# 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

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[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.

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[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

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[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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