks in her neighborhood, as that is the way to secure merit for a better rebirth. She hears monks tell of their pursuit of enlightenment, and the experiences they have in meditation. She experiences a different range of possibilities: either accept the Theravada Buddhist view of the world, or reject it. Believe what the monks say about rebirth, karma, and enlightenment, or be "agnostic" about it, or form a

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secular, scientifically informed view. She, and most of her peers, are aware of the existence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but they do not present themselves as "live options."

In general, we do not think it is necessary to consider the possibility of unfamiliar world-views held by those at a geographical or temporal distance. This way of thinking, as natural and practical as it is, is epistemically naïve. Once you realize that people are generally doing the best they can with the resources that life has given them, and that they bring more or less the same cognitive equipment to bear on the same world, you realize its naïveté. From a neutral point of view, we have to say that people are faced with—and to varying degrees, have always been faced with—a variety of religious views recommended to them for their acceptance.[1] The average American college student is aware that, in addition to the religion (if any) in which he or she grew up, the world contains completely different religions, from completely different cultural traditions. Even if they do not have even the slightest temptation to believe them, they are aware of them as belief systems available to them. Many of those same college students have grown up practicing a religion different from that of the majority around them; their awareness of this situation is particularly sharp. For the more reflective of those students, the question sooner or later presents itself as to why he or she should think his or her own tradition has got it right. People respond in many different ways to this quandary, from retreating into dogmatic blind faith to becoming skeptical of all religious claims, to ignoring the issue as if no challenge had ever arisen. Some think this is more of an issue now than it has ever been before—part of our "postmodern condition"—but it has always been true to one degree or another. The chief practical problem facing people with respect to that choice is how to decide which religion, if any, has the best claim on truth. Is there an epistemically responsible middle way between dogmatism and skepticism? In other words, how can I decide, given all the choices before me, which religion to gamble my soul on?

I use the word 'gamble' advisedly. Pascal famously put the question of what to believe in terms of a wager:

> Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. (Pascal 1958, 67)

Pascal thinks it is obvious how to wager, but it has not been so obvious to his successors in the philosophical tradition, since there seem to be more than the two choices Pascal envisions. One of the most important objections to Pascal's Wager rests on the claim that Pascal's analysis of the choices open to us is incomplete

[1] If we were to be completely candid, we would also have to admit that there are possibilities that no one has ever thought of, and they are just as possible as those that have been thought of. But there is no epistemic obligation, in general, to consider the possibility of views that have never been formulated or believed, and so have no evidence in their favor. On the other hand, a person who makes an argument based on the claim that evidence doesn't matter, like Pascal's Wager, then all possibilities are back on the table. This is the force of the Many Gods Objection, discussed below.

unless he includes choices other than belief in his God and atheism. This objection is known as the *Many Gods objection*. In a nutshell, the dialectic goes like this. Pascal argues that religious belief is a good bet, because we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing, no matter what happens to be true. In order for the argument to have any force, it must include all possible ways things could be, and also all possible choices, or else it doesn't show that belief in God is the best bet no matter how things happen to be. The Many Gods objection contends that Pascal's argument fails because it doesn't take into account all the possibilities. That is, the choice is not between belief in Pascal's Catholic God and unbelief, but between belief in one god, and another god, and another god, another something that is not quite a god, another that is a religiously significant absence of gods…and unbelief. Given that Pascal's argument cannot recommend any one of those options over another (and, crucially, given that one of those gods or whatnot might even reward unbelief), there is nothing to recommend belief over unbelief after all.[2] The existence of a diversity of options renders any particular choice unjustifiable. The Many Gods objection formalizes in the language of decision theory the problem of who or what to believe.

The problem that Pascal's Wager is supposed to answer shares structure with the problem I am concerned with, but it is not exactly the same problem. The problem I wish to examine is not the practical problem of how to maximize my own advantage, or what to do when there is no evidence to recommend any of the options available. My problem, which is a version of what is now called the *Problem of Religious Diversity*,[3] arises in much the same way that other, more mundane decision problems arise. If two mechanics, equally competent at their craft (as far as you can tell), give you mutually inconsistent stories about what is wrong with your car and what to do about it, you have a mechanical diversity problem. In practice, we have ways to solve this kind of diversity problem,[4] but when the diversity of views comes on matters that are not so easily settled empirically, it is not clear what to think. In particular, one might reasonably wonder what one's epistemic responsibility is in such a situation. What, if anything, is one entitled to believe in such a situation?

When our mechanics disagree about what is wrong with the car, it is obvious that at most one of them is right (unless their disagreement is not a genuine disagreement), and this situation is guaranteed by the objective reality of the car. There is only one way the car can be. When two friends disagree about what (say) God is like, one of the questions at issue for many of us is whether there is such a being at all. Could I be justified in accepting one person's religious claim over another's? Surely I could, if there were some relevant difference between my two friends. If

[2] The Pascalian continues to be defended and criticized. See Hajek (2003, 27–56), and Anderson (1995, 45–56), for discussions of various forms of the argument and various attacks on it.

[3] Griffiths (2001) has an extended and insightful discussion of the problem; see also Quinn and Meeker (2000).

[4] See Goldman (2001) for a useful discussion of this problem.

one of them is more gullible than the other, or one of them is more intellectually careful than the other, or if one of them is more perceptive than the other, I might have excellent reason to distinguish between them. But the gullibility and perceptiveness of the adherents of the various religions is to all appearances about the same, averaging over the whole populations involved. It might be tempting to conclude, in these circumstances, that there is nothing to decide between the various religions. The variety itself might be taken as evidence that there is nothing to any of them. It doesn't help that most religious claims rest ultimately on claims to have experienced the thing in question. We do normally afford people some degree of trust when they testify to their own experiences, but that normal authority, too, is undermined by the apparent equality of authorities who contradict one another. If one eyewitness reports seeing a man rob a bank, and another, equally trustworthy eyewitness to the selfsame event reports seeing a tiger eat a duck, it seems we have no good grounds to believe either.

This is not to say that, when claims of this kind disagree, none of them can be right. It would be gross error to make that inference. If we construe the religious claim as a real truth claim, capable of having a truth-value,[5] then there's no reason to suppose that mere disagreement shows there's no truth to any of the claims. It would also be a mistake to suppose that the multiplicity of claims shows that none of them is justified.[6] People can disagree about ordinary empirical matters, and some of them can be in a better position than others to know, even if we do not know which among them is better placed to know. Likewise, it might well be (though this claim is controversial) that taking part in a religious practice makes resources available to you that you couldn't have had otherwise, and so the adherents of one religion may well be better placed to know the truth than the adherents of others, even if we do not know which among them is better placed to know. Alston makes this kind of case for the rationality of Christian practice. But he also recognizes that this answer will not suffice to answer the question we are asking. He says

> It goes without saying, I hope, that the conclusions I have been drawing concerning the epistemic situation of practitioners of CMP [Christian mystical practice] hold, *pari passu*, for practitioners of other internally validated forms of MP [mystical practice]. In each case the person who is in the kind of position I have been describing will also be able to rationally engage in his/her own religious doxastic practice despite the inability to show that it is epistemically superior to the competition (1991, 274–275).

Alvin Plantinga likewise argues that the variety of religious experiences does not show that Christian belief is irrational, unjustified, or otherwise under par epistemically. It has been widely argued, though, that the strategy he employs is equally open to the adherents of the other religions. So, while it may provide some comfort to those already ensconced in a religious tradition, it does nothing for those looking to choose between the traditions, on their merits. The only way an Alstonian or Plantingan argument can suffice to solve the diversity problem is for

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[5] This assumption will be argued for in the next chapter.

[6] Or warranted, or whatever. I don't propose to make any hay from the various kinds of positive epistemic status short of the factive ones.

all of the other religious doxastic practices to have some internal defect that the Christian practice lacks (which is why Alston is careful to limit his concession of parity to "other internally validated forms of MP").

This present work is part of a venerable tradition, the philosophical examination of the epistemic claims of religious experience. William James, while categorizing experiences and discussing their various psychological types, felt the need to comment on their epistemic value as well.

> My next task is to inquire whether we can invoke it as authoritative. Does it furnish any *warrant for the truth* of the twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism which it favors? I must give my answer to this question as concisely as I can.
>
> In brief my answer is this—and I will divide it into three parts:—
>
> 1. Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
> 2. No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.
> 3. They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.
>
> I will take up these points one by one. (1958, 323–324)

His raising the question of the "authority" of experiences, together with his trying to accommodate faith in the third part of his answer, constitute the first stab at a comprehensive, modern epistemology of religious experience. There has followed, in the Western philosophical tradition, a flood of works agreeing with, criticizing, and expanding on the Jamesian story. Some have approached the problem from sociological or anthropological angles. Some have defended a particular tradition. In general, there is an awareness that there is something here to be accounted for, one way or another.

This work fits into the part of that project called "Reformed Epistemology," so named by one of its guiding lights, Alvin Plantinga. In late twentieth-century analytic philosophy, Plantinga, Alston, and others developed a way of thinking about epistemology (tracing its inspiration to Thomas Reid[7]) that is not only a reasonable understanding of knowledge generally, but also has as a consequence that religious experiences could well be reasonable grounds for religious belief. They took the Jamesian proposal seriously, and showed how it could be part of a systematic epistemology. The vast majority of contemporary analytic philosophers have reacted in one of two ways: either they reject the entire epistemological picture, and religious epistemology with it; or they accept the epistemology, with its consequences for religious epistemology, and consider the matter closed. A few are trying to show that the general epistemology is right, but that it does not underwrite religious epistemology in the way they think. This work is part of that minority project. I accept, in particular, what William Alston has called the

[7] Especially in his *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* and *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. A useful selection of the relevant passages can be found in Beanblossom and Lehrer (1983).

Doxastic Practice Approach to epistemology (Alston 1989), including its application to religious experience, but I want to raise problems for the particular conclusions Alston draws for Christian mysticism, by comparing it another practice.

In what follows, I will grant that a practitioner of a religion may well be justified in believing as he or she believes and acting as he or she acts. I also grant that someone outside all religious practices who joins one, for whatever reason, may be (or become) justified, both pragmatically and epistemically, in so doing. My version of the problem of religious diversity is captured in the following question: What should a person outside all religious practices do? Should such a person withhold all belief, or is there a reason to prefer the purported evidence put forward by one religion over all the others? Does the total state of the evidence make it the case that a person outside all religious practices would be well advised to join a particular one of them? What is the best bet, epistemically speaking?

Is there anything to be said, then, to help people decide among religious traditions? I think so. Ultimately, the claims of particular religions rest on the experiences of somebody or other, whether it is the meditative practices of saints, seers, and Buddhas, or revelations of a personal god in Sinai or Bethlehem or Mecca. So, ultimately, the question as to which claimants to religious knowledge are right rests on the evidential value of those experiences. Further, there are ways to understand what goes on in religious experience that help us understand whether it is good grounds for religious belief.

This work is an attempt at comparative religious epistemology. A lot of the philosophical discussion in the analytic tradition has been couched in terms of Christian mystical experiences, because the analytic tradition has for decades been largely critical of religious belief, and the countries where analytic philosophy is dominant are largely Christian countries. The Christian philosopher has felt embattled, and so has been for some time engaged in defensive action. Philosophers in the Eastern traditions have had much less concern to show that they are rational. This work is an attempt to bring a particular Asian tradition, Theravada Buddhism, into the discussion, to see to whether the religious-experience claims made in that tradition compare favorably with the claims of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim mystic.

Why Theravada Buddhism? The short answer is that it is the non-theistic tradition with which I have some familiarity, and for which I have some sympathy. You might say it presents itself to me as a "live option" in a way that other traditions do not. The Theravada tradition has a wealth of meditative experience to draw on that fits in with the Theravada system of thought in much the same way as mystical experience fits in with Catholic mystical theology, and Christian theology generally. What they report experiencing is not a personal god, or any other kind of god, but rather a metaphysical truth about the reality we all share.

Meditative experience is the ultimate ground of Buddhist doctrine. The central doctrines of Buddhism are about suffering, and its origin in desire. The reason that desire causes suffering is that reality itself is so constituted as to frustrate desire. All things are impermanent; all things are unsatisfying; no self is to be found among them. This doctrine was developed in the earliest Buddhist literature,

especially the *Abhidhamma*, to mean that reality consists in an ever-changing stream of momentary events (*dhammas*), not a collection of enduring substances and their attributes. The *dhammas* are the fundamental units one reaches at the end of the analysis of any reality or experience. These truths are revealed to us by the Buddha, but not because he is an omniscient deity. He was a man who discovered these truths, and taught others how to rediscover them; the reason the Buddha taught and others continue to teach that the world is made of streams of momentary events, not enduring substances, is that is what they discover in their meditations. Once the mind is under control, you "see things as they are," which means that one sees that there are no enduring substances, including what you take to be yourself.

The aim here is to compare the epistemic credentials of monotheistic religions with something quite different, and the choices are limited. The Chinese traditions, except when they are Buddhist or Buddhist-influenced, do not have religious experience as a crucial part of their epistemic foundations. There are Daoist and Confucian meditation practices, but the claims of what one encounters in those experiences do not figure in any kind of apologetic or evidence for the traditions. Yogic experiences do figure in the discussion of Hindu beliefs, but Hinduism is so variegated that it is hard to say anything general about it. Advaita Vedantin experiences of Brahman are both well defined and evidential, but the identity of the experiencer with the experienced makes for logical complications I do not wish to deal with.

Why not look at other forms of Buddhism, then? While all Buddhist traditions include a commitment to not-self (Harvey 1990, 50–52) and something like dependent origination, there was a turn at the beginning of the Mahayana movement to understand the object of meditative experience as something other than mere absence of enduring substances. They took the ultimate nature of reality to be emptiness (*sunyata*). While the philosophers and systematizers of early Buddhist thought who codified their results in the *Abhidhamma* thought that there were some basic units of reality, *dhammas*, each of which has its own nature (*svabhava*), the early Mahayanists—especially Nagarjuna and those who followed him—concluded that even those units were empty of inherent existence. I do not understand what this means. Any reading of it that makes it more than just plain dependent origination, the thing taught in *Abhidhamma*, seems to me to entail complete metaphysical nihilism. I do not see how such a view can be even self-consistent, never mind true and grounded in experience. The Mahayana schools that came later all built on this idea of emptiness in different ways. Notably, the Cittamatra school concluded that all *dhammas* are creatures of the mind, and end up with a kind of Berkeleian idealism, but without minds or God to hold it together. Ch'an, and later, Zen, despaired of the ability of language to do justice to the truth experienced in meditative practice. None of these schools can be described as having a definite object of religious experience, such that the experiences stand as evidence for the truth-claims about that object. So, for the purposes of this inquiry, there are really only two clean options: western monotheism and Theravada Buddhism. I aim to compare the epistemic credentials of experience

reports in these two traditions. In any case, it may turn out that the claims I make could also be made by an Advaitin yogi or a Daoist recluse; that is an open question. They are welcome to write their own books.

There are two distinct interlocutors addressed here: the philosopher who thinks there is something disreputable about religious experience claims in themselves, and the philosopher who thinks that the experiences of those in the monotheistic traditions are especially reputable. In what follows, I intend to argue against the first interlocutor that (1) religious language is intelligible as factual discourse, and so reports of mystical experience are unproblematically true or false; (2) religious experiences can be coherently and fruitfully thought of as perceptual in kind; (3) they are therefore good *prima facie* grounds for religious belief, in the absence of defeating conditions; but (4) there are defeating conditions that obtain to some degree in all religious experiences, though not to an unambiguously conclusive degree, so (5) while it may be rational for believers to embrace religious belief on the basis of their experiences, there is no rational compulsion for nonbelievers to accept the testimony of religious believers as evidence (this in spite of the fact that testimony can be, and often is, a perfectly reasonable ground for belief). I will then argue that reports from different traditions fall prey to this defeater to different degrees, and that Theravada Buddhist experiences of conditioned co-arising fare better than other experiences, and so are more rational to accept as veridical.

Terminological Aside

The phrase "religious experience" has been variously understood, and is so vague and multivalent that some philosophers have chosen to eschew it altogether; e.g., Alston (1991, 34–35). I will retain the phrase in order to emphasize the continuity of my inquiry with earlier ones, but it does need initial clarification. First of all, I intend to accept as a religious experience anything usually so called, unless there is overriding reason to exclude it. In other words, I think that the phrase as commonly used does pick out a set of experiences that have important things in common. They all, for example, purport to be experiences of some objective reality not a part of the perceiver, and not normally accessible to perception, which is central in some religion's doctrine, and is discovered by some means other than ordinary empirical practices. The intractable differences are isolated in the claims about the nature of the object/reality so discovered, rather than in the experiences themselves. One of the more intractable questions is the question as to what, if anything, is the essence of religion (or the definition of 'religion'). William James anticipated this difficulty, as he anticipated so much of what was to follow.

> Most books on the philosophy of religion try to begin with a precise definition of what its essence consists of. Some of these would-be definitions may possibly come before us in later portions of this course, and I shall not be pedantic enough to enumerate any of them to you now. Meanwhile the very fact that they are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence,

> but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion. (1958, 39)[8]

I propose to follow my illustrious predecessor in sidestepping that question entirely, but that should pose no problem. Since I will mean by 'religious experience' whatever people ordinarily mean, then 'religion' can be understood throughout as 'what people ordinarily take to be religion.' No analysis of the concept is needed.[9]

Many who write on this topic prefer to talk about mysticism, or mystical practice, rather than religious experience. That way of dividing things up makes too much of what is certainly an accidental property of the experiences. Mysticism is a very specialized practice, undertaken with a disciplined procedure by religious specialists. But I want to be able to account for the experiences of laypeople that come to them unbidden, without them having to engage in esoteric meditation or prayer practices; I want to include Saint Paul right along with Saint Theresa of Avila. The epistemic differences between sought and unsought experiences are minor compared to the phenomenological similarities between them.

For the purposes of this inquiry, then, 'religious experience' will be understood to refer to any and all experiences, sought or unsought, pleasant or unpleasant, that seem to reveal to their subjects an important truth about an otherwise empirically inaccessible reality, where that reality figures centrally in the doctrines of some religious practice.[10] This definition has some consequences that some might find unwelcome. First, a religious experience need not be of an 'ultimate reality,' like God or nirvana, but can also be of subsidiary beings like angels, saints, bodhisattvas, and the like. Second, the reality in question could be a fact or state of affairs, rather than a substance. This means that experiences of absences can be religious experiences. This is important because the central fact of some religious doctrines, including Theravada Buddhism, is in fact an absence or lack, and enlightenment—a paradigm of religious experience—consists in perceiving that absence. As a consequence, atheistic existential experiences of the meaninglessness of the world can count as religious experiences. Except for the discomfort of calling an atheistic experience 'religious,' this is as it should be; the experiences are of the same kind, in the same way that two scientific experiments, one of which finds a phenomenon and the other of which doesn't, are still of the same kind. While it would be

[8] I am inclined to go a bit further than James and assert that there is nothing, or nothing interesting, that all religions and no non-religions have in common. See Webb (2009).

[9] Wall (1995) makes a case for a universal religious practice. While the universal practice is pretty thin, as there is so little in common to all religions, he is right that there is enough to warrant discussion of religious experience in general.

[10] Or, better, figures centrally in the doctrines of some practice commonly called 'religion.' Henceforth I will use the term 'religion' and its cognates without this cumbersome locution, but it should be understood as if the cumbersome locution had been used.

bizarre to call atheism a religion, it is not so bizarre to call atheistic experiences religious experiences, in that they purport to reveal the empirically hidden nature of the world, and reveal by something like perception the truth about the alleged realities central to religions.

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Chapter 2
The Cognitivity of Religious Language

Abstract Religious language has been challenged by verificationists as not cognitive, and so religious claims have no meaning. This challenge fails, because even limited versions of verificationism are untenable. Some have granted that religious language has meaning, but does not make assertions, so is neither true nor false. Some have argued that religious language belongs to a different practice from ordinary language, and so should not be assessed according to ordinary understandings of rationality. Both of these charges have untenable consequences.

Keywords Verificationism · Logical positivism · A.J. Ayer · Rudolf Carnap · Ludwig Wittgenstein · Language game · Expressivism

Claims about religious experiences are couched in the terms of natural languages, which seem to be used in more or less their ordinary meanings. That is to say, people report their experiences in the languages they speak. In communities, and in scholarly traditions, technical terminology develops, but most people who have religious experiences don't make use of that specialized vocabulary. The simplest way to understand their claims would therefore be to take them at face value as descriptive claims about experiences, objects of experience, and their qualities. But many theorists have thought there was some special problem about religious language. Aquinas thought that talk about God could not be straightforwardly literally true, since God's nature is beyond our comprehension, so he developed his ingenious theory of analogy to account for talk about God. Some, in recent times, have thought that the doctrine of analogy developed by Aquinas does not go far enough; the purported objects of religious experience are not the kinds of things that can be represented in language. In the Buddhist traditions, especially Zen, there is a strain of thought according to which the enlightenment experience is inherently indescribable; e.g., Suzuki (1961, p. 243). The Buddha himself said things like that about nirvana, and about the state of an enlightened being after death.

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> Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply (Thanissaro 2010).

In the Advaita Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, some think that the real nature of Brahman, the conscious ground of all reality, is to be absolutely non-dual, without any distinction or difference. Brahman, in this view, is indescribable, as to describe it is to import distinctions (see Śankara 1946, p. 22). Some have claimed that the inability to speak literally of such objects renders religious language useless; others have found some other role for it besides description.

If language is incapable of capturing anything important about religious experiences, then there is nothing further to say. In order for a claim to count as evidence for another claim, it has to be true. *A fortiori*, it must have a truth-value. In order to have a truth-value, it must be meaningful. Therefore, before we can answer the question as to whether religious experience can provide evidence for religious belief, we have to decide whether the claims about religious experiences and their objects are meaningful, and capable of being true or false. Only meaningful claims with truth-values can stand in evidential relations to one another. The commonsense assumption that such language is like ordinary discourse in this way is controversial enough to require a defense, which is the business of this chapter.

Meaningfulness

The most important and influential challenge to the meaningfulness of religious language comes from verificationism. Some who are not global verificationists, including some who take this tack to defend religion, think that something like it is true in the realm of religious language. But let us address the most general form of the verificationist principle before passing on to these more nuanced views.

While there may have been precursors, verificationism as we understand it today is the child of the logical positivists, a group of philosophers who sought to ground philosophical discourse in reality by insisting that philosophers use the standards of science. Since the chief virtue of science, they thought, is that it can check its claims empirically, and generally has no truck with things not tied to the empirical world, then philosophy ought also to confine itself to what is empirically grounded. They went so far as to say that anything not so grounded is without factual meaning. In order for a claim to have meaning, they said, it must be possible to understand, at least in principle, what it would take to check to see whether the claim is true. Thus, any airy talk about metaphysical entities or processes that do not show themselves in observable ways is strictly meaningless. So, likewise, are all religious claims, including those claims that mystics make.

It is hard to find anyone who accepts that strict form of verificationism today, primarily because the view seems to have logical consequences that are hard to

accept, and successive formulations of the principle intended to solve those problems have failed to help. One of those consequences we could call *Nonsense Creep*. Like Hume's fork, the idea began with an admirably hardheaded attempt to keep philosophical discourse from floating off into blather, untethered from all observable reality.[1] While some rebelled against the death of metaphysics—the word itself became a reproach—many were willing to accept that a lot of metaphysical system-building had produced a lot of language of dubious semantic value, and that verificationism could provide an antidote to that tendency. Hegel, a favorite target of the positivists and their intellectual descendants, fell prey to this criticism, and his talk of the Absolute was dismissed as ultimately meaningless. This judgment has the consequence that we were spared the task of trying to understand it. Moral language followed, as moral claims also defy observational testing. Some of the positivists wished to retain some use for moral talk; Rudolf Carnap, for example, reinterpreted moral talk as disguised imperatives, thus keeping a role for moral discourse while denying it factual, descriptive content (1935). A.J. Ayer treats moral claims as expressions of moral sentiment (1952), in which case moral talk does have descriptive content, but it loses its normative force. Some then began to find problems with mental language, purporting to refer to private mental states, which led to behaviorism (Carnap 1959). Michael Dummett (1969) has even gone so far as to suggest that antirealism about the past is a tenable position, since claims about the past seem to be uncheckable by present observation. This consequence of the application of the verificationist principle, apart from any of the objections below, is by itself troubling. The spread of the nonsense-charge from areas of philosophy that many agreed had drifted into cloud-cuckoo-land, to those that no one had thereto suspected of vacuity, has all the marks of a degenerating research program. If a philosophical principle requires us to revise that much of our ordinary beliefs, it begins to look like it was the principle that was at fault, not the beliefs that the principle condemns.

This suspicion is borne out by the fact that the verificationist principle also suffers from technical defects, some of which were noticed almost as soon as the principle was announced, and many of which have stubbornly resisted repair. Moritz Schlick (1979) noted immediately that requiring verifiability, even in-principle verifiability, would render many universal generalizations meaningless, since there is no way to verify that something is true of all beings, which is what the universal quantifier demands. Requiring falsifiability, on the other hand, renders existential generalizations meaningless, since it is impossible to discover that there is not a single example of the being in question anywhere in spacetime. It also proved difficult to reduce dispositional statements to observation statements. While the fragility of a glass is grounded in its actual constitution, we can't translate disposition talk into talk of actual properties. It is difficult to see how we could have any experience grounding claims about how an object behaves in counterfactual situations. Thus propositions that entail that a thing has a dispositional

[1] A good account of the historical background and development of the verification criterion of meaning can be found in Misak (1995).

property are meaningless. These problems can perhaps be addressed by the simple expedient of not demanding conclusive verification, but rather some lesser degree of confirmation, but problems remain. For example, Carl Hempel (1959) noted that forming a truth-functional compound with one component an ordinary empirical claim and the other a bit of metaphysical nonsense can yield a compound that is itself verifiable, even though a large component of it might be nonsense.

The most famous technical problem with the verifiability criterion is that it seems to fail its own test. Since there is no empirical way to verify the criterion itself, and it is clearly not analytically true, then by its own lights it is meaningless. Verificationists noticed the potential for this problem from the very beginning, and they responded by saying that the criterion was never meant to be understood as a claim about what meaning is, but rather as a proposal for how to delimit scientific discourse, or as a convention for a formal language.[2] While these modifications may save the verifiability criterion from bald self-referential incoherence—though it is not obvious that they do; why should we accept a proposal for limiting scientific discourse if the proposal is self-undermining?—they do so at the cost of removing its teeth. As Alston said, "Wouldn't proposing that certain sentences not be classed as meaningful be like proposing that certain bottles of milk not be classed as sour? If the sentences are meaningful, then what is the point of classifying them as not? If they are not meaningful, then the proposal is redundant" (1964, p. 78). Instead of showing that metaphysical/religious/moral claims are meaningless, all the revised criterion can show is that they are not scientific claims, or not part of the carefully delimited formal language Carnap favored. If the criterion is just a proposal, then we are free to reject it, if we have some use for the language in question. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what is to be gained by adopting a proposal that, by its own lights, cannot be true. That seems, by itself, sufficient reason to reject the proposal.

As far as claims about religious experience—as opposed to abstract theological claims—are concerned, there seems to be no principled way to rule out religious experiences as kinds of observations. In other words, religious language might have an anchor in experience, after all; showing that religious language is not based in empirical observation presupposes a negative answer to the question whether religious experience is possible.[3] Ayer dismisses out of hand the possibility of religious experience as evidentially relevant, but it is far from obvious that there is any logical incoherence to the idea of an experience of a transcendent reality. He says of the mystic,

> The fact he cannot reveal what he "knows," or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his "knowledge," shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state. So that in describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world; he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind (1952, p. 119).

[2] Both Carnap (1937) and Reichenbach (1938) make this suggestion.

[3] Swinburne (1977, pp. 22–29) makes this point.

It seems obviously to beg the question to say that experience of God, because it is not experience of the physical world, is not experience of an objective reality (Ayer fudges this distinction with the phrase "external world").

While verificationism as a theory of meaning seems to have no defenders left (Martin 1990 is an exception), there are still theorists who deploy verificationist-style reasoning to challenge religious language. Antony Flew, for example, famously argued for the vacuity of religious discourse on the grounds that religious folk never admit anything could count as evidence against their beliefs. He said:

> Some theological utterances seem to, and are intended to, provide explanations or express assertions. Now an assertion, to be an assertion at all, must claim that things stand thus and thus; *and not otherwise*. Similarly an explanation, to be an explanation at all, must explain why this particular thing occurs; *and not something else*. Those last clauses are crucial. And yet sophisticated religious people—or so it seemed to me—are apt to overlook this, and tend to refuse to allow, not merely that anything does occur, but that anything could occur, which would count against their theological assertions and explanations. But in so far as they do this their supposed explanations are actually bogus, and their seeming assertions are really vacuous (1955, p. 96).

Kai Nielsen offers a more developed version of this argument.

> Given that believers (or at least reasonably orthodox ones) take their key religious claims to be factual claims, the verificationist challenge puts it to believers to show what evidence (what experience) would count for or against the truth of their religious beliefs. What would we have to experience to be justified in asserting "My Savior liveth" or to experience to be justified in denying it? If it is impossible to answer that, then, the claim goes, "My Savior liveth" lacks cognitive and factual significance (2001, p. 472).

There are several things puzzling about this kind of line of reasoning. First of all, as Basil Mitchell pointed out in his discussion with Flew, believers do take the existence of suffering and evil to count as evidence against the existence of God. If they did not, they wouldn't waste so much time on theodicies and defenses and whatnot (Flew et al. 1955, p. 103). There is also no dearth of believers who endorse cosmological or design arguments, who think that theism is not only verifiable, but actually verified. But the worst problem with this kind of verificationist argument is that it confuses the status of the belief with the behavior of the believer. A person's unwillingness to give a claim up is not the same as the claim's unfalsifiability. There could be any number of reasons for religious believers being apparently immune to evidence. They may be just expressing their faith. If I claim that nothing could show my wife is an international jewel thief, I may simply be expressing a high degree of confidence that she is not. I am convinced no evidence will show me to be wrong, but I am far from convinced that no evidence *could* show me to be wrong. People unfamiliar with different kinds of modalities can be forgiven for not understanding the idea of logically possible counterevidence. Alternatively, they may be making a statement of their intentions, in the light of the Duhem-Quine thesis; that is, they may understand that any claim can be held constant if one is willing to make adjustments elsewhere in the belief system, and they are announcing that they intend to hold belief in God constant in that way. Whatever the explanation, even if there is something defective about their

behavior, it need not show that their utterances are meaningless, incoherent, or vacuous.

Truth-Aptness

Even if we grant that religious discourse is meaningful, it does not automatically follow that it can be evaluated as true or false. I will call the property of being evaluable as to truth-value "truth-aptness". Sentences can be used to perform speech acts that are different from what their surface structure would suggest. Declarative sentences can be used to issue commands ("You will do this") or to express emotions ("I'll be damned"), interrogative sentences can be used to make assertions (so-called rhetorical questions), and so forth. We saw that some of the positivists chose to take this kind of tack to save moral discourse without granting it factual content. So the fact that much of religious discourse is expressed in declarative sentences does not by itself show that religious discourse is truth-apt. We have seen above how some of the logical positivists gave this kind of reinterpretive reading to moral language, taking moral claims to be disguised imperatives or expressions of emotion. Imperatives and expressions of emotion, while meaningful, are not rightly evaluated as true or false.

Similar reinterpetive strategies are available for religious language. One way that religious language might fail to be truth-apt is if it is expressive rather than descriptive. Braithwaite (1971), for example, assimilates religious utterances to moral claims, and then offers an expressivist view of moral claims. Driven by what he mistakenly takes to be the legitimate challenge of verificationism, he offers an expressivist analysis of moral claims, where what is expressed is an intention to behave a certain way. He says, "All that we require is that, when a man asserts that he ought to do so-and-so, he is using the assertion to declare that he resolves, to the best of his ability, to do so-and-so" (1971, p. 79). Not only does this spare moral language the embarrassment of being unverifiable, it also gives a nice explanation for the motivating power of moral beliefs. He then proposes that the same benefits will accrue to analyzing religious claims in the same way. To say God loves us is to express an intention to live according to a particular set of moral norms.

> The view which I put forward for your consideration is that the intention of a Christian to follow a Christian way of life is not only the criterion for the sincerity of his belief in the assertions of Christianity; it is the criterion for the meaningfulness of his assertions. Just as the meaning of a moral assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to act, so far as in him lies, in accordance with the moral principle involved, so the meaning of a religious assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to follow a specified policy of behavior (1971, p. 80).

Braithwaite admits that such a view is not, by itself, fine-grained enough to account for the actual world of religious belief and action. After all, a great many religions espouse the same moral code as Christianity, so assertions of belief in Christian doctrines would have the same meaning as expressions of belief in the

corresponding doctrines of Islam, say, or even Buddhism. So he adds a refinement to the theory: what distinguishes assertions of the doctrines of different religions is the set of stories to which the doctrines refer. So an assertion of belief in Christ amounts to an assertion of intention to act according to the Christian moral code, where that is specified in part by reference to stories of the life of Christ. Otherwise similar assertions of belief in Buddhist doctrine may involve assertion of intention to live by the same code, but the code in the case of a Buddhist will be specified by reference to the life of the Buddha, and likewise for the other religious traditions (Braithwaite 1971, p. 84). The stories themselves will be understood the ordinary way, as strings of empirically verifiable (at least in principle) historical claims, some intended literally, and some not.

This refinement makes for some odd consequences. Many believers take many of the stories in question to be true, so when they assert them, they are making ordinary empirical claims. “Christ died on the cross” and “The Buddha left his family to pursue the life of a religious seeker” both amount to ordinary historical claims, with just the meaning ordinary understanding would give them. But “Christ died on the cross for my sins”, or, “The Buddha left his family and found nirvana” become statements of intention. It is at least odd if such superficially similar claims had completely different analyses. Worse, it seems that in these two examples, the second claim contains the first, so that the expressive statement entails the factual one. But mere expressions can’t entail anything. Braithwaite allows that one need not believe the stories are true for them to inform one’s statements of intention, but many people in fact do believe the stories, and take the truth of the stories to be the ground of their beliefs. To say that all they are doing is expressing intentions would be to deny that they know even the most basic facts about their own beliefs and intentions.

Whatever the merits of expressivism in ethics, expressivism seems to be a disaster as an analysis of religious belief. Not only does it make logical relations among different claims problematic, and make it the case that religious believers are mistaken about the nature of their own beliefs, but it also makes it analytically impossible to have literal religious beliefs. If a believer says, “God is real and he loves me”, Braithwaite will say that the believer is expressing commitment to a moral code. If the believer denies this, saying, “I am committed to that moral code, but only because God really exists and really loves me”, Braithwaite would have us understand that utterance as meaning “I am committed to the moral code, but only because I am committed to the moral code.” It is unlikely that the believer means any such thing. While we may misunderstand our own beliefs to some extent, and be confused about the meanings of our utterances to some extent, this is surely too large an error to believe.

To deny the truth-aptness of religious language, though, one need not reassign it to one of the familiar kinds of speech act. It may be that religious discourse is not truth-apt, but is *sui generis*, demanding its own special analysis. This is the sort of view often attributed to Wittgenstein; religious discourse has its own rules, and it is a mistake to try to evaluate as if it were simply ordinary descriptive discourse. The idea is that different kinds of use of language amount to different

practices, each with its own standards for meaningfulness and its own rules for evaluating the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an utterance. Carnap (1956) developed a similar view, although he did not use it to account for religious language; his aim was to understand how talk of abstracta, especially numbers, could make sense in an empiricist, scientific framework. His idea was that to countenance a kind of entity is to endorse a particular way of talking, a particular linguistic framework. Questions within a framework, internal questions, can be answered by reference to the rules of the framework itself. Questions as to what kinds of things there are-external questions-amount to questions as to what frameworks we should adopt. In other words, they are practical questions about which ways to talk serve our pragmatic interests best. Thus metaphysical questions about the reality of numbers really mean, “Shall we talk about numbers, or not?” The reason such metaphysical questions seem intractable is because we mistake them for theoretical questions, and try to answer them accordingly, when they are really pragmatic questions about the usefulness of number-talk.

While Carnap did not make the application to religious talk, it is an easy move to make. Here’s one way this might go: Questions about the truth of religious claims cannot be settled by means of the rules of our ordinary physical-object linguistic frame. In particular, questions about the existence of God or other beings mentioned in religious discourse are ruled out of court, as it is analytically entailed by permissible assertions within the religious linguistic frame that God exists. Whether God exists as an internal question is answered analytically in the affirmative. Whether God exists as an external question is a question about the propriety of God-talk, not a theoretical question about the existence of an entity. Both a priori argumentation and empirical investigation are inappropriate. Discussions of the nature of God, then, are to be evaluated by the rules of the religious linguistic frame, not the scientific or mathematical ones. It would not be accurate to say that, on this view, religious assertions are not truth-apt, but they are certainly not true or false in the same way that more ordinary assertions are.

Some of this way of thinking of things grounded Wittgenstein’s idea of *language-games,* or *forms of life*.[4] Like Carnap, Wittgenstein proposes that different kinds of assertions have different presuppositions, so it is a mistake to try to evaluate all assertions according to the same rules, by the same procedures. Wittgenstein goes farther than Carnap; Carnap thought of all linguistic frames as involving ontologies, and supporting assertions. Truth is the same thing in all frames, and the laws of logic apply equally. For Wittgenstein, however, it is an error to see all language games as assertive at all. When he lists the various uses of language, many of the items on the list are not rightly understood as assertions (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 23).[5] “A man walked into a bar”, means one thing in courtroom testimony and another thing in a joke. It would be a serious misunderstanding the game of joke-telling to

[4] I wish to leave open the question whether these are the same thing. Whether they are or are not, the same points can be made.

[5] All references to Wittgenstein’s works will, where possible, cite section numbers rather than page numbers, as the section numbering is constant across all editions.

investigate to see if the claims in the joke are true. More than that, it is not even clear that 'man' and 'bar' mean the same things in the two situations.[6] As Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, "When language games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 65).

Wittgenstein himself made the application to religious language, both in *On Certainty* and in his *Lectures and Conversations*.[7] He takes religious language to be a distinct language-game (or perhaps each religion is a different language-game) from ordinary talk about the world, and so it is insulated from the need for public verifiability. Someone outside the religious language-game cannot even contradict an assertion made within it, even by uttering the assertion's negation. The extra-religious assertion is not, and cannot be, the negation of the intra-religious assertion. At the very beginning of his lectures on religious belief, he says:

> An Austrian general said to someone: "I shall think of you after my death, if that should be possible." We can imagine one group who would find this ludicrous, another who wouldn't. … Suppose someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: "not at all, or not always."
>
> …
>
> Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly, I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near (1966, p. 53).

If we are disagreeing about the presence of a certain kind of airplane, we are engaged in the same kind of practice, both playing the same game, and so our claims are comparable, and evaluable by the same rules. We do contradict one another, and which of us is right is to be settled by empirical inquiry. But if we disagree about the existence of God, or the Last Judgment (assuming we are not two believers disputing about the particulars of theology), my not believing puts me outside the practice you are engaged in. In Carnap's terminology, I am refusing to make use of the religious linguistic framework. Consequently, my assertion does not contradict yours, any more than my telling a joke involving Saint Peter at the pearly gates contradicts anybody's doctrine of heaven. Wittgenstein (1966, p. 55) says, "I can't contradict that person". I cannot even say that your belief is unreasonable, since reasonableness may be a feature of some, but not all,

[6] A misunderstanding along this line is exploited to comedic effect in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Brian is trying to tell a parable about two servants, and his interlocutor demands to know the servants' names. When Brian can't answer, and then finally just chooses two names, the interlocutor complains that he is just "making it up".

[7] Many defenders of Wittgenstein's view (e.g., see Phillips (1971), Mulhall 2001) have spent a lot of time arguing that the criticisms leveled at the view have been based on misunderstandings of it. While I believe that the description of Wittgenstein's view is correct, I am not concerned here with Wittgenstein exegesis. If this is not Wittgenstein's view, it is at least a view in his spirit, and one actually held by some philosophers.

language-games; even if it is a feature of two different language-games, the standards of reasonableness may vary:

> If someone believes something, we needn't always be able to answer the question 'why he believes it'; but if he knows something, then the question "how does he know?" must be capable of being answered.
>
> And if one does answer this question, one must do so according to generally accepted axioms. This is how something of this sort may be known (1972, pp. 150–151).

And what those axioms are varies from language-game to language-game:

> Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another (1966, p. 59).
>
> Am I to say that they are unreasonable? I wouldn't call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not reasonable, that's obvious. 'Unreasonable' implies, with everyone, rebuke. I want to say: they don't treat it as a matter for reasonability (1966, p. 58).

D.Z. Phillips develops this view:

> In the light of these examples, what are we to say about the man who believes in God and the man who does not? Are they contradicting each other? Are two people, one of whom says there is a God and the other of whom says he does not believe in God, like two people who disagree about the existence of unicorns? Wittgenstein shows that they are not. The main reason for the difference is that God's reality is not one of a kind; he is not a being among beings. The word God is not the name of a thing. Thus, the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also applies to things other than God. (1971, pp. 126–127)

In ordinary-object language, to say that X is not the name of a thing (unless there is some special weight being put on 'thing') is the same as to say that there is no X. To say that there is a God, but 'God' is not the name of a thing, is therefore to say that God-talk goes by different rules from ordinary object talk, and so must not be evaluated by the same rules as ordinary object talk.

If this view is correct, then whatever truth-value claims of religious experience have, they have only in the context of the religious language-game. Since such a language-game includes as one of its axioms that God exists, then the question as to whether religious experiences count as good evidence for religious belief is ill formed. To ask that question is to import a standard of evidence from a game where it is at home to another game where it is alien; it would be like asking if moving a pawn to the back rank constitutes a touchdown.

There are good reasons to suppose that this is not an accurate picture of language in general, never mind of religious language in particular, or at least that if it is true, there is nevertheless only one language-game, and one set of rules for reasonableness. First of all, it seems that if there are a multiplicity of language-games, we do in fact perform inferences that countenance entailments from one to another. For example, we routinely allow assertions in math-talk to be evidence against assertions in object-talk; if I think I see two people go into a room, then two more, that is excellent reason to think there are now four people in the room. While inferences from jokes or novels to the real world are not allowed, that

seems to be better explained by saying that jokes and fictions have different illocutionary force because they are intended that way; the sentences have their ordinary descriptive meaning, but they are not being used to make assertions. There is no reason to treat differently from one another different claims that seem all to be equally intended as assertions of truths.

It is easy to be misled by the analogy with games. While it is clear that there are lots of different games, and each has its own rules, and judging moves in one game by the rules of another is a mistake, the case with language seems to be different. There are, of course, different *languages*, but they are intertranslatable (and they are not what was intended by 'language-games', anyway). But what are the different language-games? Wittgenstein does list several different uses of language, but it is not at all clear that they constitute different language-games. With games, we can explicitly list the rules, and that makes it clear when we are dealing with different games. But is praying so different from requesting? We can't explicitly list the rules of praying and requesting.[8] They may, for all we can tell, operate by the same rules of reasonableness.

But even if a diversity of language-games is an adequate theory of language in general, it doesn't make sense to treat religious language as a special and separate language-game, to the extent that it has its own rules for reasonableness. If it were, then every believer who has engaged in natural theology has been making a mistake, not just those who have subjected religious belief to rational criticism. The laws of first-order logic, at least, apply within religious discourse as in all other kinds of discourse. John Hyman puts it very well:

> It is certainly impossible to insulate religion entirely from rational criticism: "If Christ be not risen, our faith is vain" implies "Either Christ is risen or our faith is vain" for exactly the same reason as "If the weather is not fine, our picnic is ruined" implies "Either the weather is fine or our picnic is ruined." But if religious beliefs are not invulnerable to logic, why should they be cocooned from other sorts of rational scrutiny? (Hyman 1999, p. 155).[9]

The proponents of the language-game picture face a dilemma. If religious discourse is not subject to the rules of reasonableness that other kinds of discourse are, then there is no reason to suppose that arguments made within religious discourse have any force for those outside the discourse. And it's not just the reasonings of Anselm and Aquinas that are at stake here; Jesus's appeal to his hearers to infer what their Father in heaven would do based on what they as earthly fathers do could have no force. The Buddha frequently invites us to reason along with him, and the kinds of reasoning he employs are the familiar ones we use in other contexts. On the other hand, if religious discourse is subject to the same rules of reasonableness, then there is no point to saying it is a separate language-game. Many modern thinkers are happy to grasp the first horn of the dilemma, but most believers through the ages (and even today) would find that a bizarre concession to make.

[8] Morawetz (1978, pp. 52–54) makes this observation.

[9] Kai Nielsen has made the same point in many places, starting with his (1967, pp. 191–209).

Conclusion

It seems, then, we are left with no reason to exempt religious language from evaluation in ordinary ways. There is no reason to think religious assertions are meaningless, or not really assertions, or not subject to rational scrutiny. While religious language may be odd in many ways, it gets its life, its point, from being of a piece with ordinary talk. That means that claims about religious experiences are, in particular, assertions with truth-values, and can enter into evidential relations with other assertions. Our next task, then, is to begin that evaluation.

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Chapter 3
Religious Experience as Perceptual

Abstract An examination of reports of religious experiences from all traditions shows that they all have a perceptual character. While some have challenged the claim that they are perceptual on the grounds that naturalistic explanations provide a better explanation, or on the grounds that divine qualities are impossible to perceive, such challenges rest on a misunderstanding of how perception works, even in ordinary cases.

Keywords Perception · Thomas Hobbes · Naturalistic explanation · Richard Swinburne · William Alston · Neurology

If claims about religious experiences can't be dismissed as nonsense, or not assertions, or not in the realm of the reasonable, then they are subject to evaluation as true or false, and can be assessed as to their evidential relations to other claims. But the question remains: what kind of claims are they? Many of them seem, on the face of it, to be perceptual. The subjects of religious experiences use perceptual language, and for the most part take their experiences to be encounters with objective realities outside their own conscious states. They frequently deny, of course, that the experience is *sensory* perception, but our physical senses surely do not exhaust the range of possible kinds of perception. Many thinkers have posited without incoherence a *sensus divinitatis*, a non-sensory mode of perceiving the divine.[1] If religious-experience claims are perceptual claims about objective realities, that suggests that they can be—indeed, must be—evaluated in the same way as ordinary perceptual claims, adjusting the principles of evaluation for the special nature of the mode of perception.

In this chapter I will look at some examples of theistic and Buddhist religious experiences, and will argue that there is no reason not to understand them as perceptual in kind, and that since they appear on the surface to be perceptual, they are

[1] See for example Edwards 2001, Plantinga 2000, and the inspiration for this study, Alston 1991.

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best understood that way. Calling a kind of experience 'perceptual' does not entail that it is an actual perception, and so veridical; we are not using the term 'perceive' and its cognates in their factive senses. The point here is to identify what type of claim it is. If I say (sincerely), "I saw a fifty-foot-tall duck," I am making a claim to have had a perceptual experience, though obviously I perceived, in the factive sense, no such thing. Then I will address some common objections to understanding such claims as perceptual, and argue that they are not really problems for taking these claims as perceptual.

Experiences with Perception-Like Features

The following accounts of religious experiences will illustrate their general features. I am omitting from this collection religious experiences that involve seeing and hearing heaven and heavenly beings other than whatever is taken to be the ultimate reality, on the grounds that such experiences, even if they are hallucinations, are clearly perceptual-type experiences; no argument is needed to make the case for Muhammad's night journey, or a seeker's vision of Amida's Pure Land, or the vision of Our Lady of Guadalupe, being perceptual in kind. Everything experienced in such cases is either physical or presented as embodied, located in space, in some way. I am also omitting those cases in which a subject claims to encounter a supernatural object through sensory perception of an ordinary object (the starry sky, a sunset, a flower, etc.). The interesting case for our purposes is the case to be made for those glimpses of ultimate reality that aren't either of physical realities or of spiritual realities taking on the aspects of physical realities.

These descriptions of experiences or features of experiences come mainly from two traditions: Buddhism and the Abrahamic monotheisms. While there are certainly interesting religious experiences in the Hindu and Taoist traditions, and in other traditions for which meditative accomplishment is important, these two represent two very different kinds of claims about the nature of what is encountered in religious experiences, and so can serve as proxies for the others.

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous 14th century tract about mystical practice, unabashedly describes mystical contact with God as visual:

> On the other hand, there are some who by grace are so sensitive spiritually and so at home with God in this grace of contemplation that they may have it when they like and under normal spiritual working conditions… [there follows an extended discussion of Moses'experiences of God] Moses could only 'see' on rare occasions, and then after much hard work, but Aaron, on the other hand, by virtue of his office, had it in his power to see God in the temple behind the veil as often as he liked to go in (Anonymous 1961, 138–139).

While the author is clearly talking about mystical states, since he speaks of it as contemplation, he clearly takes it to be visual in some sense. Yet it is just as clearly not mere physical vision, since its effectiveness depends on spiritual work. Teresa of Avila describes a similar kind of experience in auditory terms:

> For often when a person is quite unprepared for such a thing, and is not even thinking of God, he is awakened by His Majesty, as though by a rushing comet or a thunderclap. Although no sound is heard, the soul is very well aware that is has been called by God, so much so that sometimes, especially at first, it begins to tremble and complain, though it feels nothing that causes it affliction (Theresa of Avila 1961, 135).

Kabbalist Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, in a work about prayer, describes the experience of God's presence in visual terms:

> The maker of all is the creator; you should believe in his divinity for the creator is one and shows his Glory according to his will and wish. This is the wondrous form, which is elevated and brilliant, bright … "and the spectacle of the Glory is like the consuming fire" (Exod. 24:17) and it is called the shekhinah. Sometimes it is envisioned without a form, just a great light without an image of anything created, and [the prophet] hears the utterance and sees the wonderous vision and says, "I have seen God," including his Glory (Dan 2002, 113).

Clearly, talk of a "great light" puts this firmly in the category of visual, and therefore perceptual, experience. Al-Qushayri, an eleventh-century Sufi, likewise uses visual language:

> When your majesty appears before me,
> I go into a state from which there is no return.
> I was brought together, then separated from myself through it.
> In intimate union, the individual is a party of two (Sells 1996, 119).

All this sensory language shows that the subjects of the experiences certainly find it natural to describe their experiences in perceptual terms. Even though the experience depends on God's will, so that it is not open to anyone to reproduce the experience at will, it is still understood as God showing himself, appearing to the subject. The fact that the experience cannot be replicated at will is no argument against its veridicality. As C. S. Lewis explains:

> If you are a geologist studying rocks, you have to go and find the rocks. They will not come to you, and if you go to them they cannot run away. The initiative lies all on your side. They cannot either help or hinder. But suppose you are a zoologist and want to take photos of wild animals in their native haunts. That is a bit different from studying rocks. The wild animals will not come to you: but they can run away from you. Unless you keep very quiet, they will. There is beginning to be a tiny little trace of initiative on their side. Now a stage higher; suppose you want to get to know a human person. If he is determined not to let you, you will not get to know him. You have to win his confidence. In this case the initiative is equally divided—it takes two to make a friendship.
>
> When you come to knowing God, the initiative lies on His side. If He does not show Himself, nothing you can do will enable you to find Him. And, in fact, He shows much more of Himself to some people than to others—not because He has favourites, but because it is impossible for Him to show Himself to a man whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition. Just as sunlight, though it has no favourites, cannot be reflected in a dusty mirror as clearly as a clean one (Lewis 1952, 164–165).

Buddhist

On the preceding evidence alone, it might seem natural to think that this account works very well for theistic experiences because the object of the experiences, God, is understood to be a distinct being, separate from the subject. The doctrine of omnipresence and the Christian doctrine of the indwelling of the Spirit, especially together with the idea of mystical union, make it difficult to say exactly in what way God is separate from the subject, but God and the subject of the experience are at least not numerically identical, nor is God a proper part of the subject. Consequently, it is natural that such experiences would seem to be causally dependent on the object of the experience in a way that we normally associate with perception. But perhaps mystical experiences in other traditions are not so readily understood on a perceptual model.

Whereas some experiences in the Hindu tradition aren't easily understood as perceptual, especially those in the Advaita school, since the subject and the object are thought to be numerically identical, there is plenty going on in the Eastern traditions that is also best understood as perceptual in kind. For one thing, many Hindus claim to experience the Lord of Creation in a way they describe as seeing, much as Arjuna saw the Lord Krishna in his universal form (Gita 1962). Even for the less theistic brands of Eastern religious practice, religious experiences still take a form that has the same structure as sense perception. For many of these mystical practices, the point is to transform yourself, but the result is often described as seeing something in a new way; that is, although the mystical experience is understood to be one of union with something (much as the Catholic mystical tradition aims at an experience of union with God), it culminates in an experience of something other than the subject, and in a way that shares many features with sense perception.

The Theravada account is somewhat different, but in a way that makes perceptual language even more natural. The ancient Theravada Buddhist meditation handbook, *Vissudimagga* (Buddhaghosa 1990), contains detailed descriptions of a variety of kinds of meditation practice, and the kinds of experiences practitioners can expect to have. In one of the early steps of *samatha* (calming) meditation, it says the meditator "achieves the first *jhana*, and on emerging, he sees the formations in it with insight as impermanent, painful, and not self." The result of successful meditation is not just that one achieves a certain state of concentration (the *jhanas*) or that one comes to know things are a certain way—having the "three marks" of being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self—but one *sees* that they are so. The Pali canon, which constitutes the Theravada Buddhist scriptures, attributes to the Buddha himself the claim that "knowledge and vision of things as they really are," is the fruit of concentration. Practitioners of *vipāssanā* (insight) meditation report seeing, often with a sense of surprise, that there is no self, or that all things are impermanent. For example, Robert Walsh reports:

> It seemed as though the "I" thoughts were recognized as belonging to a special category and were then somehow grasped and incorporated by the awareness which had been watching them. In the instant of recognizing this, the "I" thoughts ceased to be differentiated and grasped, and then existed as "just thoughts" without their former significance. Immediately there followed a powerful awareness, accompanied by intense emotion, that

> "I" did not exist, and all that existed were "I" thoughts following rapidly one after another. Almost simultaneously the thought, "My God, there's no one there!" arose, and my consciousness reverted to its accustomed state (Bucknell and Kang 1997, 239).

While this particular experience is not itself perceptual, or described as perceptual, it leads to perceptually experiencing the world differently, "as it is." Another practitioner, Rod Bucknell, describes the aftermath of that experience this way: "The moment awareness broke down, the vision was lost." (Bucknell and Kang 1997, 262) The vision he is referring to is the vision of reality as a network of impermanent events. In the Zen tradition, the experience of seeing things as they are (*satori*), empty of any inherent nature and nondual, is also described perceptually. Thirteenth century Zen master Daikaku says, "Illusion is dark, satori is bright. When the light of wisdom shines, the darkness of passion suddenly becomes bright, and to an awakened one, they are not two separate things." (Bucknell and Kang 1997, 262) Master Keizan, from the same period, says "Even though you have ears and eyes, when you do not use them, you see what is not bound by body and mind."(Foster and Shoemaker 1996, 235) The experience is explicitly perceptual, and just as explicitly not sensory.

The Tibetan tradition describes things in a similar way. Thus Geshe Gedün Lodrö:

> *Question*: In descriptions of the direct cognition of emptiness, it is said that emptiness and mind cognizing it are like water poured into water. How is this different from the mind's becoming of the entity of emptiness?
>
> *Answer*: When one speaks of the Mahāyāna path of seeing as being like water poured into water, it is not meant that the subject is generated into the entity of the object. Rather, it indicates that once the uninterrupted path is attained, all conventional appearances disappear for this mind. Only emptiness appears, and thus it is said that the mind and emptiness are of one taste (Lodrö 1998, 181).

Again, the language is of seeing and appearing. Moreover, the practitioners who use this language, while denying that it refers to the physical senses, are equally adamant that the perceptual language is ineliminable. Seeing is clearly, for them, not a metaphor coming to understand by inferring, intuiting, or any other means; the knowledge comes by direct apprehension of some objective reality, caused in some way by that reality. In other words, it is perception.

Objections to Perceptual Understanding

Hobbes's Objection and Naturalistic Explanation

Hobbes famously remarked, in a discussion of ways that God might speak to humanity:

> To say [God] hath spoken to him in a Dream, is no more than to say that he dreamed that God spake to him; which is not of force to win belief from any man, that knows dreams are for the most part natural, and may proceed from former thoughts (1940, 200).[2]

[2] The archaic spellings are in the original.

Many thinkers since have advanced a similar objection to alleged perceptions of God, and not just for dreams. The idea is that since we can explain these unusual experiences some other way, there is no need to posit any external causes. This objection can be brought to bear on our question in a couple of ways. First, one might think that the presence of a naturalistic explanation for an experience shows that it is a kind of hallucination. If that is so, then it is no threat to the main claim of this chapter, as hallucination is a kind of perception (since we are not understanding 'perception' in its factive sense here). Such an objection would be answered, if at all, by an argument to the effect that the subject is rational to take the experience as veridical, and that is the project of the next chapter. On the other hand, the point could be that the presence of a naturalistic explanation for the experience, like a dream, shows that it is really a completely different kind of experience, a purely subjective one, which is not best assimilated to perception.

One way to make that argument is to claim that the experiences cited by mystics and other subjects are merely experiences of their own inner states, so are more like the results of introspection than of perception. Kai Nielsen discusses this strategy.

> To experience God, some have said in reply, is to experience (or perhaps experience to the full) one's finitude, to have feelings of dependency, awe, wonder, dread or to feel a oneness and a love and a sense of security, no matter what happens. But these are plainly human experiences, psychological experiences, which can have purely secular readings or interpretations (1985, 46).

Recent work in neuroscience and mysticism has suggested that states associated with religious experiences are simply unusual brain states. When people having these experiences are put in fMRI machines, certain parts of the brain "light up" that are associated with things other than perception, which suggests that religious experiences are more like mere imaginings or even temporal-lobe seizures than they are like vision.[3] On the basis of such neurological data, some want to offer a naturalistic explanation of religious experiences as evolutionary adaptations. For example, Matthew Alper offers the following.

> [S]piritual consciousness probably evolved in response to self-conscious awareness which brought with it, as an unfortunate side-effect, an awareness of death. As a result of mortal consciousness, the human animal would have to live in a state of constant dread unless something could help relieve us of this awarenesses' [*sic*] painful effects. If not for the evolution of such a palliative mechanism, it's quite possible our species might not have survived (Alper 2001, 115).

Because of the parts of the brain involved in "spiritual" experiences, and what other functions those parts of the brain have, we can postulate a naturalistic and reductive evolutionary origin for the capacity for those experiences.

[3] One popular discussion of the naturalistic origin or religion is Boyer 2001. He says his view "portrays religion as a mere consequence or side effect of having the brains we have" (Boyer 2001, 330).

A simple analogy can serve to show that such an argument, as it stands, is inadequate. To show that an experience correlates with some natural state, no matter how strong the correlation, does not show that the natural state is all there is to the experience. Consider what it might be like for a sighted person to arrive in the proverbial kingdom of the blind. Instead of becoming king, he arouses the suspicion of the blind medical community with his vision-talk. They put him in an fMRI machine, and find that his visual experiences correlate with activity in a certain area of the brain not active in perception (via the senses they know of). It would clearly be a mistake for them to conclude that all there is to vision is activity in that area (the area we call the primary visual cortex). Whatever natural process happens in religious experience, that process could well be the means through which religious perception takes place. This is not to say that the presence of a naturalistic explanation can't, along with other considerations, raise a problem for religious experience as an avenue of knowledge. Such an explanation might be part of an argument to the best explanation, for example. But merely pointing out the correlation is not enough. Gellman (2001, 55–62) gives a detailed discussion of what it would take to elevate the existence of such a correlation to a reductive explanation .

The Limitlessness Problem

Another problem for taking religious experiences as perceptual in kind arises from the purported objects of the perception, rather than the process. Take the kinds of mystical experiences reported in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Can any experience be grounds for the claim that its object can do anything, and knows everything, and created everything? Saint John of the Cross thought so. In *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1973), he says of one kind of mystical experience, "God is the direct object of this knowledge in that one of His attributes (His omnipotence, fortitude, goodness and sweetness, etc.) is sublimely experienced." But it seems that no experience could be sufficient to show that its object knows everything rather than merely a great deal, is omnipotent rather than merely very powerful, and is the creator of the physical universe rather than a being with some creative and annihilative powers. There are possible finite degrees of these properties that are so great that they are indistinguishable, the argument goes, from infinite degrees of the same properties. This is the line J.L. Mackie takes. He says

> Religious experience is also incapable of supporting any argument for the traditional central doctrines of theism. Nothing in an experience as such could reveal a creator of the world, or omnipotence, or omniscience, or perfect goodness, or eternity, or even that there is just one god (1982, 182).

He goes on to quote James to the same effect, who he says is "firm and obviously right."

Nick Zangwill makes a similar argument (2004, 1–22). He argues that in order for religious experiences to be good grounds for religious beliefs, we must be able

to identify the object by distinguishing it from other objects. Such a principle is clearly not generally true, since it leads directly to skepticism; nobody can distinguish the objects of sense-experience from cleverly devised holograms, for example. It is precisely by invoking such a principle that many skeptical arguments get their footing.

Swinburne (1979)[4] provides the beginning of an answer to this argument. He offers the following principle, called the Principle of Credulity, as the source of justification for perceptual beliefs:

(POC) If it seems (epistemically) that *x* is present, then probably *x* is present.

POC is qualified by four defeating conditions, the obtaining of any of which undermines (though not necessarily completely) the justification of a perceptual belief:

1. The perception occurs under conditions that make the subject an unreliable perceiver;
2. The perception is of a kind at which S has been shown previously to be unreliable;
3. The perceiver has good evidence that there is no *x* present[5];
4. The perceiver has good evidence that, whether there is an *x* present or not, the *x* was not the cause of the perceptual experience.

This principle, supplemented by the Principle of Testimony,

(POT) Other things being equal, what other people tell us they have perceived, probably happened.

He claims, give us adequate reason to accept religious experiences as evidence for religious belief. Let us ignore the *ceteris paribus* clause for now. There are two things to note about POC before we go on. First, 'seems' (which I take to be equivalent to 'appears,' or close enough) in POC is to be understood in what Swinburne calls its "epistemic" sense; something seems epistemically to be F if the subject is inclined to believe it to be F on the basis of her sensory experience. This frees the argument from the restriction to sensible properties, and so obviates worries about the distinction between sensible and insensible properties. Something can epistemically seem omnipotent as long as it is possible for someone to be inclined to believe on the basis of her sensory experience that she is in the presence of an omnipotent thing, even if there is no way for the property of omnipotence to be directly represented to the senses. Second, the variable in POC is meant to be perfectly general, ranging over objects, properties, and

[4] To be fair, Swinburne is not foreseeing the use I am making of POC. He is simply arguing that people are entitled to trust their own religious experiences. POC is not to appear as the premise of a natural theologian's argument.

[5] In defeaters three and four, Swinburne seems to be taking an internalist line; only things that the subject has epistemic possession of can be defeaters. I am not convinced this is true, but it would take us too far afield to discuss that here.

(presumably) relations; one can recognize that Laurie Anderson is present, but also that something red is present, or that something is present which is to the left of something else. In fact, for Swinburne, its seeming that God is present is just its seeming that something omnipotent, omniscient, etc., is present, and so it had better apply to the perceptual recognition of objects as having properties.

Swinburne argues that POC is clearly true of ordinary perceptual beliefs, and that there is no principled reason for saying that it does not apply to cases of religious perception, too. He then argues that none of the defeaters applies in the religious case, and since there are no other plausible candidates for defeaters, religious perceptual experience is every bit as justified as ordinary sensory perceptual experience.

Unfortunately, his dismissal of the defeaters is too hasty. One way to be an unreliable perceiver, and so by defeater number two above undermine the justification of your perceptual beliefs, is to lack whatever is necessary (concepts, past experiences, or whatever) for recognizing things. Swinburne admits that this is so (1979, 261). He makes the good point that we can surely recognize something of which we have had no past experience as long as we know what properties it is supposed to have and can recognize things as having those properties. Hence we could all recognize a centaur even though none of us has seen one, since we know what they are supposed to be like, and hence know what it would be like to see one. From this telling point he draws the conclusion that, since 'God' is defined in terms of 'power,' 'knowledge,' and the like terms which we understand from our more ordinary applications of them, there is no problem in recognizing the supreme instance of these properties (1979, 256–257, 268). This is surely a hasty inference. I have no problem recognizing tall people, but I have no confidence at all that I can, by that selfsame ability, recognize someone as the tallest woman in Woonsocket by how she appears. With the appropriate past experience, subjects can recognize that God is powerful, and the appropriate sort of past experience is the sort that the unbeliever should be willing to grant that the believer has had, and so cannot object to the argument on those grounds. However, no past experience could prepare one to recognize that the object of perception is omnipotent (that is, not just powerful, but able to do anything possible) unless it was past experience with omnipotent things. The unbeliever is surely free to be skeptical when presented with the claim that things that appear omnipotent probably are omnipotent. The problem is that POC is too credulous when it comes to supreme or unique instances. We are not entirely reliable at recognizing supreme instances of things even when we have the other instances before us; when we are only presented with a single case, we certainly aren't reliable at telling whether it has the property to a greater degree than all the absent cases, nor are we able to tell reliably whether the thing is unique in any respect.

Swinburne's treatment of defeater four is certainly inadequate. He argues (1979, 269–270)[6] that we can never have good reason to believe that God is not

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[6] He seems to have adopted this argument uncritically from Wainwright (1973).

the cause of an experience unless we have good evidence that God does not exist, since if God exists at all, causal chains only operate because God sustains them.

> [A]ny causal processes at all which bring about my experience will have God among their causes; and any experience of him will be of him as present at a place where he is. And so if there is a God, any experience which seems to be of God, will be genuine—will be of God (Swinburne 1979, 270).

This can't be right. My experience of a thing does not become veridical simply because it has that thing among its causes, even if it represents the thing as present at a place where it is. If J. Edgar Hoover ordered the manufacture of a tablet of LSD which caused me to have a vision of him standing in his office, and he in fact was standing in his office, that does not make my drug-induced vision a veridical perception. This shows that defeater number four must be understood as ruling out more than just cases in which the subject has evidence that the purported object of perception wasn't among the causes of her experience. It must be understood as ruling out all cases in which the purported object of experience was not the item in the causal chain making whatever contribution it takes to make it the perceived object (the painting rather than the earlier painter or the later neural pattern in the primary visual cortex). If Fred Dretske (1981, 153–168) is right, defeater four should rule out cases in which the subject has evidence that the object of the experience was not the first item back along the causal chain that gives rise to the experience such that the experience contains the information that it is present. Cases in which the purported object makes no causal contribution at all will be a subset of the set of cases ruled out by this revision, since if the item was not in the causal chain at all, it was *a fortiori* not the first item back along the causal chain which carried the information that it was present. No item in the causal chain carried that information. Whether Dretske is right or not, not just any causal contribution to an experience will do to make an object the one that is perceived in the experience.

Shall we say, then, that religious experiences can't be perceptual, because no one could perceive that something is God? There are several reasons to think not. First, not all religious experiences purport to be of things that are superlative, or unique, or limitless. Even if they did, all the limitlessness problem would show is that such experiences could not provide good grounds for the belief that the object is rightly described as superlative, or unique, or limitless. The experiences could nevertheless be real perceptions of some objective reality, giving rational grounds for belief that it is a reality, and even give grounds for some other important religious beliefs. Second, the above considerations show that POC is too strong; they do not show that no grounding can be given for some other, weaker principle or set of principles that would underwrite taking religious experiences to be like perceptions.[7] It is to be expected that the phenomenal content of our experiences should not determine a unique theory about what sort of things cause our experiences; this is as true of ordinary sense-experience as of religious experience. Omnipotence and omniscience are not the sort of properties one can perceive

[7] Gellman (2001, Chap. 2) defends such a principle.

something to have without some contribution from background information, but neither is the property of being Saul Kripke, or the property of being water, or any of a huge set of properties that we have no trouble at all perceptually recognizing things to have. Background beliefs inform our perceptions in such a way that we can identify far more properties than just the ones that are available to perception in that sense. There is no reason to think that background information couldn't apply in the case of perception of the divine, too, to make the sensory phenomena sufficient grounds for the beliefs.

There are a variety of different ways that background beliefs can work in influencing how perceptual beliefs are formed. On one model, perception is always inferential in character, consciously or unconsciously[8]; inference is made from the immediate content of experience to beliefs about the objective state of affairs via beliefs about regularities in the world. It is clear that what is needed for any perception to take place on this view is a set of principles linking phenomenal content with external facts. Background beliefs, on this view, make a direct inferential contribution to the resultant perceptual belief.

A less extreme view is to be found in Dretske (1988).[9] On Dretske's view, perceiving that an object *b* has the property F depends on background information of two kinds: the proto-knowledge that it is *b* one is perceiving, and the background belief that conditions are such that *b* would not look the way it does unless it was F. However, the resultant perceptual belief does not depend inferentially on these background beliefs. They must be present in the perceiver, and make some contribution to the formation of the perceptual belief, but not as premises in an inference.

Alston (1991) argues that, although this kind of background belief (that is, belief that the background conditions obtain) is in practice assumed, very frequently it is not part of the grounds of the subject's perceptual beliefs. Other kinds of background beliefs frequently enter into the formation of perceptual beliefs, including beliefs about the conditions under which perception is taking place, the location of the perceiver, what the perceiver remembers to be the case about this place, these things, or these conditions, and so on. These beliefs help to determine which beliefs get formed on the basis of how things seem to the subject, and sometimes they are among the grounds of the subject's belief, but frequently the only grounds there are for the subject's beliefs, and the only grounds there need to be, are how things appear to the subject. If the background conditions (Alston calls them adequacy conditions) obtain, then the appearance is an adequate ground, and so the subject is justified in her perceptual belief. There is no reason to think that religious experience is any different. So religious perception could be just another case of theory-laden perception of this type. Then the question shifts to whether

[8] Such a view is to be found in Gregory (1970).

[9] Dretske explains this all in terms of seeing, but he says that it can be generalized to the other sense-modalities.

any defeaters obtain to undermine the justificatory power of these experiences, which question will be addressed in a later chapter.

Conclusion

The subjects of these experiences certainly understand them as perceptions of an objective entity or fact, and there is no compelling argument to think they are mistaken in this. Our best option, then, is to presume that they are indeed perceptual experiences. Of course, to make this concession is a long way from admitting that they are veridical perceptions; that requires further argument. Unfortunately, there seems to be no noncircular argument available for that conclusion. Nevertheless, we can ask the question whether the subjects of religious experiences are being rational when they take them to be veridical, and, further, whether their reports of their experiences provide compelling belief in others who don't share the experiences. The next chapter takes up the first of these challenges.

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Chapter 4
The Justificatory Force of Religious Experience

Abstract Under ordinary circumstances, perceptual experience provides good grounds for belief. Some argue that religious experiences are unlike ordinary perception, and so do not justify the corresponding beliefs. Applying Alston's doxastic practice approach to epistemology, we can see that the question comes down to whether some defeater or other is operative that removes the experience's justificatory force.

Keywords William Alston · Alvin Plantinga · Doxastic practice · Defeater · Analogy · Perceptual error · Psychology of perception · Self-deception · Schizotypy · Insight meditation · Not-self

It does not follow immediately from the perceptual nature of religious experience that the beliefs formed on the basis of those experiences are justified. After all, hallucinations are also perceptual experiences, and illusions cause people to form false beliefs about their environments. Why should we think that religious experiences provide even *prima facie* justification to the beliefs based on them? Many of the critics of the idea of mystical knowledge think that the objects of religious experience, especially God on the monotheistic model, are by their very nature not the kind of things we can make contact with perceptually, whereas the ordinary experiences we have of our physical environment are unproblematic, so even if religious experiences are perceptions of a sort, they can't really reveal any objective realities. In other words, there is some important difference between sense perception and purported religious perception that disqualifies the latter as a justifying ground of religious belief. Even if it can be shown that religious experiences provide *prima facie* justification for religious beliefs, they may nevertheless be unjustified *ultima facie* (to use Senor's (1996) felicitous distinction), because some defeater occurs that overrides that justification.

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Purported Defeaters to the Justification of Perception

One way to approach the question of the justificatory force of religious experience, once we grant that it is perceptual in kind, is to ask what justifies other kinds of perceptions, and look to see whether religious perceptions share those features. A thorough undertaking of that task is clearly beyond the scope of this inquiry, but perhaps we can say a few general things in that direction. While it is a contested matter what justifies our perceptual beliefs, it may be that, whatever it is, religious perceptions also have that feature. To put the idea negatively, we could argue that one cannot rule out religious perception without ruling out ordinary perception; that whatever it is that allegedly disables religious perception is in fact a feature of ordinary perception, too. The two main exponents of this line of argument are Alston and Plantinga.

Plantinga and the **De Jure** *Question*

Plantinga (2000) approaches the question of justification for beliefs about religious experiences in a defensive mode. That is, instead of asking what justifies these beliefs, he asks what reason there is to deny their justificatory force. Famously, he theorizes (1981) that many beliefs about how God appears to believers are properly basic; that is, they are properly held, and not because they are inferentially related to any other beliefs. If these beliefs are properly basic, then they cannot be criticized on the grounds that they are not grounded in good evidence. His view of justification makes it the case that any belief formed by the use of a faculty that is functioning properly in its proper environment, working according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth, is justified (1993); so if there is a faculty at work here, and it is functioning properly (to put it briefly), then the output beliefs are justified. Of course, believers think that their faculties are functioning properly, while non-believers might hold that there is no such faculty, or that the beliefs result from *improper* function of some faculty. How can we decide between them? It turns out to be quite difficult to answer that question in a noncircular way, as believers will appeal to resources that are reasonable resources, but only if they are the beneficiaries of a properly functioning faculty. A central question then is whether there is any reason to think that those who have religious beliefs are somehow damaged or defective, or behaving improperly. Plantinga calls that question the *de jure* question; is there any reason to think that religious belief is disreputable simply in virtue of being religious belief? He considers some reasons that people have offered for the positive answer, and finds them all wanting. Having found no in-principle defect in religious belief, he concludes that the discussion of the epistemic status of religious belief depends on an answer to the *de facto* question, that is, the whether the religious beliefs are true.

Alston and Doxastic-Practice Coherentism

Alston approaches the problem in a slightly different way, by making a direct case for the rationality of religious belief. Instead of asking directly whether it is rational to form religious beliefs on religious experiences, he asks the more general question as to what makes it rational to form any beliefs. In particular, since we are talking about a kind of perceptual experience, what makes it rational for us to accept the deliverances of our senses? It's not that some sound, noncircular argument can be made for the reliability of the senses; every valid argument for the reliability of the senses appeals to the evidence of the senses at some point, and so they all exhibit epistemic circularity (1986). The same can be said of our other ways of forming beliefs (Alston calls them 'doxastic practices'), like deduction, induction, memory, and so on. Rather than embrace a skeptical conclusion, Alston argues that we are rational to engage in these doxastic practices because they are the only game in town for forming beliefs about their particular subject matter, and that they don't produce massively inconsistent outputs, either internally or with the other, equally well-established doxastic practices; those inconsistencies it does produce are either eliminable or not on central matters. Since this is all we can say in favor of our basic package of doxastic practices, it must be sufficient to show that we are rational to engage in them. Practices can be shown to be unreliable if they run into persistent, ineliminable inconsistency, but they can't be shown directly to be reliable. Alston then argues that what he calls the 'Christian Mystical Practice' exhibits all the same features. It is socially established, and does not produce important, ineliminable, massive inconsistencies, either internally or with respect to our other practices. Moreover, if it is the truth, it is the only game in town for coming into perceptual contact with the divine. It is impossible to produce a direct argument for the reliability of the practice without appealing to its own outputs, but the same is true of sense perception, so that is no disability.[1]

Many have argued that Alston's argument fails because he has overlooked some crucial disanalogy between religious experience and sensory experience. Louis Pojman, for example, argues (2008, 130–131) that religious experiences cannot provide justification for belief in God for three reasons: (1) religious experience is "amorphous and varied"; that is, the objects of religious experiences don't appear the same to everyone; (2) justification of religious belief by religious experience is circular, in that it depends on premises that are not self-evident to everyone; and (3) religious experiences are not confirmed in the same way that sensory experiences are. Pojman is clearly right that sense-experience is richer and more unanimous than religious experience, and that sensory experiences are confirmed in a way that religious experiences are not; but notice that the evidence that confirms sensory experience is all derived from sensory experience, so the justification for

[1] This paragraph is a summary of the argument of Alston (1991).

sense experience is circular, too. In any case, no grounds for the validity of sensory experience are "self-evident to everyone." While a great many philosophers have attempted to prove the reliability of sense experience on some ground or other, they all argue from different grounds, and none of them is generally recognized as successful in the attempt. If that is a disability for religious experience, it is equally a disability for sense experience. Pojman has shown that the two types of experience are different, but he has not shown that those differences underwrite different epistemic evaluation.

A more ambitious attempt at refutation comes from Matthew Bagger (1999). He starts from a theory of perception according to which a belief is justified just in case it is the best explanation for our experiences, and argues against supernaturalism generally. The argument involves a general repudiation of Alston's view of perception, and all views that make room for any externalist component.

Likewise, Ulf Zackariasson (2006) argues that, while Alston has shown that there is a structural similarity between sense perception and religious experience, the two fail to be similar in another way that is crucial for an argument from analogy. The important dissimilarity is that sense perception plays a certain functional role in our wider practices, and religious perception plays a quite different role. Sense perception serves a critical function and "frequently forces us to reconstruct our beliefs" (2006, 330). It provides us with a rich and varied range of information so that we are constantly updating and revising our picture of the world. Religious experience, on the other hand, serves primarily to confirm the previously arrived-at picture of its object. Religious dogma provides the final arbiter of genuineness in religious experiences. If your experience contradicts established dogma, then it was not genuine. This dissimilarity, Zackariasson claims, seriously weakens the analogy.

Alston has resources to answer this kind of argument. For one thing, the differences between the two kinds of perception can be accounted for by differences in their objects. The Christian picture of the world, built up in large part from the results of religious experiences, includes claims that, if true, make it likely that religious experiences will not provide very much new information, and will tend to support the previously arrived-at picture the believer has, just as Zackariasson says. Since these features are not unexpected, on the Christian view, they cannot count as evidence against it. The same can be said of the other monotheistic practices. Zackariasson is aware of this response; he's just not very impressed with it.

> It will not help to appeal, at this point, to the fact that the doctrines used to assess numinous experiences partially have their origin in the output of CMP [Christian mystical practice]. Besides the fact that this may be a dubious empirical claim, it does not remedy the difference between CMP and SP [sense perception] as they function presently; in SP, received opinion has not, as in CMP, been allowed to take the status of unquestionable dogma. (Zackariasson 2006, 336)

First, as to the dubiousness of the claim that Christian dogma has its origin partially in the deliverances of religious experience: unless Zackariasson is claiming massive fraud—and he wouldn't be the first—where does he think the doctrines came from? People's purported experiences of God, including experiences of him

revealing doctrines or inspiring writings, are certainly the foundations of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic doctrines. Take any religious doctrine, and trace its justification back to foundational beliefs, and you will find that the 'axioms' on which it depends are either a priori logical or metaphysical principles, on which all reasoning relies, or claims about something that has been experienced. This is true even of those esoteric doctrines that came from the application of abstract philosophical reasoning to Christian doctrine; experience provides the raw material to which the reasoning is applied. According to their own stories, Judaism begins with Moses' experiences at Sinai, Christianity begins with the experiences of the disciples in Judea and Samaria, and Islam begins with the prophet Muhammad's experiences at Mecca. Second, he certainly underestimates the degree to which the deliverances of sense perception function as unquestionable dogma. How would we respond to someone who insisted she saw rocks falling up, or reported that the sky is bright red? The well-established and repeated deliverances of sense perception function as practically unquestionable defeaters for claims to such an extent that persistent claims to experiences to the contrary are taken to be symptoms of psychological disorder. The difference is much smaller than Zackariasson thinks.

But Alston need not answer these claims at all. Both Pojman and Zackariasson address Alston's argument as if it were a straightforward argument from analogy, when in fact it is not one, or even an 'indirect' one. Alston does *not* argue "CMP is like SP; SP is rationally taken to be reliable; therefore CMP is rationally taken to be reliable," so pointing out disanalogies is beside the point. The structure of Alston's argument is to show that if a doxastic practice is socially established and free from massive contradiction, either internally or conjoined with other established practices, then it is rational to engage in it. If it is rational to engage in the practice, then it is rational to take its deliverances to be justified. He then argues that Christian mystical practice is a socially established doxastic practice, and argues that it is free from massive contradiction, and so concludes that its practitioners are rational to engage in that practice. While he does draw analogies with sense perception, those analogies serve primarily to illustrate the general argument, which is not an argument from analogy. Early in his article, Zackariasson shows that he is aware of this feature of Alston's argument.

> The reason for characterizing Alston's argument as indirect is that it involves no direct comparisons between instances of sense perception and numinous experience, but rather reflections on the general characteristics of reliable doxastic practices. (2006, 333)

But he misses the consequence of this point: disanalogy alone is not enough to undermine the argument, since neither Plantinga nor Alston makes a simple argument from analogy. Alston argues for a general epistemic principle for evaluating doxastic practices. To show that he is wrong, it is necessary to show that the principle is wrong, or at least that his argument for it is faulty. Disanalogies may be able to play an important role in showing that the general principle is false if it is, but disanalogy alone shows nothing. To see that this is true, one need only consider

some of the other doxastic practices (like memory, deductive reasoning, and so on) and how dissimilar they are from sense perception. If disanalogy undermines the credibility of religious experience, it also undermines the credibility of memory and induction.

Some have argued that the principle is too permissive, and when appropriately amended, it no longer countenances religious experience as a rationally engaged-in doxastic practice. In Webb (1996), I argued that Alston‘s principle was too permissive, in that it would count as rationally engaged-in a practice that was completely untethered from reality, provided only that it could gain adherents over time, and could avoid inconsistency by incorporating a defeater system that forced consistency. The only way we could rule those practices out while preserving things like sense perception, memory, and the rest, was to add that justified practices, besides being established and free from inconsistency, must be natural and inescapable. Since religious doxastic practices are avoidable—one can always quit one and join another, or not join one at all—they don't fill the bill. But this is clearly not an adequate reformulation of the principle. After all, we can't define 'natural' in a way that excludes all religious practices without begging the question. If people are capable of experiencing God, or nirvana, or whatever, it is because of something in their natures, so that capacity is natural. It is also not at all clear that avoidability should be epistemically decisive. While it is true of our basic package of doxastic practices that they are the only game in town for learning about their characteristic objects, that is not the same as their being unavoidable. Even if we could opt out of sense perception, it would still be the only game in town for discovering things about the dispositions of physical objects in our vicinities. The fact that a practice completely untethered from any reality could qualify as rationally engaged in remains as a worry for the view, but the amendment to the view that requires that practices be natural won't do.

Critics of Alston and Plantinga point out that the argument they make for the rationality of religious belief based on religious experience is potentially available to the adherents of all religions,[2] and so provides no special support for the Christian beliefs they favor. G.A. Cohen states the problem nicely:

> Suppose that identical twins are separated at birth. Twenty years later, they meet. One was raised as, and remains, a devout Presbyterian. The other was raised as, and remains, a devout Roman Catholic. They argue against each other's views, but they've heard those arguments before, they've learned how to reply to them, and their opposed convictions consequently remain firm.
>
> Then each of them realizes that, had she been brought up where her sister was, and vice versa, then it is overwhelmingly likely that (as one of them expresses the realization) *she* would now be Roman Catholic and her sister would be Presbyterian. That realization might, and, I think, should, make it more difficult for the sisters to sustain their opposed religious convictions. (2000, 8)

[2] Whether the arguments are actually available to the other religions depends on whether those other religious practices are sufficiently coherent, among other things.

The reaction of these hypothetical twins is appropriate because they realize that they continue to hold their convictions in spite of neither of them having better grounds for her belief than the other (2000, 13). Both Alston and Plantinga acknowledge this, but do not think this result is a problem for their arguments. Suppose that their arguments do show that Christians are rational in their Christian beliefs, and that the same argument can be used to show that Buddhists are rational in their Buddhist beliefs. It is tempting to think that a style of argument that can justify anything justifies nothing. In other words, the mere fact that equal evidence can be adduced for different, mutually inconsistent belief systems undermines our justification for believing either; each acts as a defeater to the other. It counts as exactly the kind of interpractice massive inconsistency that shows a practice to be unreliable, and so not rationally engaged in.

There are a variety of possible principles here, ranging from the radical claim that diversity completely defeats whatever force religious experiences might have to the grudging admission that religious diversity should reduce our confidence, but not enough to make any real difference in the epistemic status of our religious beliefs. Robert McKim (2001) offers a pair of modest principles that are close to the 'grudging admission' end of the spectrum. He argues that disagreements in general (under certain carefully defined conditions) trigger an epistemic situation in which a burden is placed on the believer. The awareness of disagreement makes it the case that we have "an obligation to examine" (140) our beliefs on the matter in question, and is reason for our beliefs in that area to be "tentative" (141). David Basinger argues that if one sincerely wants to maximize truth and avoid error, and also wishes to maintain an exclusivist religious belief, one takes on an obligation to try to resolve the disagreement (1991). It's hard to know what to make of these kinds of proposals, especially since the facts about the epistemic status of any given belief depends on the particular intelligence, education, and other circumstances of the believer.[3] It's also unclear what an obligation to behave in a certain way (e.g., to try to resolve disagreement, to hold one's beliefs tentatively, or to examine one's beliefs) entails as regards the actual epistemic status of the belief. There's no logical barrier to having an obligation to examine a belief, even though the belief is on perfectly solid epistemic ground. Suppose I re-examine my belief and its grounds, and find that I have made no mistakes; am I not then justified in retaining my original belief, even in the face of disagreement? In at least some cases, I can't look at the other person's grounds and "check his work," since he is *ex hypothesi* a member of another practice, with resources I don't have access to. This is particularly clear on externalist views; since part of what justifies the belief is the fact that makes the belief true, I can't check someone else's beliefs against my own without knowing first what is objectively true.

Neither Alston nor Plantinga admits that mere awareness of religious diversity removes the religious believer's justification for her beliefs. Plantinga argues

[3] Andrew Koehl makes this case persuasively (2005). On the way to making that case, he gives an admirably thorough survey of the literature on the topic.

(2000, 437–442) that if you have adequate reason for your own belief, the presence of beliefs inconsistent with your own, even among apparently rational people, does not decrease your belief's justification, and should not decrease your confidence in your belief. This is because whatever warrant your belief enjoyed before you found out about rival beliefs remains intact; if your belief was properly formed, that fact about its origin is still a fact. What is wrong with Cohen's argument is that neither of the hypothetical twins should grant that her reasons are no better than her sister's. A thoughtful religious believer, one who actually has reasons for his or her belief, need not concede that people in other religions are in exactly the same epistemic condition. This is in line with our other doxastic practices; the mere fact that we are aware that other people disagree with us (consider the case of those who believe in a flat earth, for example) is rarely taken to count against our justification. The plurality of religious beliefs does not even constitute a probabilistic defeater; since probability would have to be assessed with respect to background information, and the believer's background information includes beliefs that support the belief in question, then the probability of the belief should remain unchanged, even in the face of a plurality of beliefs. Alston admits that the fact of religious diversity should lower a believer's subjective confidence, but denies that it should be taken to "undermine the credibility" of the religious practice (1991, 266–278). Every mystical practice is internally coherent, and insofar as they are separate practices, there is no noncircular way to decide among them. But that means that each one, by itself, is consistent with our basic package of doxastic practices, and so each one is rationally engaged in. Since they are independent, they cannot act as defeaters for one another.

If known religious diversity is to count as a defeater for religious belief, then it will have to be because of some special features of the religious case. There are, of course, differences between religious disagreement and other kinds. People who disagree about the shape of the earth share sensory access to the same physical evidence, and so their difference of opinion can be adjudicated, even if they can't be brought to agreement. In the religious case, the resources that exist for adjudicating disagreements are internal to the different practices, so no disagreement between practices can be adjudicated by neutral principles. If Alston and Plantinga are right, the mere fact of religious diversity does not make it irrational to maintain religious belief. The argument then has to turn on the facts about the individual practices. Can we find actual evidence of unreliability for any of the religious practices?

Perceptual Error and Psychology

Defeaters come in two kinds: those that show that the belief in question is false by providing evidence that supports a proposition inconsistent with it, and those that show that the evidence supporting the belief does not, in this case, actually support it. In the case of religious belief based on religious experience, the first kind of

defeater would be, for example, independent reason to think that there is no God (for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), or reason to think that a permanent self does exist (for Buddhism). Defeaters of the second sort would be reasons to think that religious experiences are not good evidence for religious belief, even though experiences in general do have that kind of force. Our subject in this inquiry is whether there are defeaters of the second sort. If we could show that religious believers are unreliable perceivers, that fact would be such a defeater.

The likelihood of perceptual error by self-deception, or self-delusion, or wishful thinking in the case of religious experience is precisely such evidence. As even the proponents of knowledge by religious experience admit, the kind of information presented in religious experiences tends to be meager, vague, and lacking in informational richness, and so is open to a wide range of interpretations. This interpretive latitude leaves a lot of room for the subject's preferences, prejudices, and expectations to enter into the resultant beliefs. As J.J. Gibson put it,

> [W]hat happens to perception when the information is inadequate? In general, the answer seems to be that the perceptual system hunts. It tries to find meaning, to make sense from what little information it can get. (Gibson 1966, 303)

The more inadequate the information, the more the perceiver has to supply, which allows an opportunity for all kinds of psychological biasing to introduce error.

One important way that perception can be biased is by wish-fulfilling self-deception, seeing what we want to see. Self-deception seems paradoxical, for reasons that lots of people have pointed out, but for our purposes, we don't need to give an account of the phenomenon, so we don't need to dissolve the paradox. If self-deception takes place, that is, if people form beliefs that in some sense they know are unfounded, that is enough. If we can then show that self-deception is not only possible in religious experience to a larger degree than other ways of forming beliefs, but even is prevalent, then we have shown that the subjects of religious experience are unreliable perceivers, and so their justification for the resultant beliefs is undermined.

Henry C. Triandis finds the telltale signs of self-deception in all kinds of features of religious belief and practice. Rather than looking at religious believers themselves and measuring whatever psychological propensities they have, he finds the signs of self-deception in the contents of religions themselves. Since the various religions have features that fulfill our wishes, if true, then they are probably wish-fulfillment self-deceptions. Some of those features are the following.

1. Gods are conceived of as resembling those who believe in them (Triandis 2009, 119);
2. Religions reinforce the powerful's political position (Triandis 2009, 119–120);
3. Religions correlate with geographic areas (Triandis 2009, 122);
4. Religions have the same structure as magic, which is clearly wish-fulfillment (Triandis 2009, 126–131).[4]

[4] He makes other claims, too; I have listed here only the ones that I think have some bearing on the question.

The claim seems to be (though it is not made explicit) that the best explanation for religions' having these features is that they are self-deceptive fantasies. While this list may offer a persuasive cumulative case, when we look at each of the items on the list, their force evaporates. Item 3 is a version of the problem of religious diversity, and we have seen that the doxastic-practice approach has resources to answer it. Item 1 makes a good point against those religions and practices that have gods and think those gods have something like physical form; that is these days a very small subset of the range of human religions. Religions that assert that God is like human beings in more subtle and abstract ways are less vulnerable to this objection, though any personal being will have to be like us in most of those ways. As for item 2, it is not at all clear that it is even true. Religious belief certainly can have a role in reinforcing political power, but it frequently also has a role in undermining it. Item 4 claims that religion has "the same structure" as magic, but he offers us no account of what those structures are, so no reason to think such a similarity either holds, or would have any epistemic consequences if it did. But most important, Triandis is not really, or not effectively, arguing that religious belief is probably self-deception, and that therefore we have a defeater; rather, he is arguing that since religions are false, the best explanation for why people believe them is that they are wish-fulfilling fantasies.

The evidence of other justification-undermining kinds of psychological conditions is equivocal, but suggestive. Gibbons and De Jarnette (1972) found a correlation between religious experience and hypnotizability. This suggests that the real explanation for religious experience is some kind of suggestion, just as people's sense perceptions can be manipulated by the right kind of preparation. There is apparently no correlation between religiosity and psychoticism. The literature on neuroticism is all over the map; some find no correlation, some a positive correlation, and some a negative correlation (see, for example, Hills 2004). This suggests either that there is a flaw in the design of some of the studies, or that there is some important difference between the variables in the different studies, so they are actually measuring different things. There is a large literature of studies that have found a correlation between religious experiences and a range of personality factors associated with openness to new experiences and ideas, including those that seem irrational to others (see Beit-Hallami and Argyle 1997, 91–92). One of those factors, and in fact one for which the correlation seems to be strongest, is schizotypy. Schizotypy is not itself a mental disorder, but people with schizotypy are more likely to develop schizophrenia. They are also more prone to hallucinate. On the positive side, they tend to be more creative than the general population. This collection of results, while far from conclusive, supports the hypothesis that religious experiences are attributable to imagination and suggestion rather than actual perception.

Still, this defeater does not work equally against all religious experiences. One thing that influences the likelihood of misperception or self-deception is how one is primed for the experience. Balcetis and Dunning (2006) found that visual perception can be influenced by what the perceiver wants, when the visual information is incomplete or ambiguous. Other studies show that motivation can influence

how and on what attention is focused, which can determine what is seen.[5] If these effects show up in visual perception, how much more likely are they to be operative in religious experiences, where incomplete, vague, and ambiguous perceptual data is the norm? The mystical practices of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam involve putting oneself into a certain frame of mind by entering into prayer, or contemplating the nature of God, or the like. It is no surprise that such experiences culminate in beliefs concordant with those beliefs. Similarly, Hindu bhakti practices involve chanting the names of gods, and so it is no surprise that it is those gods who appear to the subject. Some kinds of Theravāda Buddhist meditation do not have that priming feature to the same degree, because there is no particular object that the meditation is directed to discover. Instead, they begin from a determination to calm the mind, and then simply observe, as neutrally as possible, the rising and falling of mental events, or contemplate the nature of the physical body, for example. Certainly, Buddhist meditators come to their practice with expectations, and they begin as primed as anyone else, but the practice of insight meditation is intended to weed those things out, not reinforce them. There is no presupposition in the practice itself as to what you will find.

Theravāda Buddhist literature on meditation emphasizes the need to observe whatever is there, without expectation. Even though there is some expectation as to what you will find in those observations, the technique itself does not involve focusing on or thinking about those things, and the achievement of final liberation is possible only when one sees the world as it is. The goal of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation is to pierce the illusion of the world as made up of stable objects, including a permanent self who is the witness and observer of that world. Paul Williams describes the goal this way: 'Thus the meditator comes to deconstruct the apparent stability of things and to see directly the world as a process, a flow.' (Williams 2000, 85) This effect is achieved by an examination of all elements of the experienced world to discern in them the 'three marks'; every object of experience is unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), impermanent (*anicca*), and not-self (*anatta*). This examination is conducted by exercising mindfulness (*sati*), a prolonged and concentrated attention. In his discussion of the etymology and meaning of the word '*sati*,' Anoloyo identifies as part of the importance of *sati* that it 'is required … to fully take in the moment' (Anoloyo 2003, 48).

Conclusion

Since justification admits of degrees, so does the undermining of justification. For that reason, it is impossible to say, in many cases, whether a defeater has completely removed justification or only weakened it. The same is true in this case.

[5] For a nice discussion of this research, see Duffy and Kitamaya (2010) and Naatanen and Summala (2001).

Some reasonable people may conclude that the prevalence of self-deception in religious matters, or among religious people, completely removes any justification for religious belief based on religious experience. But this seems too strong. After all, we could have reason to believe, of a particular subject, that she is less prone to self-deception than most. If a particular perceiver is intellectually responsible and a careful weigher of evidence, then it would make sense to conclude that the beliefs she forms on the basis of religious experience are reasonably grounded. So in the next chapter, I will turn to the question of religious testimony. Even if a particular subject is rational to form religious beliefs on the basis of religious experience, is it rational for a second person to believe on the basis of her testimony?

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Chapter 5
Buddhist Testimony and Christian Testimony

Abstract Even if religious experiences can provide good grounds for religious belief, the question remains whether someone else's experience-reports provide good grounds for me to form similar beliefs, and accept their religious claims. Whether it is rational to accept religious testimony, or even irrational not to accept it, depends on whether certain defeaters are operative, which would impugn the testifier's sincerity or competence. While there is some reason to think that defeaters are often present, there is no reason to believe they always are, so it is sometimes rational to accept religious testimony. Then the question of which testimony to accept turns on the question of which testimony has the least likelihood of being defeated. Comparing Christian and Theravada Buddhist experiences, Christian experiences are more likely to be subject to priming effects and self-deception, so, all other things being equal, it is more rational to accept the Theravada Buddhist experience claims.

Keywords Testimony · William James · Theravada Buddhism · Priming · Schyzotypy · Hypnotizability · Insight meditation · Not-self

On the doxastic-practice view, it is rational for at least some religious people to form religious beliefs on the basis of religious experiences. But the question driving this inquiry was about the epistemic situation of a person standing outside all religious practices. If all practices have an equal claim, then it seems that the agnostic has no good reason to join any practice at all, and even if she had some reason to join some practice, she could have no reason to choose one practice over another. But that picture leaves out some important points. First, the claims of different religious practices need not be exactly equal. Remember that different practices are subject to different defeaters and to the same defeaters in different ways. For example, theistic religious experiences that purport to be of an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who is the creator of the universe can run afoul of defeaters peculiar to those strong metaphysical claims, which experiences that purport to be of a being with less remarkable properties would escape.

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Second, even those who do not have their own religious experiences can learn by testimony about the experiences of others, and so can come to be justified in holding the same beliefs they hold. If the adherents of one religion are better witnesses than those of another, less subject to defeaters of testimonial justification, then the recipients of religious testimony will be better justified in believing the first group over the second. These two factors work together in such a way as to give the outsider a way to distinguish one practice from another, and so have grounds for choosing one over another. Defeaters of religious testimony will also be sensitive to the particular religious content of the experience, too, so the two considerations are related.

Testimonial Justification

It should be obvious that testimony is an important source of knowledge. Even a cursory examination of the average person's belief-system reveals that a huge proportion of our beliefs come directly from the testimony of other people. Everything you know about the world outside your own experience, you learned from other people. The practice of forming beliefs on the basis of what other people say is a firmly entrenched practice, deeply entangled with our other practices and projects, and learned at an early age. In other words, the practice of forming beliefs based on the testimony of others is an integral part of human life, without which we could not pursue our joint goals. This is what Alston calls a *doxastic practice*. Some have thought that it is a basic practice, one which cannot be shown to be reliable without appealing to its own outputs; others have thought it is not basic, holding that general arguments for the reliability of testimony are available, and so testimonial justification is ultimately derived from other sources.[1] For the purposes of this inquiry, it does not matter who is right here; all that matters is that a person can acquire a justified belief, or knowledge, just because someone else told them. A wide variety of kinds of knowledge or justified belief can be transmitted that way. You can tell me what you saw, certainly, but you can also tell me what you derived mathematically, what you read in a textbook, whether you found something beautiful, and in all of these cases I can, in the right circumstances, come to know or justifiedly believe what you have told me. It seems, then, that in the right circumstances I can also come to know or justifiedly believe your religious-experience reports, too.

The question then turns on when the circumstances are right. On an externalist picture of justification or knowledge, the answer is simple: when the testimony is

[1] This point is made very nicely in Coady (1992). Since the publication of Coady's book, the epistemology of testimony has been a lively topic of philosophical research, resulting in hundreds of books and articles.

reliable,[2] the belief so formed is epistemically in the clear. For a testimonial mechanism or process to be reliable amounts to the speaker being competent to make assertions on the subject, and the speaker not being a liar. Testimonial reliability reduces, then, to testifier competence and sincerity. So, the question as to whether one is epistemically in the clear to accept religious testimony just reduces to the question as to whether the speaker really experienced what she claims to have experienced.

The matter is somewhat more complicated on an internalist view of testimonial justification or knowledge. On an externalist view of testimonial justification, all that is required for the recipient to be justified is that the testifier be a reliable source of information, at least on this topic in these circumstances. In particular, she need not be able to produce—or even have access to—evidence of that reliability. On an internalist view,[3] in order to justifiedly trust someone's testimony, I must have reason to believe that person is reliable. If internalism is true, then there are two possibilities: either testimonial justification is reducible to the justification provided by whatever practices provide the evidence for its reliability, or testimony provides its own evidence. The second option need not be as ludicrous as it sounds; remember that if we try to show that sense perception is reliable, we must appeal to the evidence of the senses. If such circular justification is a disability for testimony, it is a disability for every other doxastic practice, too.

If the reliability of testimony is established by appeal to the fruits of other doxastic practices, then an internalist must maintain that the typical consumer of testimony is, at least typically, in possession of that evidence. This view has often been called "reductionism," since it reduces testimonial justification to the justification of other practices. Many theorists of testimony have thought it implausible that people are in general in possession of such evidence, at least in a noncircular way. Consider what it would take for me to have evidence of the reliability of scientists, mapmakers, and so on. To be reliable is to produce a good proportion of truths over falsehoods, so I would need to have checked the accuracy of such people, which would involve my knowing, independently of their testimony, the facts to which they testify. When you consider what it would take for me to have independent knowledge of science, history, and geography, you can see that it is just too large a job. No human being is capable of running such checks on all the available information, and nobody in fact has. So either no one is justified in accepting testimony, or such checks are not required.

There is a way for internalists to escape the threat of skepticism here. If one could discover that people are generally reliable *without* running checks on all the particular subjects of testimony, then one could become independently justified in accepting testimony. Further, if people in general do justifiedly form the beliefs it

[2] Or, to be more precise, when the instance of belief-formation based on testimony is an instance of the operation of a reliable mechanism, or process, or whatever.

[3] There is, of course, a huge variety of kinds of internalism. See Alston (1988) for a discussion of some of the more popular varieties.

would take to ground the belief in the general reliability of humanity, then testimonial justification would be widespread. Here is one way that justification could be found. As children, we all rely on the general helpfulness of our parents and others in our environment, and, except in the case of very unfortunate children, other people are generally helpful. It is extremely unusual for adults to lie to children (Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy notwithstanding). Further, most of what adults tell children consists in matters in which the adults are competent to testify, i.e., matters of common knowledge, elementary facts about the world, facts about their general environment, and facts about the semantics of the language they are speaking. These are the sorts of things a child can check, to some extent. Therefore, they can come to find that the small circle of adults they encounter all the time are, in fact, reliable sources of information about the world. At the same time, they learn that those adults are sincere in their utterances. As they venture out into the world, they meet other adults who seem to possess the same sorts of cognitive apparatus as the adults they already knew, so they have grounds for thinking these other adults are equally competent knowledge sources. It would also be reasonable for them to form the belief that other adults want to be helpful, just as much as the adults they already know, so their utterances are likely to be sincere. By simple and reasonable induction, they can gradually widen the circle of people they trust, without violating any canons of reason. The result is a trust in testimony that is grounded in their own experiences. Of course, there will be occasions on which they learn that some categories of people are not to be trusted, or some categories of testimony are likely to be unreliable, but those refinements come later.[4]

There is one other distinction needed to proceed with this discussion, though it is one epistemologists rarely make. If we think of justification as being logically like permissibility, then to say that one is justified in believing an instance of testimony is to say that, from an epistemic point of view, the recipient of the testimony does nothing wrong in accepting the testimony, but it does not follow that the recipient does something wrong if she doesn't accept the testimony. But clearly, there are cases when a person would be epistemically "in the wrong" if she were to fail to accept a piece of testimony. That is to say, excessive skepticism is just as much an epistemic vice as excessive credulity. So we can say that a belief is epistemically obligatory if the subject, in that instance with respect to that belief, would be unjustified in failing to form the belief.[5] With this distinction in hand, we are equipped to discuss the possibility mentioned by William James that religious experiences provide good evidence for religious belief for the person having the experience, but they are not probative for third parties.

[4] Paul Saka suggested this line of thought to me in conversation, at the NEH Seminar in Social Epistemology at the University of Arizona, summer 2000.

[5] Not surprisingly, Chisholm (1977, 135) *did* discuss such a notion (or one nearby in logical space), the notion of a proposition's being "beyond reasonable doubt." Presumably, if something is beyond reasonable doubt for a subject, she would have to be unreasonable to withhold belief.

Whether testimony can be grounded in a rational belief in the general reliability of people or not, it follows that it is rational to accept testimony, in the absence of defeating conditions. Defeaters come in two kinds: underminers and rebutters. An underminer is some reason to think that, in this case, the ground of the belief does not have its typical justificatory force. For example, if I discover that the lighting in this room has an unusual color balance, then my visual experience of a green object does not justify my belief that there is a green object present, even though those experiences usually do justify such beliefs. A rebutter is reason to think that the belief in question is false; in other words, it is countervailing evidence. If I believe that my dog is in the yard based on a memory of having put him there and shut the gate, it would be a rebutting defeater if I then saw the dog out in the street. Rebutters are direct evidence against the belief in question, so whether a rebutter obtains has nothing to do with the particular method by which the original belief is justified. Any grounded belief can serve as a rebutter for any belief inconsistent with it. That being so, there are no rebutters that apply to testimony only, or to testimony especially.

Underminers of testimony also come in two kinds: since reliable testimony turns both on competence (the testifier knows what she is talking about) and sincerity (the testifier is not lying), underminers always undermine one of those two factors, either sincerity or competence. There are a variety of conditions under which a testifier's sincerity can reasonably be brought into question, which would therefore undermine the testimony's ability to justify belief. It might be that the testifier has something to gain by getting you to believe something, irrespective of its truth, and so there exists a pressure on that speaker to testify a particular way, without regard for the truth. Advertisers, salesmen, and the like fall into this category. It might also be that a given testifier is pathologically averse to telling the truth, or takes a perverse pleasure in misleading. To discover such a thing is to discover that an undermining defeater obtains with respect to that person's testimony. In the typical case, people are not pathological, and have nothing to gain by lying, so when there is a question of the reliability of a particular instance of testimony, it is usually a matter of competence.

Defeaters of competence come in a variety of forms, many of which were discussed in the previous chapter. The question in that chapter was whether the subjects of religious experiences were justified in forming religious beliefs on the basis of them; in this chapter, the question is whether recipients of religious testimony have reason to doubt the reliability of such subjects. The same considerations arise, but the verdict may well be different. In order to see that there is room for doubt, all that is necessary is to realize how complicated a matter it is to form a perceptual belief (for example). There are so many components to the process that any one of them going wrong might make a subject incompetent to form perceptual beliefs. Here are a few obvious kinds of defeating conditions for a testifier's competence:

1. *Inability to make appropriate distinctions*—If a testifier is not equipped to distinguish between similar cases, she is not competent to make a judgment about it, and so not competent to testify to that judgment. For example, many people can detect the difference between a merlot and a cabernet by taste; I cannot, and so I must rely on the testimony of the label on the bottle. Therefore, there

exists a defeating condition for any claim I make about whether a particular wine is a merlot or a cabernet that I make based on taste, and anyone who knows about this disability of mine has grounds to doubt my testimony. This is not to say that the testifier must be able to distinguish a veridical perception from all possible alternate possibilities—she need not be able to distinguish a barn from a papier-mâché barn façade, or a zebra from a cleverly painted mule, to cite the famous examples[6]; but she must at least be able to distinguish what she claims to have experienced from other things that are likely to be in her environment, and also to distinguish the presence of what she claims to be there from its absence. One way a subject can fail to be able to make appropriate distinctions is by not having the appropriate concepts to be competent to identify a thing. The philosophical literature on natural kinds is full of examples of this sort. I may know the word 'molybdenum,' and even be able to use it correctly a lot of the time, but I do not really have a concept of it that allows me to distinguish molybdenum from other substances, and so my reports of the presence of the stuff are suspect, unless my reports are themselves based on testimony.

2. *Absence of or defect in appropriate apparatus*—If a testifier does not have the appropriate sense-organs, or the appropriate additional equipment, or the appropriate conceptual resources to be able to detect the thing she is testifying is present, then she is not competent to testify to the presence of the thing in question. For example, blind people cannot testify to the colors of objects from their own experience (though, of course, they can relay the testimony of others, or use prosthetic equipment to translate color into sound, say). Any of the various agnosias caused by defects in the brain also provide defeating conditions for testimony on those topics. A person who is aware that the testifier has one of these disabilities has grounds for doubting the testimony in question.
3. *Psychological disability*—Even if all is going well with the perceiver's physical apparatus, including her concepts, there can be kinds of psychological failing that provide defeating conditions for testimony. Excessive credulity is the most important example of this. Some people, on seeing an unexplained light in the night sky, jump to the conclusion that what they are seeing is an alien spacecraft. In most of these cases, there is nothing wrong with the subject's perceptual or conceptual set-up; the fault comes entirely from a kind of doxastic incontinence.[7] Some people, for whatever reason, are inclined to deceive themselves, delude themselves, or engage in wishful thinking. Some, because of their religious upbringing, experience cognitive dissonance at the thought of understanding their experiences in a way contrary to their upbringing. Through intellectual vice, or bad upbringing, or some other cause, the person has a habit of making judgments that go beyond the evidence. Such a person's testimony is undermined, at least on some topics.

[6] The example of a mule cleverly painted to look like a zebra, and indistinguishable to the normal observer, was formulated by Dretske (1970, 1007–1023); the *locus classicus* for the countryside replete with papier-mâché barns is Goldman (1976).

[7] I am indebted to William Alston for this felicitous phrase.

Even in the absence of intellectual vice or bad habits, people's perceptions can be manipulated by 'priming'; that is, they can be led to understand their experiences in a certain way because of experiences that precede them. This kind of effect can be produced especially easily in cases when the stimulus is vague, or ambiguous, or otherwise lacking in detail; by priming the perceiver in a particular way, one can make it the case that she resolves the ambiguity, or fills in gaps, in one way rather than another. People who have just been watching horror movies are much more likely to see ghosts. Some of our natural cognitive tendencies make us already perpetually primed. Since identifying things in our surroundings as purposive or not is very important, we are inclined to see faces where there are none, or attribute agency to inanimate things.[8] Similarly, human beings are prone to making certain errors in probabilistic judgments. These errors are entirely explicable in terms of our evolutionary history; since it was important for our ancestors to be able to make quick decisions about avoiding predators, those who attributed some noise in their environment to a predator survived to breed in higher numbers than those who made more judicious judgments in accordance with data. There is little or no cost to a false positive, but one false negative takes you out of the gene pool.

Application to the Religious Case

So it can be rational to accept religious testimony, provided no defeaters obtain. Clearly for every one of the defeater categories described above, there are cases of religious experience in which the defeater obtains, and so, in those cases, it is not epistemically obligatory, and may be epistemically impermissible, to accept the testimony. The unfortunately significant number of religious charlatans might seem to provide a defeater of the sincerity of religious testimony, and it certainly does raise a problem. However, to claim that a large enough proportion of religious testifiers are liars would be to advance a skeptical hypothesis reminiscent of science fiction.[9] If the large number of politicians, advertisers, and salesmen does not undermine the justification of ordinary testimony, then the relatively small number of religious charlatans should not undermine religious testimony. It might be that religious folk are so invested in their belief systems that they feel they have something to gain by persuading others, and so are inclined to self-deception, but that defeating condition would go to competence, not sincerity.

Some have urged that the first variety of competence-defeater, inability to make appropriate distinctions, applies to many if not all religious experiences, because no perceiver can be expected to distinguish between God and a being who is merely vastly more powerful than me, but not all-powerful, and so on for the other

[8] For a nice account of that phenomenon, see Heider (2005). Chapter 3 of Guthrie (1993) surveys a variety of explanations for the phenomenon.

[9] Such a world would be more like *The Truman Show* than *The Matrix*.

attributes of God. We saw in chapter three that this argument against religious experiences either fails to indict religious experiences, or leads to equal skepticism about sense perception. Just as background information functions to help me identify particular objects in my environment, background theological beliefs might supplement my religious experiences in a way that allows me to identify their object as God.

The second category of competence-defeaters can be dispensed with quickly; there is simply no evidence that the subjects of religious experience have any neurological defect that explains their experiences. The third category is a bit more resilient. As we saw in the previous chapter, studies have shown that the subjects of religious experiences do have measurably different psychological traits that might call their testimony into question. While the evidence about suggestibility, hypnotizability, and schizotypy is not conclusive, it certainly suggests a certain kind of caution. Clearly mere possession of these traits does not by itself make a person's religious testimony unfit to ground religious belief, especially if they otherwise exhibit a good competence in distinguishing fantasy from reality. In the vast majority of cases, such people can and do learn to compensate for their non-truth-directed tendencies; otherwise, they would be unable to function in normal society.

Clearly, then, there are some cases in which there are no defeaters for the testimony of religious experience. If that is so, then there are cases in which a person is justified in accepting the testimony of another about religious experiences, especially if they have independent reason to think this particular person is a solid and reliable epistemic agent. In cases in which the testifier is a stranger to me, about whom I have no evidence, or scant evidence, the correlation between religious experience and these epistemically unhappy traits excuses me from having to accept her testimony. So James's conclusion was right, though not for the reasons he thought; a person's religious experience can be excellent grounds for her own beliefs, but it doesn't compel belief in another person. It would be a remarkable and rare case of religious testimony that would be a case of epistemic compulsion.

What About Differences Among Practices?

The previous discussion was cast in terms of religious experience in general, and so its general conclusion is no help to us in answering our guiding question, what a person is to do to distinguish among the various religious practices. Since the various defeaters obtain to different degrees for different experiences, they may also obtain to different degrees for different practices. The only way to answer our question, then, is to get down to cases, and examine to what extent the defeaters apply in different cases. For the purposes of this inquiry, we must ask to what extent the defeaters apply in experiences associated with monotheistic religions, and to what extent they apply in cases of experiences of dependent co-arising among Theravada Buddhists.

What is there to say, then, about our first competence defeater, the inability to make appropriate distinctions? The monotheist has the superlatives problem. That is, for this defeater not to obtain, our monotheist must have the conceptual resources to recognize an omnipotent being, and distinguish it from merely very powerful beings, and similarly for the other alleged divine attributes. As we noted before, a similar problem exists for any belief formed on the basis of sense perception that purports to identify a unique object. In that discussion, we noted that a lot of work can be done by a background belief system, and such a system is clearly working in the religious case. The general picture of the world the religious person brings to her experience limits what alternative explanations of her experience are relevant, and so limits what distinctions she needs to be able to make.

What are the appropriate distinctions a monotheist must be able to make? Given the general world-view held in common by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, she must be able to distinguish a true experience of God from experience of other possible beings that are not unlikely to be in the vicinity. That's why so much Catholic mystical theology is written about how to distinguish real experiences of God from experiences caused by myself or the devil: myself, the devil, and God are the only hypotheses on the table. Likewise, it is important for Islamic theology that the prophets are morally incorruptible. To be sure, prophets are mere human beings, but they are chosen for their moral excellence, and protected from committing anything but the most trivial of sins (see Kerr 2009). That insures that they will not themselves be deceptive, and they will not be so foolish as to be deceived by the devil.

One of the earliest biographies of the Prophet Muhammad contains a story according to which the Prophet was deceived by Satan into producing a revelation which was a bit less strictly monotheistic than the other revelations he had received (Guillaume 1955, 165–166). Though this story appears in one of the earliest biographies of the prophet, it was rejected by early Islam as impossible, because it would imply that God did not protect his word and his prophet from deception.[10] The fact that the subjects of experiences can't distinguish between an experience caused by God and an experience caused by a powerful and technologically advanced alien bent on deception is no more significant epistemologically that the inability to distinguish between a barn and a papier-mâché barn façade. If we had reason to think such aliens were around, the story would be different. If we have reason to believe that self-deception is reasonably common, then it would be epistemologically significant if the subjects of experiences could not distinguish an experience caused by God from one caused by their own psychological states. Whether this form of this defeater obtains, then, reduces to the question whether self-deception is likely, which is a form of the psychological-disability defeater, which we take up below.

[10] This reasoning contains a very familiar kind of circularity: We know the message is true because the prophet is reliable. We know the prophet is reliable because the message says he is.

Theravadins don't have the superlatives problem, but they do have the perceiving-absences problem. What leads to enlightenment is the experience of reality as lacking in permanent substances (including selves), and as made up of momentary events that occur only because of previous conditions. How is one to perceive that there are no permanent substances? In general, how do we perceive the absence of something? Some cases are unproblematic: I can observe that there is no camel in the room; I can reason that there is no largest prime number; I can learn that there are no unicorns. That there are no unicorns is a matter for biological science; scientists observing the natural world and building elaborate and well-grounded theories have concluded that they do not exist. They learn it by the application of observations, testimony of other observers, deduction, and induction—that is what science is. The point is that I do not observe it myself. It is unlikely that by engaging in an introspective meditation practice I could do what is necessary to come to know this.

That there is no largest prime number is a theorem of mathematics, and as such, it is established by deductive proof from self-evident axioms. No observations could serve to establish this bit of knowledge. So again, this is not the kind of thing I could come to discover by an introspective meditation practice. The case of the absent camel is more to the point. I do observe that there is no camel in the room. I do it by myself, and perception is the primary avenue of this knowledge. When someone asks me if there are any graduate students around, I can find out by looking in the places they would be if they were present. If they are not in any of those places, then I can confidently assert that they are not present. What makes this kind of observation possible is the fact that if they were present, I would see them, just as if there were a camel in the room, I would see it. But it is only because I am confining my observations, and the content of my assertion, to a finite vicinity that I can make this claim. Can I observe that something of type X does not exist anywhere, in all of space and time? If the object's description is internally inconsistent, then I can, but that kind of case will be rare, outside of mathematics and set theory.

In a way, the superlatives problem faced by the theist and the absences problem faced by Theravadins are versions of the same problem. To see that a being is all-knowing, for example, is to see that there is no truth, in all of space and all of time, that this being doesn't know. That being so, the solution is similar. If there is background knowledge that, together with the observation, implies that there are no objects of kind X, then it does not matter that I cannot observe it directly. This is why the biologist can make the confident assertion that there are no unicorns. It's not just that she hasn't seen any, or that nobody she knows has seen any; it follows from the lack of observations together with a well-founded theory of how the animal kingdom works that leads them to say that if there were any, we'd know it. The problem for the Theravadin, then, is this: Is there any reason to think that, if there were permanent substances, you would know it? That is, is there reason to think you would discover them in introspective meditation?

The Theravadin has resources to answer in the affirmative. The question about the counterfactual boils down to, in this case, the question as to whether

a meditator could expect to encounter permanent substances in her meditative practice, if there were any. Whether there are or aren't permanent substances is a basic metaphysical fact that we would expect to obtain all over the universe equally. Suppose a meditator examines herself, and finds that there is nothing there but aggregates of impermanent processes. It would be bizarre in the extreme for her to say, "That's how I am, but perhaps other people have permanent souls." Just as a physicist may reasonably conclude that what she discovers about the electrons in her supercollider holds for all electrons everywhere, the meditator can conclude that the basic metaphysical facts she discovers about herself will hold for other sentient beings, and beings generally.

But is there reason to think that, if there were a permanent self, a meditator would have to run across it? Hume famously concluded that introspection reveals no self, but only a bundle of impressions.

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception (1976, 252).

One obvious criticism of Hume is that there is no reason to suppose that introspection should reveal a substantial self. The Buddha actually gave an argument for the claim in the Mahanidana Sutta (Thanissaro 2010). He sees no sense in the idea that something should be your self, but not be accessible to you and in your control. Therefore, if you don't find it by introspection, it is not there.

The second class of defeaters, resting on a claim that the subjects of experiences have either missing or damaged cognitive apparatus, can be dismissed quickly. There is no reason to think that there is any fault in the apparatus, either among theists or among Buddhists. Claims of psychological disability can also be quickly passed over; subjects of religious experiences in all traditions show schizotypy, and no research has been able to detect any consistently demonstrable neurosis or other disorder. The matter of priming and hardwired tendency to error is different, as we noted in chapter four. It is far easier to prime someone to interpret a vague and ambiguous experience as of a person than as of nothing whatever. Therefore, the probability that someone will form a religious belief on the basis of an experience is relatively high, regardless of whether the belief is true.

One way to pose the question is this: what kinds of illusions are people likely to suffer? What kinds of things are we likely to think are present, even when they are not? One thing we know is that people are likely to see faces in all kinds of places where they are not, from Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina to Jesus in a slice of toast. Our minds are configured to try to arrange perceptual data into faces, a well-documented phenomenon known as pareidolia. This is suggestive, but far from conclusive, since religious experiences rarely are experiences of faces resolved out of perceptions of actual features of the environment. It suggests, though, that we may have a bias in favor of interpreting our experiences as of purposive activity, attributing agency where there is none. Such a bias would account for many UFO sightings, attributing purposive behavior behind the

apparent movement of phenomena in the sky, and so seeing them as craft piloted by intelligent beings. It would also account for all kinds of reports of paranormal phenomena; a fleeting shadow is a ghost, a whispering noise is a voice, a coincidence or random occurrence was intentionally engineered, and so on. Is there a similar built-in bias toward perceiving the world as not made up of enduring substances? It seems that, in fact, we have the opposite bias, the bias of attributing substantiality to the insubstantial. Flames, storms, clouds, and the like seem to us to be persisting objects when they are in fact just relatively stable collections of processes. So we would expect, as a matter of natural fact apart from any theory, that experiences of self-examination would produce experiences of enduring substances, not of series of fleeting events.

Claims of religious experiences are ordinary-language perceptual claims, which can ground justified beliefs in the subjects of those experiences, and that justification can be transmitted by testimony. Given the difference in the content of the claims, however, and the natural biases humans are subject to, the experiences reported in the monotheistic traditions provide weaker justification than those in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, because such experiences are explicable even if they are not veridical. Theravada Buddhist experiences resulting from meditation practices are not so readily explained. The religious seeker, outside all traditions, has better reason to become a Buddhist than a theist, though it is not epistemically obligatory to accept either.

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