The appearance of God

A defense of the argument from religious experience

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Abstract

Should we trust religious experience? Discussions of religious experience in analytic philosophy have, over the last fifty years, focussed primarily on whether such experiences can serve as *non-inferential* evidence for the existence of God. Richard Swinburne's work on the subject is the locus classicus of the discussion, with debate centring on whether his Principles of Credulity and Testimony afford religious experiences with prima facie epistemic value. In this work, I criticize and reject both principles. Nevertheless, I maintain that religious experiences are evidence that there is a God, for those who have such experiences. I deny, however, that testimony about religious experiences can provide non-inferential evidence for anyone and, consequently, those who have never had a religious experience might reasonably disagree with those who have.

With the question of whether or not religious experiences are to be afforded a prima facie epistemic trust set aside, the second most important question is whether or not there are any positive reasons to think that religious experience is unreliable. The most prominent arguments in this vein are: those which contend that results from the natural science undermine the value of religious experience; those which contend that religious experience is far too varied and inconsistent to suppose it reliable; and those which insist that the most common types of religious experience are merely sensory experiences with an unjustified religious interpretation. I argue here that none of these objections is fatal, concluding that many people do in fact have good grounds for believing that there is a very good, loving and powerful God.

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Introduction

The late John Hick once remarked that '*religious belief does not properly depend upon inference from evidences discovered in the structure of the universe'*. Rather, he says, it depends upon the world being '*consciously experienced as having the kind of meaning articulated in religious language*' (Hick, 1992, 304). Belief in God, Hick thinks, depends upon experiences of the presence of God. Certainly Hick is right that one reason that many religious believers give for thinking that there is a God appeals to either the believers own religious experiences or else the testimony of other's having had those experiences. Can religious experiences serve as evidence for the existence of God? This question is best handled by dividing it in two: (1) Can religious experiences serve as evidence for the existence of God for subjects of those experiences? (2) Can reports of religious experiences serve as evidence for the existence of God, for those not fortunate enough to have had such experiences?

There have been two different approaches for answering in the affirmative to both of these questions. The first approach involves focussing on the epistemic status of the doxastic *practice* of forming beliefs about God on the basis of religious experiences and comparing this with the doxastic practice of forming beliefs about physical objects on the basis of sensory experience (Alston, 1991). William Alston argues that neither can have their reliability established without relying on their own inputs and that both are socially established practices which are internally coherent and consistent with the outputs of all other well-established doxastic practices. He concludes that the practice of forming beliefs about God on the basis of religious experience '*has basically the same epistemic status as [sensory experience] and that no one who subscribes to the former is in any position to cavil at the latter*' (Alston, 1982, 12).

The second approach is the more direct of the two and involves arguing on the basis of very general epistemic principles that religious experiences are evidence for the existence of God (Swinburne, 1979; Kwan, 2011; Davis, 1989; Gellman, 2001; Wainwright, 2012; Hick, 2006; Gutting, 1982; Yandell, 1993). This approach looks to have been foreshadowed by C.D Broad, who in the 1950s wrote:

> The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical. We cannot prove that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them; but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not (Broad, 1953, 197).

This way of thinking inspired only a handful of followers at the time and would not inspire any further research on the matter until almost 20 years later. So why did Broad's suggestion not gain much traction? It is impossible to say anything of substance about the recent history of philosophy of religion without commenting on the way in which it was beaten into submission by Logical Positivism – roughly the doctrine that only statements which are true by definition, or empirically verifiable in principle are 'cognitively meaningful' – and the failure of C.D Broad's reasoning to garner much support from the philosophical community may easily have been a result of the Logical Positivist's claims that all talk about God is meaningless. Fortunately, by the 1970s, Logical Positivism had collapsed and in its wake came a surge of interest in Broad styled arguments.

In this paper, I want to focus in on those Broad styled arguments offering a critical discussion of the major issues which crop up in that context. I shall contend here that there is a plausible argument from religious experience (ARE) and hence contend that religious experiences and, in certain conditions, testimony about religious experiences, are evidence for the existence of God. Before embarking on the journey, let me first make some general comments about the argument whilst giving an overview of the rest of the paper.

The conclusion of arguments from religious experience is that there is significant evidence for the existence of a being with some of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God. The properties normally ascribed to God are personhood, great power, great knowledge, great love and great goodness. Of course many of those who subscribe to Theism go further than

this and claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, all loving and all good. I shall use the word 'God' to refer to the former idea, unless otherwise stated.

Arguments which cite the occurrence of religious experiences as evidence for the existence of God obviously rely on the premise that people actually have such experiences. In Chapter 1, I shall provide the requisite defence arguing that religious experience is wide-spread.

Having established that religious experiences do in fact occur, the next question to ask is whether such experiences count as evidence and in exactly what way they do so. Do they only provide evidence for the person who has the experience, or can someone who hears a report about such experiences obtain non-inferential evidence as well? These questions provoke fundamental epistemological issues which serve as the subject matter for Chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, I evaluate the most famous argument from religious experience: that of Richard Swinburne. I find his argument unpersuasive because of its reliance on certain answers to these epistemological issues. In Chapter 3, I offer an alternative argument on the back of an alternative epistemology: Phenomenal Conservatism.

The rest of the work is a consideration of the many alleged defeaters for religious experience. There is a view widespread amongst sceptics today that natural science has shown that religious experiences are all delusions, or at least that they cannot provide any evidence for the existence of God. Many are of the view that religious experiences are the product of drugs, mental illness or else capable of being 'explained away' by superior naturalistic hypotheses. If cogent, such arguments amount to defeaters of religious experience. Chapter 4 argues that there are no defeaters for the majority of religious experience to be found in the natural sciences.

The second most potent objection to the ARE I take to be the claim that religious experiences are 'interpretations' of regular experiences and that such experiences cannot provide any evidence unless the interpretation itself is first justified independently. I shall argue in Chapter 5 that this objection is impotent.

Chapter 6 takes up a battery of allegedly insurmountable philosophical problems for the ARE, including, but not limited solely to, problems which arise from the fact that religious experiences are often so different to one another. Some religious experiences are of the Christian God, others of Allah, others still of Nirvana, and many of these seem to conflict

with one another allegedly preventing any of them from serving as undefeated evidence. I argue in Chapter 6 that this argument constitutes a partial defeater to the ARE. In particular, it prevents the ARE from being a successful argument for the existence of a personal God and certainly prevents it from being a successful argument for the God of the Abrahamic religions. Despite this, I claim that the ARE can still be mounted as a cogent argument for the existence of a being that has at least some of the attributes of God; namely, an enormously powerful, yet thoroughly good being which transcends the material universe.

An astute scholar of the ARE will notice that my discussion follows the agenda for discussion of numerous other works on the same topic – principally Davis (1989) and Hick (2006). This work shall differ from those other treatments in numerous respects. First, I treat the basic epistemological issues with more detail than is normally done when discussing these arguments. This, I hope, results in an exposition of the argument which is much more plausible, connected as it is to developments in mainstream epistemology. The increased attention to such details also makes way for importantly different conclusions than those that are usually drawn by proponents of the ARE concerning the possibility of reasonable scepticism about religious experience. Second, my discussion of the potential defeaters for religious experience differs both in terms of which defeaters are given the most attention and, in some places, the responses offered.

One final introductory note; there are a number of people who deserve acknowledgement for their support during the writing of this work. I am very grateful to Scott McMurray and Kathryn Hayward who read multiple drafts of this entire work despite their academic interests lying outside of philosophy. Michael Huemer helpfully entertained my questions about Phenomenal Conservatism via email, and at one point prevented me from completely misunderstanding the view! Thanks also to James Tartaglia who provided me with both philosophical expertise and a stern challenge to my thesis. The contributions of my supervisor Sorin Baiasu are immeasurable. He has been willing to discuss all aspects of the project at almost any given time; offered detailed comments on drafted chapters; and provided many useful challenges to my thesis. His careful Socratic questioning of my ideas has prevented me from making plenty of philosophical mistakes throughout this work. Any which remain are of my own doing.

1

Reports of Religious Experience

The argument from religious experience requires the claim that many people have had religious experiences. Proponents of the argument have usually been content to offer a plethora of written reports of religious experience which serve to substantiate the claim (Swinburne, 1979; Davis, 1989; Gellman, 2001; Alston, 1991). I suspect that this strategy can leave a sceptic of the argument unsatisfied. The sceptic may still feel as though such experiences are simply not anywhere near as common as is being made out by defenders of the argument. Statistical data on religious experience would prove much more effective. However, on the occasions on which defenders of the argument have drawn on statistical data, they have been brief, cursory and at times failed to properly evaluate the data which they deploy (Kwan, 2011; Hick, 2006). A persuasive argument requires a careful articulation of what is meant by 'religious experience', an array of examples which give the reader a clear idea of what is being referred to and an evaluation of the statistical data on religious experience. These are the goals of this chapter.

1.1 Clarifying the Concept of Religious Experience

What are religious experiences? 'Religious experience' is a protean notion today and is used in innumerable different circumstances. Some use the term to refer only to experiences of the Abrahamic God; others mean to include experiences of religious figures; others are prepared to allow any experience of a transcendent reality to count as a religious experience including the experience of ghosts and apparitions; some include any form of seemingly inexplicable experience as a 'religious' one; lastly, some are prepared to include just about any experience had whilst engaging in religious practices or living a religious life. My use of the term shall be artificial. Following Alston (1991) I shall use the term to denote any experience in which it seems to the subject that there is a transcendent reality present to their consciousness. This

transcendent reality may be the Christian God, Nirvana, Oneness, Nothingness, Allah, any of the Hindu God's, or any other such purported reality. Limiting the notion in this way will make for a more focussed discussion. Additionally, for an experience to count as religious in my terminology, it is not at all necessary that the experience be structured in terms of religious concepts. It is not necessary, for example, that the purported object of experience be described using the words 'God', 'Nirvana' or any of those. It is only necessary that the purported object of experience be of that kind, namely, of a reality which is purportedly 'beyond' the world of ordinary sense perception. I shall also stipulate that I am uninterested in experiences of ghosts and evil spirits, not because I do not think them worth exploring, but simply because there is not the space to afford them the attention they deserve.

Beyond this, I shall not offer any more stringent definition of religious experience. Instead, I intend to provide a series of examples which give the reader a firm grasp of the sort of experience I have in mind. I shall also note some general features of these experiences along the way and delineate some broad categories. I encourage the reader not to get too bogged down in the issue of whether or not my categorisations are ideal, and to instead let the experiences speak for themselves.

As mentioned previously, there are many experiences in which the subject claims to be aware of the presence of God. Such experiences are usually had via the experience of ordinary objects, as in these examples:

> The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature (James, 1979, 248).
>
> I feel him [God] in the sunshine or rain; and awe mingled with delicious restfulness most nearly describes my feelings (James, 1979 [2012], 70).
>
> Just occasionally when I was sure no-one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by a running

> waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of Meadow Sweet or a mass of Purple Loosestrife (Rankin, 2008, 10).

Often, the presence of God is experienced through the experience of ordinary objects in this way, but sometimes it is experienced more vividly, as though God is literally speaking to one:

> When I was middle-aged and the 2nd World War upon us, there came a night when I was in deepest distress of mind. I was alone in my bedroom, pacing the floor…. Suddenly, I heard a voice firmly say 'Be still and know that I am God!' It changed my life. I got into bed, calm and confident (Beardsworth, 1977, 92).

These experiences are even frequent in children. Here is one from a lady reflecting on her childhood:

> My father used to take all of the family for a walk on Sunday evenings. On one such walk, we wandered across a narrow path through a field of high, ripe corn. I lagged behind and found myself alone. Suddenly, heaven blazed upon me. I was enveloped in golden light, I was conscious of a presence, so kind, so loving, so bright, so consoling, so commanding, existing apart from me but so close. I heard no sound. But words fell into my mind quite clearly- 'Everything is all right. Everybody will be all right (Hay, 2006, 14).

Notice at this point a clear difference between the experience cited in Beardsworth (1997) above and that cited by Hay (2006). The former clearly involves the subject having auditory sensations. He literally hears God's voice. In the second, it seems to the subject that a transcendent reality is offering her a message in some sense, but this message is not portrayed through the having of auditory sensations.

Other experiences involve the experience of a presence which transcends the ordinary world, although that presence is not explicitly labelled as God by the subject despite its sharing many properties with what would normally be described as God:

> Then, in a very gentle and gradual way, not with shock at all, it began to dawn on me that I was not alone in the room. Someone else was there, located fairly precisely about two yards to my right front. Yet there was no sort of sensory hallucination. I neither saw him nor heard him in any sense of the word 'see' or 'hear', but there he

> was; I had no doubt about it. He seemed to be very good and very wise, full of sympathetic understanding, and most kindly disposed towards me (Beardsworth, 1977, 122).
>
> All at once I felt someone near me, a presence entered this little room of which I became immediately conscious….dazed I knelt by the nearest chair and here is the physical phenomenon that has recurred many times since. Into my heart there came a great warmth. The only way I can describe it is in the words of disciples on their way to Emmaus 'our hearts burned within us'. My hands raised in prayer also glowed from tips to wriest with a blessed warmth, never before experienced (Beardsworth, 1977, 113-114).

The sense of a presence not explicitly associated with God is an experience which occurs quite regularly among those who do not believe in any sort of transcendent reality:

> I…know that since I concluded some years ago that my mind could not accept a personal God… I seem to have become more aware of this all-pervading power which to me is strength, comfort, joy, goodness (Hay, 2006, 17).
>
> Since about the age of 6 I have had an awareness of a higher power. At all times I am aware of this power, which is as real to me as any in the physical world….Originally a Catholic, since 12 I have belonged to no organized religion whatsoever. I belong to no group (Hay, 2006, 16-17).

Moving on now to the experience of religious figures, many people have reported having visual or auditory sensations in which it has seemed to them that such sensations were of religious figures such as Jesus Christ:

> I was busily occupied one morning in cooking the lunch and with no other thoughts in mind, when suddenly there was a blinding flash of light and standing at my side was a white-robed figure. I knew it was Christ when I saw the pierced hands and feet, but did not see his face. The amazing brightness all around me was indescribable and I was filled with such overwhelming joy that I cannot find words to express all I felt (Tschudin, 1990, 79).

What's more, many experiences of religious figures occur to people who do not worship those figures. We find non-Christians having experiences in which it seems to them that Christ is present, for example. Simone Weil, an agnostic in Portugal had a religious experience she describes thus:

> Christ himself came down and took possession of me… I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person, here below, between a human being and God… in this sudden possession of me God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact (Overman, 2009, 135).

Notice again here that there is a distinction to be drawn between experiences in which the subject literally seems to see Christ in front of him by the having of visual sensations, and other experiences in which it seems to the subject that Christ is present but not through the having of visual sensations. Further, this is not merely a one off instance. Marshall (2005, 190) writes that *"many cases are situated outside traditions of doctrine and practice, occurring under a variety of non-religious circumstances"*. He includes an example in which a school boy describes an experience of the world as "*the mine of an I that was no longer the familiar ego*" (Marshall, 2005, 191). In adulthood the boy reflected on the experience noting that it left a great impression on him at first because it did not fit into anything with which he was familiar.

Such experiences even occur across traditions. A young man named Sadhu Singh reports having an experience which almost precisely parallels that which is reported by St Paul despite at the time being a Sikh:

> At 4:30 A.M I saw something of which I had no idea at all previously. In the room where I was praying I saw a great light… I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love… but it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before…I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, "How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you, you were praying to know the right way, why do you not take it?" And then the thought came to me, Jesus Christ is not dead, but living and it must be He Himself (Streeter and Appsamy, 1921, 4-6).

Lastly, perhaps the most fundamental type of religious experience is one in which it seems to the subject that there is a transcendent unity to all of reality; that he is one with the everything and there is no distinction between, as the mystics say, this and that (Newberg, 2001). Here is a plethora of examples:

> The individual shell in which my personality is so solidly encased explodes at the moment of satori. Not necessarily that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences… melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to (Suzuki, 1971, 31-32).

> One day I was sweeping the stairs down in the house in which I was working, when suddenly I was overcome, overwhelmed, saturated, no word is adequate, with a sense of most sublime and living love. It not only affected me, but seemed to bring everything around me to life. The brush in my hand, my dustpan, the stairs, seemed to come alive with love. I seemed no longer me, with my petty troubles and trials, but part of this infinite power of love, so utterly and overwhelmingly wonderful that one knew at once what the saints had grasped. It could only have been a minute or two, yet for that brief particle of time it seemed eternity (Hardy, 1979, 89).

> Without any sense of perception, I was made aware of a Reality beyond anything that my own mind could have conceived. And that Reality was a total love of all things in heaven and earth. 'It' enclosed and accepted everything and every creature: there was no distinction of its love between the star, the saint and the torturer (Tschudin, 1990, 61).

> One day years ago I went for a walk in the fields with my dog. My mind suddenly started thinking about the beauty around me, and I considered the marvellous order and timing of the growth of each flower, herb and the abundance of all the visible growth going on around. I remember thinking 'Here is mind'. Then we had to get over a style and suddenly I was confronted with a bramble which was absolutely laden with black glistening fruit. And the impact of that, linked with my former reasoning, gave me a great feeling of ecstasy. For a few moments I really did feel at

> one with the universe or the creative power we recognize. I know it was a feeling of oneness with something outside myself, and also within. I must have been confronted with the source of all being, whatever one should call it. I have often told my friends about it, though it seems too sacred to talk about (Maxwell and Tschudin, 1990, 52).

I say the experience of Oneness is the most fundamental type of religious experience both because it is one of the most frequently occurring (Hay, 2006, 22-23) and because it is one which occurs in universal fashion. Both Christian nuns and Buddhist monks have this same type of religious experience despite their radically opposed backgrounds. Christian nuns experience a relationship with God so intense that they seem to be 'mingling with God' (Newberg, 2001, 11). Buddhists experience a transcendent unity in which the ego disappears into Nirvana. Many times, experiences which begin as experiences of the presence of God gradually become experiences of Oneness, or something close to it. In experiences of the presence of God, God is often described as 'in everything' or as 'all pervading': a description which sits on the borderline of an experience of Oneness.

There is a vast array of other experiences which I have not taken the time to mention at present. Hay (2006) also demonstrates that experiences of an evil transcendent presence, of people being filled with spirit and other sorts of religious experience are at least as common as those which I have chosen to make example of. Rankin (2008) distinguishes a dizzying array of similar types of experience. However, we must stop here for now because of spatial limitations. This array of examples should suffice to give the reader a good idea of what is meant by a 'Religious Experience' as I shall from here on use the term[1].

1.2 Religious Experience in the UK

I turn now to evaluating the statistical data on religious experiences. Just how common are the sorts of experience I have in mind here? Depending on the country, it can be more or less difficult to tell.

1 There are many other examples to be found in great figures such as St. Teresa, St Paul and others. I have not relied on these examples because I wanted to show that religious experience was a phenomenon stretching far beyond the incredibly devout.

Religious experiences have been fairly frequent in the UK since at least the 1980s but have been growing at a fast pace as of late. The late Alister Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) in 1969 with the purpose of beginning a scientific study of the nature, function and frequency of religious experiences in human beings. In response to advertisements placed in the local media, Hardy was able to compile an archive of several thousand descriptions of religious experiences sent in by members of the UK general public; an archive which has today grown exponentially (Hay, 2006). The descriptions collected were sent in response to the following question and variants of it:

(The Hardy Question) Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, that is different from your everyday self?

David Hay followed up on Hardy's work in 1978. He managed to get The Hardy Question into the British National Opinion Polls; a nationwide survey on a battery of topics. Of 1865 respondents, 36% reported at least one experience of the sort indicated by the Hardy question, and 18% reported having such experiences on several occasions.

Not much later, Hay (1979) conducted interviews with 100 University students asking them the Hardy question and allowing them – relatively unrestrictedly - to write an account of any particular religious experience they have had, if applicable. Twenty two percent of those students reported awareness of the presence of God; 19% reported awareness of a presence in nature; 23% awareness of a power guiding them and 10% a unity with nature (Hay, 1979, 166-171). Moreover, 20% reported having these sorts of experience 'all the time'; although it was more common (33%) to report having the experience once or twice (Hay, 1979, 166-171). Similarly, 18% reported having, for example, an awareness of the presence of God 'always there', whilst it was much more common to report having the experience for a minute or less (40%) (Hay, 1979, 166-171). Here are some of the first hand descriptions of the experiences offered by the students who had them. This first comes from an English student:

> I've been interested in God and what it meant since my teens, and during the study of Victorian poetry, particularly Tennyson and Browning and their searchings for God, I thought about their problems which seemed relevant to me. I began praying, not really sure that there was a God. At one particular time there was a great relaxation came

> upon my mind and everything fitted together. It only lasted for a moment, perhaps 4-5 seconds. I really felt God was communicating with me (Hay, 1979, 171).

In this example, it seems to the subject that God is communicating with them, but there is no mention of any visual or auditory stimuli. Here is another similar experience from a different student:

> At this time, if I'm lucky (during yoga exercises) I seem to latch on to something akin to a pure emotional state. A sense of happiness. There is definitely some sort of power there which seems to greet me, to embrace (Hay, 1979, 180).

These two examples involve awareness of the presence of something like a God, but there were also many descriptions of a sense of a sacred presence in nature:

> Frequently I have a very simple awareness of a presence which is engendered in everything around me (Hay, 1979, 180).

and again:

> About 5 years ago, sitting on a mountain top in the middle of Dartmoor, I was waiting for some people, and had been there for several hours. I felt that I wasn't alone, but I felt very content although I had to wait all these hours. It came quite suddenly and went on for at least an hour until the others arrived (Hay, 1979, 180).

Here are two reports from the survey of an experience of Oneness:

> I can remember walking out in a field on our farm, by myself, and it was a fine blustery day, and it (the wind) was cutting out other sounds. I can just remember this feeling of being part of a whole sort of universal sensation, really, it was - in which I was completely involved. So the experience was first felt by me but spanned way out beyond anything I could encompass (Hay, 1979, 180).

> I should say I've had a going into one's self, but at the same time seeming to split off from my own personality. This was on certain occasions when I've been doing Transcendental Meditation. It was almost like falling into an abyss. You lost all sense of body or time (Hay, 1979, 180).

Clearly, the experiences reported in this survey are of the sort which I would call 'religious experiences'. That is, they are experiences in which subjects seem to be aware of a transcendent reality present to consciousness.

Since then, David Hay (2006) has conducted two more separate nationwide surveys using more precise variants on the Hardy question which enable us to identify the numbers of specifically religious experiences as I have understood the term; one in 1987 and another in 2000 in association with the BBC nationwide project 'The Soul of Britain'. Table 1 details the exact figures:

Table 1: Religious Experience in the UK (Hay, 2006, p. 11.)

	Percentage of the National Population in 1987	**Percentage of the National Population in 2000**
A patterning of events	29%	55%
Awareness of the presence of God	27%	38%
Awareness of a prayer being answered	25%	37%
Awareness of a sacred presence in nature	16%	29%
Awareness of the presence of the dead	18%	25%
Awareness of an evil presence	12%	25%
Cumulative total	48%	76%

Over three quarters of the population of the UK claim to have had at least one experience belonging to these categories and this despite the decline of institutional religion in the UK (Hay, 2006). Looking specifically at religious experiences as per my definition, we must ignore awareness of prayers being answered and awareness of the patterning of events, because neither of these involve the actual presentation of transcendent reality to consciousness, as well as awareness of the dead and of an evil presence.

Now, we see that in the UK, reports of awareness of the presence of God are fairly common (27% in 1987 and 38% in 2000), whilst awareness of a sacred presence in nature, though not as prevalent as the former, is by no means an anomaly (16% in 1987 and 29% in 2000). That is, over 1/3 of people in the UK in 2000 reported an awareness of God and just under 1/3 of people report awareness of a sacred presence. What's more, another UK national poll found that 23-24% of those claiming to have experienced the presence of a higher power identify themselves as being either 'agnostic', 'atheist' or 'don't know' (Hawker, 2000). Hay (1987 cited in Hood, 2009) corroborates this latter result.

In surveys of the UK, religious experience is reasonably well operationalized in the questions asked. The Hardy Question on its face appears to be directly about the sort of experience I have in mind. In the most recent surveys in which the question was split into numerous categories, we find clear questions oriented at the sort of religious experience I am concerned with. Lastly, the body of qualitative studies on religious experiences done by Hardy and Hay (1979; 2006) make it clear that many people who responded to these surveys indicated that they have had experiences in which it seems to them that a transcendent reality is present to their consciousness.

1.3 Religious Experience in other English Speaking Countries

More recently, the Baylor Religion Survey (2005) asked 1721 adults and found reports of both theistic and monistic religious experiences. The following table shows the results:

Table 2: Religious Experience in the USA Per the Baylor Religion Survey (2005)

Religious Experience	**Percentage of people who had the experience**
I personally had a vision of a religious figure while awake	5.9%
I heard the voice of God speaking to me	14.6%
I changed profoundly as the result of a religious experience	29.4%
I had a religious conversion experience	27%
I had an experience where I felt that ....I was filled with the spirit	52%

I had an experience where I felt that I was one with the universe	20.3%

In the second wave of the same survey (2007), the figures came out with very little difference. Note that the most common experience is being filled with spirit, which is not unambiguously religious. Further, reports of having changed profoundly as a result of a religious experience do not say anything about what the experience was like. We do not know, for this survey, whether such experiences involved awareness of a transcendent reality present to consciousness or whether they involve the patterning of events, purported answers to prayers, or something else. The same can be said of people having had a religious conversion experience. Did they convert as a result of a direct awareness of transcendent reality? Or did they convert as a result of a seemingly answered prayer, or something else? Such experiences hence cannot be counted as 'religious experiences' as I am using the term, since it is unclear whether they meet that definition.

What remains here is: vision of a religious figure, experience of God's voice, and experience of being one with the universe. Together, these categories amount to a substantive number of reports of religious experience, the most common being the experience of Oneness.

Similar results have been found repeatedly by the PewForum. Having asked 4013 people whether or not they had ever had a religious or mystical experience, 49% responded with yes (2009). This is consistent with the results the PewForum found in 2006, where the figure was 47%, but constitutes a significant increase from the figures in 1962 (22%). Moreover, 33% of those who identify themselves as 'not affiliated to any religious group' report having had a religious experience, and 1/5 of self-identified atheists report having had such experiences as well.

A series of smaller scale surveys support these findings. In San Francisco in 1963, Glock and Stark had asked "Have you ever as an adult had the feeling that you were somehow in the presence of God?" to 2871 subjects, all of whom attended church. Seventy-two percent responded with 'yes' (Glock & Stark, 1965, cited in Hood, 2009, 344). Vernon (1968 in Hood, 2009, 344) was able to ask the same question to a small sample of 85 who indicated that they had no religious commitment when asked finding that even still, a significant

minority answered affirmatively (25%). Lastly, the National Opinion Research Centre asked 1468 subjects: "Have you ever felt as though you were close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?" Thirty-five percent answered "yes" (Davis & Smith, 1994 in Hood, 2009, 345).

With regard to English speaking countries in general, *"a large proportion of the Western population has had first-hand experience of God or a presence of power…. 43% positive response in the United States (1985), 44% in Australia (1983) and 44% in Canada (1990)."* (Hawker, 2000, 87).

Most of the studies in the USA are large-scale surveys. This is beneficial in that it makes possible the gathering of a sample which is very probably representative of the population as a whole. However, the sheer scale of the surveys imposes a number of limitations. First, the questions asked are in some cases quite general, as in the case of the PewForum. This makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about how many people had religious experiences of the sort we are interested in. Perhaps they had experiences of answered prayers or the patterning of events as opposed to being aware of transcendent reality. Second, even when there is an attempt to be more specific with the questions, as in the Baylor Religion Survey, the scale of the survey makes it far too impractical to include any qualitative descriptions of the sorts of experiences reported. This poses an issue because it is difficult enough to know by reading a report, what the exact nature of a subject's experience is, since we have not had the experience ourselves. When we do not even have access to the report and merely have the subject's 'yes' or 'no' answer to a battery of questions, this problem is only compounded. Despite these limitations, surveys such as the Baylor Religion Survey are certainly indicatory of many people in the USA having had religious experiences of the relevant kind.

1.3 Religious Experience in China

In 2004, Professor Xinzhong Yao and Professor Paul Badham conducted a survey on the religious experiences of the people of China with 3196 respondents. The participants were asked, amongst many other things, the equivalent of The Hardy Question for Chinese culture. Specifically, this question was asked:

Some people have experienced that they were once and/or are frequently influenced by a kind of power that ordinary people cannot control and explain clearly. Have you ever had such an experience?

The Lord of Heaven, Dao, Qi and Buddha were then all given as examples of what the researchers had in mind. 56.7% of participants answered 'yes' to this question and 55.9% responded with 'yes' when asked if they had experienced one or another higher power (Yao and Badham, 2007 cited in Kwan, 2011, 270). Participants were also asked to report which particular transcendent realities they had experienced. 46% of participants reported having experiences of the God of Fortune, 25.7% the Will of Heaven, 18.2% the Buddha, 6.1% the Christian God, and 4.2% the Dao or Qi. 56% of the participants reported having some religious experience or other and that same proportion of participants answered the original Hardy Question with 'yes' (Yao and Badham 2007 in Kwan, 2011, 270). Note further that few of these people were overly religious, as evidenced by the fact that only 8% identified as 'particularly religious' (Yao and Badham 2007 in Kwan, 2011, 270). The answers to these three questions taken together have been taken to be a reliable indicator of the experiences which the participants actually had (Rankin, 2008, 235). What's more, religious experience manifests itself to this great degree in China despite decades of the aggressive suppression of religion (Rankin, 2008, 236).

1.4 Religious Experience in Turkey

Professor Yaran of Istanbul University undertook the first substantive survey of religious experience in Turkey. He took random samples of the population from every region of Turkey from east to west collecting 1236 questionnaires. The study was complicated by the fact that many people in Turkey are unfamiliar with the concept of 'religious experience' even though they have them. Yaran had to alter the Hardy Question and similar questions using simple words and often provide elaboration of the sort of thing that the question is asking for. His first question for example, was:

Have you ever had an extra-ordinary, exceptional or supranormal experience which you would qualify as 'religious or spiritual' experience (state or event)?

In response, 45.9% of people answered 'yes' and 19.6% answered 'perhaps, but not sure. 34.5% answered 'no' (Rankin, 2008, 236). For those who answered 'perhaps, but not sure',

Yaran would proceed to elaborate on the question, clarifying what was meant with examples. This would allow all of the participants to make a decision. As a result, 63.7% of participants answered 'yes' and 36.3% 'no' (Rankin, 2008, 236). The second most common type of experience reported, was awareness of the presence of God (Rankin, 2008, 236).

1.5 Religious Experience in India

In South India in 2006, 206 interviews were carried out asking participants about their background, their religious affiliation and their religious experience. Of these, 68.4% reported having had a religious experience (Rankin, 2008, 238).

1.6 Further Caveats

With regard to all these surveys in non-English speaking countries, difficulties arise again which have to do with the generality of the questions asked. Most of these studies leave the notion of 'religious experience' vague or else mean to include a wide range of experiences which fall beyond the narrow range of experiences we are concerned with. Fortunately, in the most substantive of these studies in China, the questions asked are a little more specific, and this helps to some degree, as indicated above. However, for some surveys, particularly those taken in India and Turkey, it is difficult to discern just how many of these experiences are of the sort I have in mind.

Moreover, there are very few studies of religious experience in non-English speaking countries. As far as I know, those reported for China, India and Turkey are the only surveys which have been officially conducted in those countries. This is a stark difference between survey data from the UK and USA. For example, the UK and USA have numerous nation-wide polls as well as several smaller studies both quantitative and qualitative, whilst India has only a single study of 206 participants. The difference in availability of data again makes it difficult to put together an accurate picture of religious experience in many countries.

There are also limitations to the research which work in favour of the ARE, particularly as regards research in the UK and USA. David Hay (2006) has evidenced through a great number of interviews with participants in his studies - that most people are hesitant, perhaps even scared, to report having had a religious experience. In one case, 20/31of the people interviewed by Hay and his colleagues voluntarily expressed that they felt very embarrassed

discussing religious experience and that it was difficult for them to talk about it (Hay, 2006). In an older survey (1979), Hay reports that most participants were reluctant to talk about their religious experiences until a rapport had been built with them. 40% of the participants to Hay's substantial surveys expressed having never reported their experiences to anyone else prior to the interview, and when asked why they had not told anyone, they said they feared being laughed at, even by their closest friends and family (Hay, 2006, 84). Some felt that the rest of society thought of religious experiences as 'weird', 'occult', and 'strange', or that people would view them as 'cranks or religious idiots' who were 'mentally ill' or 'mad' for claiming to have religious experiences (Hay, 2006, 85).

There is no doubt a great stigma attached to religious or spiritual experiences in the West. It is something of a taboo subject (Hay, 2006). Hood, commenting on the numbers of religious experience in connection with such stigma, remarks that *"the irony is that at least one-third of the population claims to have such experiences, but few people talk about them publicly"* (Hood, 2009, 347). Not too long ago, claiming to be aware of the presence of God could get you identified as a schizophrenic by official criteria provided by the American Psychiatric Association, though this view has since been revised (Hay, 2006). If many in the West feel the same stigma as many of the participants in Hay's surveys felt, it is quite likely that they would have been too afraid to report their religious experiences, particularly for scientific studies. The number of people who actually have had religious experiences is therefore quite likely higher than the number reported.

The data on religious experiences in non-English speaking countries is slim and difficult to use for our purposes. It is indicative of there being many religious experiences in these countries, although far from conclusive. The data on religious experiences in the UK and USA however do powerfully suggest that many people have had religious experiences of the sort we are concerned with[2]. I let Hood conclude this chapter:

2 There is a general worry with this survey data in that often it is quite dated. The most recent survey is the Baylor Religion Wave II Survey from 2007- 8 years ago. The data could certainly use supplementation to make the ARE even more persuasive, but I cannot see any a priori reason to discount any report of religious experience because of age.

At a minimum, then, the reports of such experiences have been clearly and conclusively established by survey studies to be statistically quite common among normal samples (Hood, 2009, 346).

2

Swinburne's Argument from Religious Experience

What should we make of the fact that religious experience is so prevalent? Numerous philosophers have supposed that such experiences are good evidence for the existence of God. Most often, they have supposed that religious experience is non-inferential evidence, as distinguished from inferential evidence. Inferential evidence for some proposition P consists in some other proposition Q from which P can be inferred by some recognized pattern of inference. In this work, it shall be convenient to speak of the beliefs of some subject having evidence for them, rather than of propositions. This is no major obstacle, since when a subject has a belief, what they believe is some proposition. Let's say then, as some epistemologists say, that a subject has inferential evidence for some belief B when he has some other belief C from which B can be inferred by recognized patterns of inference. Not all of our beliefs can have inferential evidence in their favour because this would involve having an infinite series of beliefs from which we inferred others. There are some beliefs where this is quite clear. For example, I believe that I am thirsty but I do not believe this because I believe some other proposition from which I can infer that I am thirsty. Nevertheless, most philosophers want to say that I do have evidence that I am thirsty and that this evidence consists in my experiencing that I am thirsty. Call this sort of evidence –evidence which does not accrue by inference from propositions- non-inferential evidence. Which beliefs of ours are such that we are capable of possessing non-inferential evidence for them and which can only be evidenced by recognized inference from other believed propositions is a matter of philosophical dispute.

Richard Swinburne's argument from religious experience (ARE) is the most famous line of reasoning for the claim that religious experiences provide non-inferential evidence for the existence of God. Geivett goes as far as to dub Swinburne's argument 'the standard argument' (Geivett, 2003, 180). This chapter focuses on that very argument.

2.1 The Principle of Credulity

In Chapter 13 of Swinburne's (1979) *The Existence of God*, he formulates a pair of principles dictating conditions under which we might have non-inferential evidence for beliefs and then draws from those principles the corollary that religious experiences are non-inferential evidence for the existence of God. The first is his Principle of Credulity:

(PC) If it seems to S that P, then S thereby has non-inferential evidence that P, absent defeaters (Swinburne, 1979, 254, my paraphrase).[3]

Now the first question we must ask about PC is what does it mean for something to seem to be the case? Well, what Swinburne means by it is made clear by other formulations of the principle. He writes:

> So I advocate a principle, which I call "the principle of credulity", that every basic belief is non-inferentially justified. The mere fact that one has a basic belief is reason for believing it to be true, and so in the absence of contrary evidence it is a justified belief (Swinburne, 2010, 682).

Here the Principle of Credulity stipulates that if S believes that P (and the belief that P is not based on any other beliefs) then S thereby has evidence that P in the absence of defeaters. 'Seems', then, should be taken to mean 'believes'.

In other places however, Swinburne formulates the Principle of Credulity differently. He notes first that we all have certain inclinations to believe which are forced upon us (Swinburne, 2011 in Dougherty, 2011). For example, when I wake up most mornings I am immediately inclined to believe that I am in my bedroom. When I think about what I had for breakfast this morning I am inclined to believe that I had yoghurt. Swinburne sometimes phrases PC as stipulating that if S is *inclined* to believe that P then S thereby has evidence that P in the absence of defeaters (Swinburne, 1979, 246; 1988). Feldman and Conee sought correspondence from Swinburne and after having done so spell out his view as follows:

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3 *"…it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present"* (Swinburne, 1979, 254).

"how things seem to be is good grounds for a belief about how things are" (Swinburne, 1979, 254).

> He holds that all of our seemingly world-imposed inclinations to believe give us the evidence that we have. The inclinations vary in strength. Richard's view, as we understand it, is that our evidence ultimately consists in these inclinations to believe, whether they are strong inclinations or weak ones. (Conee & Feldman, 2011 in Dougherty 2011, 294).

This version of the principle suggests that 'seems' is to be read as 'inclined to believe'. Which then is it? Does 'seems' mean 'inclined to believe' or 'believes'? Let us consider both interpretations together from here on. PC is then the doctrine that whenever S believes or is inclined to believe that P, he obtains some non-inferential evidence that P, absent defeaters. S can therefore obtain non-inferential evidence for beliefs like: that there is a tree in front of him; that he is thirsty; that he had cereal for breakfast this morning. In fact, S can have non-inferential evidence for any and all of those propositions he is capable of being inclined to believe.

Swinburne goes on to refine his initial PC in a later formulation:

> This principle claims that every proposition that a subject believes or is inclined to believe has… in his noetic structure a probability corresponding to the strength of the belief or semi-belief or inclination to believe (Swinburne, 2010, 141).

The original formulation simply said that the mere fact that S believes that P or was inclined to believe that P was as such evidence that P. This version tells us that the degree to which P is rendered probable is proportional to the strength with which S believes that P or is inclined to believe that P (note that for Swinburne, P is evidence for Q just in case P makes Q probable).

This much more sophisticated formulation appears to be much more plausible than the previous. If we are to accept that S's believing that P is evidence for S that P, then why should a very tentative and wavering belief count as the same amount of evidence as an incredibly strong one? It does not seem that it should, and so we are lead plausibly to the more sophisticated formulation:

(PC*) If it seems to S that P, then S has an amount of non-inferential evidence for believing that P which is proportional to the strength with which it seems to S that P, absent defeaters.

PC* then claims that our non-inferential evidence consists in our beliefs and our inclinations to them. What about experiences? Is not my experience of typing right now itself evidence that I am typing right now? Not for Swinburne. Swinburne remarks in correspondence to Feldman that *'[we] cannot use these things as evidence, except in virtue of what [we] believe (true or false) about them.'* (Quoted by Feldman, 2011, 296). PC* offers us the only non-inferential evidence we can get.

Given that, as chapter 1 illustrates, many people have been inclined to believe that God is present to them as a result of religious experiences, it follows from PC* that all of those people have evidence that there is a God, absent defeaters.

2.2 The Principle of Testimony

So far Swinburne's argument has led to the conclusion that many people have evidence that there is a God of the theistic sort in the form of their inclinations to believe that God is present to them. Swinburne also wants to claim that those who have not had such inclinations to believe as a result of religious experiences can also obtain non-inferential evidence for the existence of God by way of testimony. It is here that Swinburne introduces his second epistemic principle; the Principle of Testimony. He writes:

> We usually believe to have occurred what other people tell us that they perceived occurring. Other things being equal, we think that what others tell us that they perceived probably happened (Swinburne, 1979, 271).

Sometimes he puts it quite simply:

> What others tell you is probably true, in the absence of counter evidence (Swinburne, 1979, 221).

We may again understand the Principle of Testimony (PT) as a principle of evidence possession.

(PT) If S has testimony that P then, absent defeaters, S thereby has non-inferential evidence that P.

Swinburne is clear to point out that the evidence provided by testimony-that-P is somewhat lesser than the evidence provided by actually, for example, seeing that P for yourself. Still, he insists that it provides a substantial amount of evidence.

This principle however appears to contradict PC*. Swinburne claims that all of our non-inferential evidence consists in basic beliefs (beliefs not based on other beliefs) and inclinations to believe. But this Principle of Credulity looks to contradict the Principle of Testimony which says that if someone tells me that P, I have non-inferential evidence that P. What is someone's telling me that P? It is surely a state of affairs and not an inclination to believe or a basic belief. Hence the mere fact that someone has told me that P cannot by itself serve as non-inferential evidence that P if PC* is truly the correct account of non-inferential evidence. The Principle of Credulity then ends up contradicting the Principle of Testimony.

To save Swinburne from this dangerous incoherence, we may take an alternative reading of the Principle of Testimony suggested by some of his other writings. In some places, he writes:

> I suggest, a principle of testimony, that evidence that someone has told you that so - and - so makes it as such probable that so - and – so [absent defeaters] (Swinburne, 2010, 683).

Here the Principle of Testimony is importantly different. Here, it is not the mere fact that someone told you that P which gives you evidence that P. It is your possession of evidence that someone told you that P which gives you evidence that P. For example, when I hear you tell me that the post-man was at my house this morning, I obtain evidence that you have told me this, and it is this which gives me evidence that the post-man actually did come. The principle is subtle and avoids the contradiction well. When someone in fact gives me testimony that P, I may find myself inclined to believe that they have told me that P, and this inclination to believe then gives me evidence that P. The new Principle of Testimony says:

(PT*) If S is inclined to believe that he has testimony that P, then S thereby has non-inferential evidence that P.

PT* gets along with PC* far better than PT ever did, and PT* can be used to advance Swinburne's argument from religious experience further. Many people are inclined to believe that they have testimony that there is a God. In fact, anyone who has read chapter 1 of this

work will most probably be inclined to believe that there is testimony that there is a God in the form of many people reporting experiences of God – experiences which, by PC* are evidence absent defeaters. From this and PT* it follows that we have significant evidence that there is a God in the form of religious experiences. There is significant evidence that there is a God, so the conclusion goes.

Geivett summarizes this line of argument well:

> We have been considering two questions. First, what evidential weight do of-God experiences have for those who have them? Second, what evidential weight do of-God experiences have for those who have not had them but are recipients of subjects' reports about of-God experiences? In answer to the first question, the standard argument appeals to a fundamental principle of rationality called the Principle of Credulity…and unless there are special considerations that defeat the evidence of [religious experience], it would seem that of-God experiences provide substantial support for a subject's belief that God exists.
>
> In answer to the second question, the standard argument makes use of the principle of testimony. If an of-God experience provides a subject with substantial support for believing that God exists, and if a recipient accepts the authenticity of the subject's report about his/her having such an experience, then the subject's of-God experience also provides the recipient of this testimony with significant reason to believe that God exists (Geivett, 2003, 185).

2.3 Evaluation of the Principle of Credulity

As we have said, Swinburne's argument hinges crucially on the Principle of Testimony and the Principle of Credulity. It seems to me however, that neither is particularly plausible. I shall focus first on the Principle of Credulity: PC*.

The Principle of Credulity is an unpopular epistemic principle, chiefly because it looks to endorse something very close to circular reasoning in supposing that beliefs or inclinations to believe that P can evidence P (Huemer, 2014). McGrath puts it eloquently when he writes: *'It is hard to see how a belief could be evidence for its contents. How could one's take on how*

things are be evidence for oneself at that very time that things are that way?' (McGrath, 2013 in Tucker, 2013, 245). The very point of evidence would seem to be to tell you what the world is like, allowing you to check your beliefs against reality. If however, our ultimate evidence consists solely in what we are inclined to believe, really we shall just be checking our beliefs against our beliefs[4].

Another common and persuasive argument against the Principle of Credulity is offered by Foley (1983). Suppose that S has some evidence that P, but not quite enough to make it justified for him to believe that P[5]. Now suppose that S believes that P anyway. Well now S has an inclination to believe that P or a belief that P which when added to his other evidence makes him justified in believing that P. S can move from P being unjustified for him to believe, to P being justified for him to believe, simply by believing it. That is quite a startling result.

There is another issue with the Principle of Credulity. Suppose that I am inclined to believe incredibly strongly, but for no particular reason, that the great pumpkin will return every Halloween. I have never seen the great pumpkin. No one has ever told me that they have seen it. I have no argument for the existence of the great pumpkin. It is just something I have always been inclined very strongly to believe. There might be myriad reasons for my inclination to believe this. Perhaps I really wished as a child that the great pumpkin did exist because it would make Halloween far more interesting and eventually became convinced of it, not necessarily realizing that it was my wish which convinced me. Perhaps I take belief in the great pumpkin on faith because it is a vital part of my religion, even though the great

4 I borrow these remarks from Siegel (2011) who says something similar in an entirely different context.

5 A belief is justified if and only if it is based on adequate grounds. There is a dizzying number of ways in which this might be more precisely spelled out. The notion of 'justification' I use here, and throughout this work, is an Internalist and synchronic one. It is Internalist insofar as it stipulates that the only items which count as S's grounds for a belief B are S's mental events. It is synchronic insofar as it is a notion which applies to the evaluation of a subject's doxastic response at a particular time, as opposed to an evaluation of his performance over time. Specifically, a belief's being justified means it's being rendered sufficiently probable by the evidence. I do not assume here that this notion of justification is necessary for knowledge, but I do suppose that it is a good thing to have beliefs justified in this sense, and this is surely uncontroversial. See Swinburne (2001) for an extremely useful resource.

pumpkin never appears to turn up on Halloween. This is certainly logically possible. The Principle of Credulity will be forced to say that I possess a great deal of evidence for my belief; perhaps even more evidence than I have for more ordinary propositions like that I had oatmeal for breakfast, depending on how strongly I am inclined to believe this. It is after all possible that I am so psychologically certain that the great pumpkin will return every Halloween that I am inclined toward it more so than many other ordinary propositions. Now my intuition is that this is straightforwardly the wrong result. Not only this, but I do not think this is even a borderline case. I think it a paradigm case of a belief without any evidence in its favour. If it is not, what even are the paradigm cases?

Swinburne does not share the intuition that such beliefs are beliefs without any evidence in their favour. He does agree, and I think most philosophers would agree, that the great pumpkin belief in these scenarios is not a justified belief. That is, Swinburne agrees that the great pumpkin belief is not one which is on balance supported by the evidence that the subject has, supposing that he lives in our world. Perhaps then, because of disagreements in intuition, we need not count the failure of the Principle of Credulity to accommodate my original intuition as a mark against the theory. Surely however, if the theory cannot accommodate the much more widespread that the great pumpkin belief is not justified – for whatever reason that may be - that will surely be a substantive mark against the theory.

Swinburne addresses great pumpkin cases by claiming that in a normal case, a person will have theories which are made very probable by their total body of evidence, and these theories will rule out propositions like that the great pumpkin will return every Halloween. He writes:

> We do not normally need a priori principles to rule out ‘wild’ basic-beliefs (beliefs that one has seen fairies, or knows the future from an astrological chart, etc.), since a posteriori criteria will normally rule these out. We almost all have theories rendered (subjectively and - I suggest - logically) probable by other basic propositions (including what ‘everybody knows’ about how the world works) which rule out ‘wild’ basic propositions from being overall probable. If someone believes that he has seen the Great Pumpkin return at Halloween, then this belief is normally rendered improbable by a lot of other evidence (in the form of his or her basic-beliefs or what

> others have told him or her about their observations) (Swinburne, 2011 in Dougherty, 2011, 203).

Here Swinburne attempts to show that his theory can accommodate the intuition that great pumpkin beliefs are not typically justified by arguing that typically subjects have plenty of other evidence that makes great pumpkin beliefs improbable. Still, I doubt this response can successfully deliver the required verdict, for several reasons stemming from the fact that his response presupposes that the subject's belief in the great pumpkin is rendered improbable by his other inclinations to believe or the theories supported by those inclinations.

Since inclinations to believe are a psychological matter, a person could be so utterly convinced of a proposition that he believes it more strongly than he believes absolutely anything else. It is logically possible that a person be so dogmatic, and so thoroughly brain-washed, that the proposition that the great pumpkin will return every Halloween is beyond all doubt as they see it. All we need do is suppose that this person has been forced to take a tablet which manifests in him a belief in the great pumpkin with the same degree of psychological certainty as propositions like 'I exist', 'I have a mind' and the like. Alternatively, perhaps this person's faith in the great pumpkin is so strong as to produce in him an absolutely unwavering belief. Now of course, by the Principle of Credulity, the more strongly he is inclined to his belief the more evidence he has in its favour. This brain washed subject then obtains extortionate amounts of evidence for his belief by way of being brain washed. It's logically possible that he even obtains so much evidence from his dogmatic believing that all the other counter evidence he has is vastly outweighed, and then Swinburne would fail to deliver his desired verdict that the great pumpkin belief has a lot of evidence against it. It would seem that this counter-example brings out the implausibility of the principle more clearly. By this principle, the more dogmatic you are, the more evidence you obtain and the more difficult it is for your counter evidence to render your belief improbable; that sounds like it conflicts with the very meaning of the word 'evidence'. Swinburne thus fails to deliver his desired verdict.

The most vexing concern for Swinburne's reply is that the conditional lowering of probabilities is symmetrical. If A is improbable given B, C and D then the conjunct (B & C & D) is improbable given A. Similarly, if the great pumpkin belief is improbable given many of the other beliefs of the subject then those other beliefs are improbable given the great

pumpkin belief. The issue then becomes, which conditional determines the strength of justification (Feldman, 2011, 296)? Is the great pumpkin belief unsupported by our total evidence consisting in our other opposing beliefs and theories making it unjustified or is it instead that all our opposing theories and beliefs are unsupported by our total evidence consisting of the great pumpkin belief (and other typical beliefs)? Nothing in Swinburne's theory provides an answer to this question and so there is no way for his theory to properly yield the verdict that the great pumpkin belief is not supported by the subject's total evidence even in the original more straightforward version of the scenario.

It seems to me that the best way to deliver the verdict that this belief suffers a serious evidential defect is to simply say that the subject has no evidence for it; that inclinations to believe are not evidence.

One reply Swinburne might make to the preceding argument is to appeal to his Principle of Testimony. He might argue that although a person who is very strongly inclined to believe in the great pumpkin may not himself have any competing inclinations to believe which serve as counter evidence, what he may have is a lot of testimony from other people reporting inclinations which can serve as counter evidence. That is, other people might tell him things which make the great pumpkin hypothesis very improbable given the Principle of Testimony. This would render the verdict that the subject's belief is not highly supported by his evidence, much as we wanted. For this to save Swinburne, he needs PT. He needs it to be the case that the sheer fact that S has been told that P, regardless of his inclinations to believe he has been told this, gives him evidence that P. That principle however contradicts PC* - and Swinburne's outlook generally - and is thus unavailable. If anything can save Swinburne, it must be PT*- the doctrine that if S is inclined to believe that he has testimony that P, then he has evidence that P, absent defeaters. PT* is unfortunately unable to do the trick. In the first place, PT* cannot solve the issue involving the symmetrical nature of conditional probability and, secondly, it might easily be that one believes that the great pumpkin will return with such confidence that all of the testimonial evidence one receives is vastly outweighed. One might, for example, belief it with as much confidence as one believes the proposition 'I exist'. Again, the great pumpkin belief will be justified.

I suggest that the best way to deliver the desired verdict is to deny that basic beliefs and inclinations to believe that P are evidence that P. PC* portrays the dogmatic person as a

champion of reason; because he is so psychologically certain of his beliefs, he ends up with excellent evidence that they are true and no defeaters, or at least no sufficient defeaters. Indeed the solipsistic madman with firm enough conviction may even be in a far *better* epistemic position, just by virtue of the firmness of his conviction, than any person with common sense beliefs.

These issues aside, what looks to me to be the most pressing concern of Swinburne is that his principle evacuates of all meaning the notion of a belief without evidence in its favour. On this view, there just is no such thing as an un-evidenced belief. It is logically impossible, according to PC*, that anyone ever believes anything, no matter how absurd and gerrymandered, without any prima facie evidence in its favour. There are beliefs which have plenty of evidence against them, but there are no beliefs which lack any prima facie evidence, necessarily. It seems to me however, that there are such things as beliefs without any prima facie evidence in the actual world: beliefs formed by faith or motivated solely by desire and emotion being the obvious cases. I think it even more obvious that it's logically possible for there to be beliefs without any evidence in their favour, and that the elimination of this category by definition is a mark against PC*.

2.4 Credulity and Making Sense of External World Scepticism

The Principle of Credulity is an account of what our evidence ultimately consists in, and such accounts ought to connect up to our other epistemological projects, since that is the very point of providing said accounts. One of the chief epistemological projects is to turn back external world scepticism; radical doubt about the existence of the external world. This amounts to two different projects. The first is showing that we have evidence for common-sense beliefs about the external world, and the second is showing that our common-sense beliefs are actually epistemically superior to alternative sceptical hypotheses, like the hypothesis that I am being massively deceived into believing in the external world by an evil demon. It is tempting to think that the two projects would always be accomplished simultaneously since showing that we have evidence for our common-sense beliefs, one would think, suffices to show that we are in a better epistemic position in believing them than any alternatives. Sometimes, as will be seen however, the two projects come apart. Sometimes it is possible to show that we have evidence for our beliefs without thereby showing that common-sense beliefs are actually epistemically superior to sceptical hypotheses. In any case, any theory

which fails to provide an adequate resolution to these worries is itself an inadequate theory, for one of the chief purposes of such theories is to handle these worries (Shatz, 1991, in Fetzer, Shatz & Schlesinger, 1991, 187).

Now consider how the Principle of Credulity fares. Its answer to this brand of scepticism is to offer an analysis of evidence such that we do have evidence for our common sense beliefs. That is, Swinburne retorts to the sceptic that we do have evidence for all of our common-sense beliefs, since we are all inclined very strongly to believe them. Our evidence for the existence of the external world is the fact that we are inclined to believe in it. Yet, it does nothing to explain how it is that we are in a better epistemic position in choosing common sense beliefs over sceptical hypotheses. On Swinburne's proposal, the only difference between common sense beliefs in the external world and sceptical hypotheses is the fact that we believe common sense beliefs and do not believe, nor are inclined to believe, sceptical hypotheses. This however, is hardly any reassurance since we will be forced to concede that we are doing no better epistemically than a person who is just like us in every respect and yet believes a sceptical hypothesis; a disastrous result.

Swinburne could retort here that we are in an epistemically superior position to a person who believes sceptical hypotheses because they will have plenty of counter evidence in the form of inclinations to believe. This however will not suffice as a reply, because the same issues afflict the response in this context as afflicted it when dealing with both the great pumpkin belief earlier.

The Principle of Credulity thus fails to properly deal with the second project to turn back external world scepticism. The Principle lacks therefore a chief desideratum of a successful epistemological theory[6]. In light of this and the various other issues highlighted, I shall have to conclude that the Principle of Credulity is false.

6 Shatz (1991, in Fetzer, Shatz & Schlesinger, 1991, 187) provides the inspiration for this argument. He raises an objection to Reliabilism about knowledge by arguing that it fails to explain how it is possible that we are in a better epistemic position than the sceptic. In fact, it places the sceptic in exactly the same position as we are; the position that, if his beliefs are true, then he knows that they are. Shatz puts this by saying that Reliabilism does not suffice for a dialectically effective argument for our common-sense beliefs. A similar thing could be said about The Principle of Credulity; that it does not suffice for a dialectically effective argument for

Without the Principle of Credulity however, notice that the Principle of Testimony is wildly implausible. It states that if I am inclined to believe that I have testimony that P, then I have evidence that P, absent defeaters. This principle is well motivated when put with PC* because if PC* is true, then when I am inclined to believe that I have testimony, I thereby have evidence that I have testimony. PT* then simply states that testimony counts as non-inferential evidence for what is testified, absent defeaters. But if PC* is false, then the fact that I am inclined to believe that I have testimony is no reason at all to think that I actually do have testimony, and if I have no reason at all to think that, how could the testimony give me any evidence? PC* and PT* are in need of replacement if the argument from religious experience is to proceed.

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our common-sense beliefs, since the sceptic can say just as well that he is inclined to believe sceptical hypotheses.

3

The Argument Redeemed

The ARE can be redeemed in the face of the problems of the last chapter by relying on alternatives to the Principles of Credulity and Testimony. Let us begin with the part of the ARE which answers this question in the affirmative:

(1) Can religious experiences serve as evidence for the existence of God for subjects of those experiences?

Swinburne's answer to (1) was reliant on the Principle of Credulity, which we found unacceptable in the last chapter. We might instead venture to answer (1) by relying on the doctrine of Phenomenal Conservatism. Phenomenal Conservatism is standardly a thesis about when a person has justification and is best expressed by a single, simple principle:

(PC^) If it seems to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of (non-inferential) justification for believing that P (Huemer, 2007).

It can however, also be construed as a theory of evidence possession:

(PC#) If it seems to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some non-inferential evidence that P (Tucker, 2011)

Some general remarks first. PC# introduces the locution 'at least some evidence' to indicate that different experiences may have different amounts of epistemic force. Plausibly, stronger and more forceful experiences constitute greater evidence than weaker ones. Crucially though, all instances in which it seems to S that P provide some evidence that P, no matter

how little. This preserves the insight of Swinburne's stronger PC*. Further, in much the same way as Swinburne's Principle of Credulity, PC# is intended as a principle of non-inferential evidence; as an account of what evidence I ultimately have for beliefs which are not based on other beliefs.

This by itself constitutes little to no progress over the original Principle of Credulity. As before we are forced to ask, what does it mean for it to seem to S that P? It cannot mean that S believes that P or that S is inclined to believe that P, or else this view will fall prey to the problems inherent in the last section, but we must say something about it, or else our argument shall be vague.

3.1. The Analysis of Seeming

Fortunately, the Phenomenal Conservative view insists that seemings are neither beliefs nor inclinations to believe. Rather, seemings are experiences with propositional content (Bealer 1999, Pryor 2000; 2004; Huemer 2001; 2007; 2013a, Cullison 2010, Chudnoff 2010, Brogaard 2013, 10; Lycan 2013; Skene 2011; Tucker 2010, 2013b)[7]. That is:

(3) It seems to S that P if and only if S has an experience with the propositional content that P.

This analysis is not all too revealing. What is this experience with propositional content? The best way to distinguish them is by their phenomenological character. There is something it is like to have a seeming. When it seems to me that an alarm clock is ringing, the proposition 'an alarm clock is ringing' has a certain feel of truth about it. It feels as though this proposition reveals how things really are. The proposition comes with an *assertiveness* to it as though recommending itself for our acceptance (Tucker, 2013a; Huemer, 2007). It is as though when it seems to me that an alarm clock is ringing, the proposition 'an alarm clock is ringing' has a glow about it that a proposition like 'a dog is barking' does not have in this circumstance.

I might have seemings about many different things. It might seem to me that an alarm clock is ringing or that some other a posteriori proposition is true, but it might also seem to me that

7 Sometimes it is said that seemings are 'sui generis propositional attitudes'. It appears that this amounts only to a terminological difference.

a priori propositions are true. It can seem to me that 2+2=4. When I contemplate such a proposition, it again has that feel of truth, that glow about it which directs me toward it whilst other propositions, like 2+2=9 lack that revealing phenomenology. It can also seem to me that abortion is wrong, or that giving to the poor is good. It can seem to me that I had bananas for breakfast this morning, or that The Last Supper is a beautiful painting, or that the Many Worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is correct. I can have seemings about many different things in all areas.

This phenomenal character also comes in degrees. It seems very strongly to me that 2+2=4, and it also seems to me that there is a God, although nowhere near as strongly as the former. It seems to me that I am typing right now and also that Phenomenal Conservatism is true, but again the former is much stronger phenomenologically than the latter. One may see this for oneself. Notice first that it seems to you that your name is whatever it is. Now take some much more complicated belief that you have. Perhaps one about science, or philosophy, or religion, and compare the way in which it seems to you that this is true with the way in which it seems to you that your name is whatever it is.

Some philosophers are sceptical about the existence of seemings. Most people will be quite familiar with the use of the locution ‘it seems to me that P’ to mean ‘I believe that P’ or ‘I am inclined to believe that P’. But many struggle to grasp the use of ‘seems’ which picks out a unique type of experience with propositional content. As I see it, everyone is well acquainted with seemings, but sceptics are somehow failing to notice them in this context. I shall say a few things here to help point them out.

It should be noted that it can seem to me that P even if I do not believe that P and even if I am not at all inclined to believe that P. Suppose that you are looking at a stick partially submerged in water. It seems to you that the stick is bent, even though because of what you know about the properties of water and light, you do not believe that the stick is bent. In fact, you may be so knowledgeable about these things that you are not even slightly inclined to believe that the stick is bent, yet when you look, it still seems to you that the stick is bent (Huemer, 2007, 31). For another example, the Muller-Lyer illusion involves two sticks which are actually the same length and yet one appears to be longer than the other because of shapes attached to the ends of the lines. A person who has seen the illusion many times will not believe that the lines are of different lengths, nor even be inclined to believe it, and yet every

time they look it will still seem to them that the lines are of different lengths. There is an additional sense of the word ‘seems’ then which is separate from the inclination sense and the belief sense. It is this sense which is picked out by the Phenomenal Conservative as the relevant sense.

Here is one last gasp effort to make clear what is meant by ‘seems’. Virtual reality helmets are amazing pieces of technology. You put on a futuristic motorcycle helmet and it simulates an entire alternative world right there before you. You can interact with virtual people, climb virtual mountains, and even read virtual philosophy books. The technology allows you to experience many things which are not really there. You can look across wide expanses of ocean, for example, even though the whole thing is a simulation. Now, when you wear a helmet of this sort, you may at first genuinely believe there is a sea in front of you, but after wearing it a few times, you will become accustomed to the fact that it is all a simulation and no longer believe this. Moreover, after a time, you shall no longer even be inclined to believe it. Still, there is certainly a sense in which it seems that there is a sea in front of you. It appears that there is a sea in front of you. It *looks* as if there is a sea in front of you. It is this sense of ‘seems’ which has to do with how things ‘appear’ or ‘look’ which is picked out by Phenomenal Conservatism as the relevant analysis.

So, seemings are experiences with propositional content that have a characteristic phenomenological character. It may be easy to conflate seemings with sensations. For example, when I seem to see a desk, this may easily be conflated with the mere having of certain sensations. This would be a mistake, chiefly because I often have seemings without sensations. Mathematical and logical propositions can seem to be true without the having of sensations, as can moral propositions, and philosophical propositions. What’s more, people having the same sensations can have different seemings. Both I and a bird expert may have the sort of sensation characteristic of seeing a Pintail duck. But it will only seem to me that I am seeing a duck, whilst it will seem to him that he is seeing a Pintail duck. Upon looking at a picture, it may seem to an Illustrator that there is a painting by Arthur Rackham whilst it may seem to the untrained that there is a painting. Lastly, I might have a sensation of the sort I normally have when there are 2204 blades of grass in my line of sight, but at best it only

seems to me that there are many blades of grass. Seemings and sensations are therefore distinct[8].

This ought to be enough to explicate the concept of seeming at work in Phenomenal Conservatism.

Now that we have Phenomenal Conservatism, it is possible to make the same argument Richard Swinburne made. From Phenomenal Conservatism it follows that anyone to whom it seems that God is present has evidence that there is a God, absent defeaters. Notice crucially that unlike with Swinburne's PC*, it is the actual religious experience which does the evidential work. If I have an experience which I would describe as 'it appeared that God was present' then it is that experience in which it appeared that God was present which does the evidential work. It is not my inclination to believe that God was present or my belief that he was, but the actual experience I had, with the propositional content it contains. [9]

The argument from religious experience depends heavily upon Phenomenal Conservatism. What can be said in its favour?

8 Tucker (2010) offers an argument from blind-sight for the claim that (for example) it may seem to a blind patient that there is a ball to the left of their visual field without their having any sensations at all. I take this to be a promising argument, but forego getting into it here.

9 Remember that Swinburne maintains that experiences cannot be used as evidence for anything, 'save for what we believe about them' (Quoted by Feldman, 2011, 296). Presumably he would say just the same about appearances, if indeed he would accept that there are such things independent of inclinations to believe. In reply, I wonder why he thinks this. Beliefs and inclinations to believe are clearly caused all the time by experiences. I am quite often inclined to believe that P *because* it appears that P, and these appearances do seem to be relevant to the truth of the beliefs that result. Skene (2011) even goes as far as to describe such experiences as 'doxastic instructions'. Why then can we not use them as evidence? I side with Feldman (2011) when he writes in reply that:

> These same sensory states seem often to be positively relevant to the truth of resulting observation beliefs. This relevance strikes us as holding just because of how things appear, not because of what we believe about the sensory state. Why could not any of this causing be 'using' the sensations as evidence for the observational beliefs? (Feldman, 2011, 296).

3.2. The Virtues of Phenomenal Conservatism

I shall not here attempt to provide any conclusive argument for Phenomenal Conservatism; that would mean to discuss far too many epistemological issues peripheral to the ARE. The object of this work fortunately is only to show that there is a plausible ARE, and it will suffice for that aim to show that Phenomenal Conservatism is plausible. This is surely within my modest capabilities. At any rate, the best case that can be made for Phenomenal Conservatism is, in my view, its fruitfulness in philosophical theorizing, its naturalness and its resiliency in the face of objections. A case of that kind is what I shall offer here.

Phenomenal Conservatism is a popular view today among Internalists. To name just a few proponents, the view can be found in Lycan, (2013), Huemer, (2013a), Tucker, (2013a), Brogaard, (2013), and Pryor, (2000). Tucker (forthcoming, 12) describes Phenomenal Conservatism as "*what all the cool kids are doing*". If you find Phenomenal Conservatism plausible, you are certainly in good philosophical company. So much for the argument *ad populum*, but what can actually be said in favour of the view?

The first thing to be said in its favour is that it avoids the problems which plague the Principle of Credulity. Phenomenal Conservatism steers clear of circular looking reasoning. PC# does not allow that an inclination to believe that P can serve as evidence that P; it allows that appearances that P serve as evidence that P. The trouble with belief's serving as evidence for their own contents is that my beliefs are necessarily my take on how things are, and it is difficult to see how something which is necessarily my take on things could be evidence that things are the way I take them to be. Appearances by contrast, are not just my take on how things are. Appearances can sometimes be influenced by my take on how things are, but they are not necessarily nor even frequently solely my take on how things are, and so there is far less difficulty in supposing that they are evidence.

It is also immune to Foley's argument against the Principle of Credulity. You cannot become evidentially justified in believing that P by unjustifiably deciding to believe that P. Further, Phenomenal Conservatism does not make implausible predications, like those alluded to in the last chapter, and this is because Phenomenal Conservatism preserves a robust distinction between beliefs that have evidence in their favour and beliefs which do not, unlike the Principle of Credulity. It is certainly logically possible that a person believes something

which does not appear to them to be the case. A person might, for example, believe by faith something that does not seem to be true, or hold a belief because so believing makes him feel good. Consider the example from earlier in a person comes to belief that the great pumpkin will return every Halloween as a result of either wishful thinking or strong faith. The person in the example has never seen the great pumpkin. He does not believe that there is a great pumpkin because it appears to be the case. In fact, in the envisaged scenario, the great pumpkin does *not* appear to return every Halloween (which is just the situation in which we find ourselves), and so Phenomenal Conservatism has the result that he has no evidence for his belief.

In addition, adopting Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception offers straightforward solutions to numerous philosophical problems[10]. For example, it offers a very straightforward solution to the problem of the speckled hen. If I have a visual image or sensation of a hen with three speckles, I am aware of the visual image of the speckled hen before me and its speckles. Plausibly, I have an evidentially *justified* belief that there is a hen with three speckles. But when I have the sensation of a hen with forty-eight speckles I am again aware of the visual image of the speckled hen before me and its speckles, but the proposition that there is a hen with forty-eight speckles before me is not evidentially justified for me by the visual image alone. But what is the difference? In both cases I have visual sensations which at least appear to serve as evidence for beliefs, and yet in the former case I am evidentially justified and in the latter case not. How can this be? PC# has a simple answer. When I have the sensation of a three-speckled hen, it typically seems to me that there is a three-speckled hen and this seeming justifies my belief. But when I have the sensation of a forty eight-speckled hen, it does not typically seem to me that there is a forty-eight speckled hen, unless that is, I take the time to count the speckles. Perhaps it seems to me that there is a many-speckled hen, or that there is a hen with more than ten speckles, but it does not seem that there is a forty-eight-speckled hen specifically. Hence, the belief that there is a forty-eight-speckled hen is not justified for me (Tucker, 2010, 535).

10 Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception being the doctrine that when it seems to S (sensuously) that P, S thereby has some evidence that P absent defeaters. This as opposed to the more general doctrine expressed in PC#.

Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception can also explain why different propositions are justified for people of different expertise despite them having the same sensations. An expert in classical music may have the sensations of hearing Beethoven's 6th symphony and so might a complete novice. The novice has never heard the symphony before and has no idea what it sounds like. He is entirely unfamiliar with it. Both have the sensations but only the expert can have justification for believing that they are hearing Beethoven's 6th symphony because it is only he to whom it seems that he is hearing Beethoven's 6th symphony. The novice is missing that which would evidence this belief: a seeming that he is listening to Beethoven's 6th symphony (Tucker, 2010, 538).

Notice that in order for the expert to have a justified belief that he is hearing Beethoven's 6th symphony, it is not necessary that he make any sort of inference. He need not infer from the fact that he is hearing certain sounds and that Beethoven's symphony sounds a certain way, that what he is hearing must be Beethoven's 6th symphony. He can tell that it is the symphony without doing any reasoning, just by hearing it; much like I can tell that I am seeing my mother when I see her without even being aware of what exactly it is that allows me to identify her. How could I, or the expert, obtain evidence for our beliefs without making inferences –just by looking/hearing- if others who have never seen my mother or heard the symphony can have the same sensations as us and yet fail to obtain any evidence? It is the fact that things seem differently to me and the expert than they do to people who have never seen my mother and who have never heard Beethoven's 6th symphony. Phenomenal Conservatism again has a ready explanation.

Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception also provides a simple answer to scepticism, perhaps one of the greatest problems in Western Philosophy. Sceptics in philosophy have a long standing tradition across all fields. The most radical sceptic is the external world sceptic who maintains that we cannot justifiably believe anything about the mind-independent world. Most epistemologists find these claims absurd, or at least, find most of them absurd. Yet the arguments in favour of these positions have proven very resilient. Indeed there is no generally accepted refutation of any of these positions.

Phenomenal Conservatism offers a single weapon to wield against these sceptics. We have experiences of a sort where it comes to seem to us that there is an external world independent of our minds. These seeming experiences are good reasons, absent defeaters, for thinking that

these things are true. The sceptic demanded reasons for holding propositions about the external world, and Phenomenal Conservatism has met his demands. Further, not only does Phenomenal Conservatism provide an account on which we have evidence for our common sense external world beliefs, but it also shows how it is that our common sense beliefs are superior to sceptical hypotheses. When we look around, common sense hypotheses appear – in our experience – to be true, whilst sceptical hypotheses do not. Even a person who has been manipulated by a machine into believing a sceptical hypothesis may still have all the same seemings as we do; it may still appear - even through his eyes - that common sense hypotheses are true. We believe that things are how they appear to be, and a person who believes a sceptical hypothesis or even suspends judgement makes an epistemic *mistake* in believing contrary to his appearances. As Huemer (2014) puts it: *"Thus, the ability to avoid skepticism, long considered an elusive desideratum of epistemological theories, is among the great theoretical advantages of phenomenal conservatism".*[11]

One might think that these arguments only motivate Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception, but in fact they end up motivating the broader PC#. Once one admits Phenomenal Conservatism about sense perception, it looks at face value to be an instance of arbitrary bias to deny Phenomenal Conservatism about other appearances. This stems from the nature of appearances. It is the phenomenological character of seemings which allows them to serve as evidence – and which does the explanatory work in solving the above philosophical problems - and all other kinds of seeming have the same phenomenological character as sensory seemings. When it seems sensuously to me that there is a tree in front of me, what is special about this state which gives me evidence is the way in which the proposition 'there is a tree' has an assertiveness about it in this situation. This same character is shared with appearances of all kinds, whether sensory or not and so there looks to be no reason not to extend Phenomenal Conservatism to all appearances. In particular, religious experiences involve propositions about God appearing to be the case, with that characteristic same phenomenology. Restricting Phenomenal Conservatism solely to sensory appearances without specifying relevant differences between types of appearance looks to be a case of picking and choosing, so to speak (Wainwright, 2012, 109; 2009; Kwan, 2011; Huemer, 2007, 32). There may well be some reason for restricting Phenomenal Conservatism, and I

11 This does not deal with all forms of scepticism, but it does deal with one very salient kind.

shall look at some of those before moving on, but prima facie, if Phenomenal Conservatism is true, it is true about all appearances.[12]

Perhaps the greatest theoretical merit of Phenomenal Conservatism is its ability to explain the evidential basis of sensory, moral, aesthetic, intellectual, mnemonic beliefs by reference to a single unified account found in PC#. This gives PC# great explanatory scope.

Moreover, Phenomenal Conservatism seems to be true! Upon reflection, this view seems to me, and I hope to many readers, to be true. Indeed it is regarded by many as the 'natural view' of perception, intuition, and/or memory (Tucker, 2013b, 8; Pryor, 2000, 538; Pollock, 1975, 48). The suggestion that when it looks like, appears, or *seems* that P, we thereby have at least some reason for believing that P sounds like a dictum of common sense. Indeed:

> Having the experience of it seeming to you that there is a table there is good evidence for supposing that there is a table there. Having the experience of its seeming to you that I am here giving a lecture is good evidence for supposing that I am here lecturing (Swinburne, 1979, 254).[13]

This looks to hold generally. We usually, and I think rightly, take how things appear to be as evidence. These intuitions suggest a principle like Phenomenal Conservatism; they are certainly best explained by it.[14]

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12 Another way of putting the same point is to say that an argument for Phenomenal Conservatism about sensory appearances is an argument for Phenomenal Conservatism about any appearances which are like sensory appearances in the epistemically relevant respects. As Huemer puts it in a different context:

> I take it that the critic who believes that only some appearances should be accepted as sources of justification incurs a burden of identifying an epistemically relevant difference between those appearances that do and those appearances that do not confer justification on their contents (Huemer, 2007, 32)

13 I should note that Swinburne offers this defence of the Principle of Credulity, not Phenomenal Conservatism. But, I think the argument is more persuasive in favour of Phenomenal Conservatism than the Principle of Credulity.

14 There is also Michael Huemer's self-defeat argument (2001;2007).

3.3. Cognitive Penetration

In addition to the virtues of Phenomenal Conservatism, there are many objections to the view. This is not the proper place for a full discussion[15]. What I aim to establish here is that one of the most potent objections to PC# is inconclusive.

Phenomenal Conservatism is a view which emphasizes the phenomenal character of appearances as what allows them to serve as evidence. Any theory which emphasizes the phenomenal character of appearances over their aetiology is open to a Cognitive Penetration Objection (CPO). The Cognitive Penetration Objection uses counterexamples which exploit the fact that the way things appear or seem to us is coloured by our other mental states. Sometimes, such colouring is acceptable. For example, when the bird expert has a seeming that there is a Pintail duck, this seeming is penetrated by his beliefs about Pintail ducks, but this is no problem, because he is an expert and has well justified beliefs about Pintail ducks. The problem purportedly arises when unjustified beliefs, desires and emotions penetrate the way things seem to us. In these situations, the objector alleges that Phenomenal Conservatism incorrectly predicts that the person who has this seeming thereby has evidence for his beliefs. There are many such examples provided in the literature. The most commonly described case is:

The Prospectors' Case

> Suppose that Novice and Expert are prospecting for gold. Expert has learned to identify a gold nugget on sight but Novice has no such knowledge. As the water washes out of Novice's pan, they both look at a pebble, which is in fact a gold nugget. Novice's desire to discover gold makes it seem to him as if the pebble is gold; Expert's learned identification skills make it seem that way to him. According to Phenomenal Conservatism, the belief that it is gold has prima facie justification for both of us. Yet, certainly, Novice's wishful thinking should not gain his perceptual belief the same positive epistemic status of defeasible justification as your Expert's identification skills. (Markie, 2013, 356-57).

15 Though see Chris Tucker's (2013a) for thorough discussion

In the Prospectors' Case the fact that Novice really wants to find some gold makes it seem to him that a pebble is gold. His desires cognitively penetrate his experiences. The objector alleges that Phenomenal Conservatism gets this case wrong. Phenomenal Conservatism predicts that Novice and Expert have some evidence in this instance because it seems to both that they have struck gold. But this is wrong says the objector. Novice does not have evidence as a result of his seeming. Phenomenal Conservatism is therefore false. Notice in this case that Phenomenal Conservatism does allow that Novice and Expert have *different degrees of evidence*. Expert has many cohering beliefs about how to identify gold, about his own track record of identifying gold and the like, all of which further support his belief that he has struck gold. Novice has none of this and thus, Expert has more evidence than Novice. Phenomenal Conservatism insists however, that Novice does have some small amount of evidence, even if it is a markedly lesser amount than that of Expert, and our objector alleges that this is an implausible result.

There are many similar cases. I may feel particularly pessimistic one day, and that may make it seem to me that everyone I meet dislikes me. I may really dislike an ethnic minority and this may cause it to seem to me that a particular member of that group is carrying a weapon when it is merely a mobile phone, and so on. The key here is that there are times in which our desires and emotions can cause things to seem to us in particular ways, and seemings produced in this way, at first look, cannot serve as evidence.

Here is a case which generates this same argument whilst exploiting the fact that unjustified beliefs may penetrate our experiences:

Jack and Jill's Case

> If Jill thinks Jack is angry, she might expect him to look angry, and this might lead her to 'see' him as angry, to his looking angry to her. If it does, surely her belief does not become justified if she re-bases it on his looking angry (Siegel, 2012, 2).

Here, Jill unjustifiably believes that Jack is angry prior to her seeing him. Then, when she sees him it seems to her that he is angry and this is because she already expected him to look angry. Jill's expectations have penetrated the way things seem to her; they have 'coloured in' her experience. Jill believes that Jack is angry because it seems to her that he is. Phenomenal Conservatism has it that Jill now has evidence that Jack is angry. But this is wrong, says the

objector. Jill does not have evidence because her seeming was caused by an unjustified belief. Phenomenal Conservatism is therefore false. Again, there are other examples. I might unjustifiably believe that an old building is haunted prior to visiting and this might cause the old building to seem haunted to me when I do visit. I might unjustifiably believe that there are sharks at the beach and this might make it seem to me that there are sharks in the nearby sea, and so on.

The Cognitive Penetration Objection is best summed up by the following thesis:

(CPO) Sometimes a deviant aetiology of an appearance can prevent it from constituting evidence even though a phenomenologically indistinguishable appearance with a non-deviant aetiology does constitute evidence.

Before we proceed to evaluate the force of the CPO, it is best to be clear about the problem. The problem is not that Phenomenal Conservatism thinks that one can accrue evidence when a belief is caused directly by wishful thinking or by unjustified beliefs. The Phenomenal Conservative does not make that claim and can happily agree that beliefs caused directly by unjustified beliefs or wishful thinking cannot even provide *prima facie* evidence. The problem rather, is that the Phenomenal Conservative is committed to maintaining that when wishful thinking or unjustified beliefs cause us to have certain experiences (seemings), those seemings can provide evidence. This, the CPO claims, is the wrong result.

Notice further that the problem does not resolve merely by pointing out relevant defeaters. For example, it is plausible to think that in the Prospectors' Case, Novice has a defeater for his belief that he has struck gold. He knows that he lacks the knowledge and training required to accurately identify gold and this should undercut the value of his seeming experience leaving him unjustified in believing that he has struck gold. This will not solve the problem, because the problem is that Phenomenal Conservatism implausibly allows seemings produced by wishful thinking to provide *prima facie* evidence - that is, evidence absent defeaters. The CPO alleges that such seemings are epistemically worthless[16].

16 Sometimes, the CPO is discussed as the claim that appearances with non-deviant aetiology are *less* evidence than appearances with deviant aetiology (Vance, 2013; Siegel, 2012). That claim would not refute Phenomenal Conservatism, since it says only that all appearances have some evidential value. It does not further stipulate that Phenomenologically indistinguishable appearances have the same evidential value, although this

How can the critic of Phenomenal Conservatism demonstrate the truth of CPO? The critic has described a number of cases in which he thinks Phenomenal Conservatism predicts the wrong result, but why think the critic is right about this? I shall consider four relevant arguments.

3.4. An Argument from Intuition

The question is: are seemings produced by deviant aetiology sometimes epistemically worthless, or can they in fact provide some prima facie evidence? Those who press these counter-examples report the intuition that the deviant aetiology in Prospectors, Jack and Jill and similar cases prevents the appearances from counting as prima facie evidence (Siegel, 2011; Markie, 2013; McGrath, 2013). Matthew McGrath (2013) for example, writes:

> Consider cases of what I will call 'free enrichment' of one seeming by another, due to some cognitively penetrating state. It is natural to understand [the Prospectors' Case] as follows. The pebble looks somewhat yellowish to the gold-digger and the effect of his wish to believe it is a gold nugget is that it looks to him to be a gold nugget. The sizeable gap between the yellowish-pebble-seeming and the gold-nugget-seeming is closed by the wish, not by any knowledge of the observable features of gold nuggets. The gold-seeming freely enriches the yellowish-pebble-seeming… It starts to seem that the 'concluding' seemings aren't really evidence; they are non-evidence because they are arrived at in epistemically sub-par ways based on the real evidence, the upstream seemings. I think the conservative must admit that free enrichment cases are counterexamples (McGrath, 2013; 236).

Note the conclusion of McGrath's comments. He concludes that the process of free enrichment described is epistemically unacceptable and *'it starts to seem that the concluding seemings aren't really evidence; they are non-evidence because they are arrived at in epistemically sub-par ways'* (McGrath, 2013, in Tucker, 2013, 236).

Some of those committed to Phenomenal Conservatism and similar doctrines however, do not share this intuition (Huemer, 2013; Pryor, 2000; Lycan, 2013). To these authors, it does not at all seem that the concluding seemings aren't really evidence. Skene (2011) reports the

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later claim is very plausible given Phenomenal Conservatism. In fact, I think this weaker claim just as hard to support as the stronger one.

intuition that it is the subjects who are epistemically vicious, not that the appearances are defective in any way. Tucker (2013) reports the intuition that the defect lies in the subject's lack of knowledge, stemming from his failure to have some other epistemic merit, like having beliefs formed by reliable processes. Like these authors, I do not feel the pull of the alleged counter-examples either. Given that there is such disagreement in intuition on this matter, the verdict that cognitively penetrated seemings are not prima facie evidence is far from obvious and an appeal to intuition alone is insufficient to establish that verdict (Vance, 2013, 263).

We all have the intuition that there is *something* epistemically defective about these cases, but it is far from clear that these defects pertain to the fact that the appearances do not constitute evidence, or even to the fact that they constitute less evidence than they would with non-deviant aetiologies (Vance, 2013). We all accept:

(4) There is something epistemically defective about Jill's and Novice's appearances.

Admitting this however need not force the Phenomenal Conservative to grant:

(5) Jill's and Novice's appearances are not prima facie evidence.

Here, (4) looks to be well supported by our epistemic intuitions, but taking our intuitions to support (5) is drawing greater conclusions from them than is credible (Vance, 2013, 264). [17]

17 I do not mean to suggest that the intuitions of these philosophers should not be considered. The fact that they have these intuitions is some initial reason for thinking that (5) is true. Yet, given the opposing intuitions of those philosophers on the side of Phenomenal Conservatism and the observation that cognitive penetration cases do look suspiciously like hallucination cases and evil demon cases which we all agree to be evidential, far more will need to be said to establish (5) than those initial intuitions.

Compare this situation with the situation the Principle of Credulity is in concerning intuitions about the great pumpkin belief. In that case, Swinburne fails to have the intuition that great pumpkin beliefs have no evidence in their favour. He does however, and most every philosopher does, have the intuition that great pumpkin beliefs are not justified. His theory then fails to accommodate that intuition. By contrast, here the shared intuition is that Jill's and Novice's appearances are epistemically defective, and Phenomenal Conservatism can happily accommodate that intuition. There are interesting questions at the heart of this, concerning how to properly evaluate the intuitions of others, but this we shall have to leave for another occasion.

3.5. Siegel's Corrupted Tribunal

Siegel (2011) argues that cognitive penetration of the Jack and Jill variety introduces a circular structure to belief formation. She writes:

> The challenge to perceptual justification posed by cognitive penetrability arises because it seems to introduce a circular structure to belief-formation. In the simplest case, your experience is cognitively penetrated if it presents the world as being a certain way, only because that's the way the penetrating belief presents the world as being. For instance, suppose Jill believes that Jack is angry at her, and this makes her experience his face as expressing anger. Now suppose she takes her cognitively penetrated experience at face value, as additional support for her belief tha t Jack is angry at her (just look at his face!). She seems to have moved in a circle, starting out with the penetrating belief, and ending up with the same belief, via having an experience. From Jill's point of view, she seems to be gaining additional evidence from this experience for her belief that Jack is angry at her, elevating the epistemic status of that belief.
>
> This situation seems epistemically pernicious. In general, visual experience purports to tell you what the world is like, allowing you to check your beliefs against reality. But if behind the scenes, the penetrating states are stacking the tribunal of experience in their own favour, then while experience will seem to let you check your beliefs against the world - to you, this will be just what's happening- really you'll just be checking your beliefs against your beliefs. The tribunal will be corrupted. On the face of it, epistemic elevation in such a circumstance seems illicit (Siegel 2011, 2).

Focussing on Jack and Jill's case, when it appears to Jill that Jack is angry, we want to say that Jill obtains evidence that Jack is angry. However, when we trace the aetiology of the appearance down the causal chain, we run into Jill's belief that Jack is angry, and Jill seems to have moved in a circle. She began with an evidentially unjustified belief and has been able to obtain an evidentially justified one by letting that very belief colour her appearances. This, Siegel says, is epistemically pernicious.

Siegel makes a good case for the claim that there is something epistemically pernicious about cognitive penetration, but why suppose that the epistemic perniciousness of these situations

pertains to the issue of prima facie evidence? As we have already said, the Phenomenal Conservative can agree with Siegel that (4) without agreeing that (5). Having established (4) however, Siegel offers no argument for (5) save for that from intuition which we have already found inconclusive.

Siegel maintains that the circularity of cognitive penetration cases prevents those appearances from constituting evidence. Here is some reason to think that false. We have already agreed that typical cases of evil demon or gas-induced hallucinatory appearances still provide prima facie evidence, so if Siegel's circularity is present in these kinds of cases then this is some reason to think that such circularity is irrelevant to the issue of prima facie evidence.

Certainly Siegel's circularity is not present in standard evil demon cases but I think it easy to imagine hallucination cases in which it is present. Imagine an evil demon tricking you about absolutely everything by producing in you only hallucinatory appearances and preventing any veridical ones. This evil demon is omniscient and so he knows what all of your beliefs are. His procedure for choosing which hallucinations to produce in you is to look into the inventory of your beliefs and produce only hallucinations which confirm those beliefs. Alternatively, take Huemer's gas-induced hallucination case. Suppose that I know that you believe that there is a cat in the parking lot. I maliciously decide to fill the parking lot with a gas that produces hallucinations of cats when inhaled. You then walk into the parking lot and have the hallucination of a cat. Again, tracing the causal chain from the appearance of a cat back to its origin, we run into your belief that there is a cat in the parking lot.

In both these cases there is a circularity introduced to belief formation and the deck is stacked from the beginning in favour of your original beliefs. The tribunal is corrupted. Still, if hallucinations produced by an evil demon or a gas can serve as prima facie evidence then why should it matter what led to the evil demon choosing to induce hallucinations or what led to the gas being in the parking lot? It does not seem as though such contingent factors would be relevant. It does not seem to matter that the evil demon first read your inventory of beliefs nor that I knew about your beliefs about cats. I doubt anyone would seriously accuse you of 'not following the evidence' if you were to form beliefs on the basis of these hallucinations. The circularity is irrelevant to the question of prima facie evidence in these hallucination cases. But why then would it be relevant in cognitive penetration cases? I cannot see that it

would be. At any rate, without some motivated answer to this question Siegel's argument fails.

3.6. Tucker's Blameworthiness

Tucker (2010) suggests that the difference between hallucination cases and cognitive penetration cases may be that Novice is epistemically to blame for having the seeming he has. It is, in some sense, his fault that how things appear to him has been caused by a deviant aetiology. Perhaps Jill is epistemically to blame for forming an unjustified belief that Jack is angry which later changes how things appear to her. The proponent of the CPO, on this reading, claims that when seemings are produced by deviant aetiology for which the subject is themselves epistemically blameworthy, the seeming cannot serve as evidence.

In the first place, I think it dubious to suppose that Jill is necessarily epistemically blameworthy because she has formed an unjustified belief. It might, after all, be that Jill has done her upmost to do well from the epistemic point of view and yet still come out with an unjustified belief. Jill might have evaluated everything she could, as best as she can evaluate it, and yet, because her best involves unfortunate errors, she may end up with a belief that Jack is angry which is unjustified (In the sense that it is not based on adequate grounds).

Nevertheless, Tucker goes on to imagine cases in which a person is epistemically blameworthy and yet still obtains evidence from how things appear, showing that even with my reservations aside, this way of filling in the CPO will not suffice. Tucker (2010) envisages a scenario in which the subject really wants to be deceived by an evil demon and so pays the demon all of his money to radically deceive him about everything - this includes altering his memory such that he cannot remember making this deal with the evil demon. In such a situation, the subject is epistemically blameworthy for his having appearances which are all caused by deviant aetiology, and yet, nevertheless, he *now* still plausibly accrues evidence by way of those seemings. Here is another example. Suppose that I put on a virtual reality helmet – being the huge fan of video games that I am. Unfortunately, I forget that I am wearing the helmet. All of my appearances are caused by the helmet, which is simulating an alternate reality, and for this, I am entirely to blame. Nonetheless, given that I have forgotten that I am wearing the helmet my appearances are plausibly evidence for me. As before I doubt anyone using the ordinary notion of 'evidence' would seriously suggest that in forming

beliefs in response to the appearances produced by the helmet I have failed to follow my evidence. Huemer (2013 in Tucker, 2013, 244-245) imagines a case in which a person purposefully causes himself to have cat hallucinations, and yet the hallucinations still count as evidence, since he has forgotten that he did this to himself. So I can be epistemically blameworthy for the cause of my seemings and yet those seemings still constitute evidence, and therefore Novice and Jill might be blameworthy for their seemings whilst those seemings still count as evidence, given that they have no inkling about the deviant aetiology.

3.7. Siegel's Doxastic Downgrade Thesis

Siegel's Downgrade Thesis represents what I think is the best argument available for (5). The Downgrade thesis is:

(DT) If a subject S forms a belief B with content P on the basis of an experience E that is chequered with respect to P, B is thereby doxastically unjustified (Siegel 2012, 704).

By calling a belief 'doxastically unjustified', Siegel means the following: There is a distinction at this point between propositional and doxastic justification. A belief is propositionally justified when the subject possesses grounds which on balance support that belief. A belief is doxastically justified when the subject *bases* his belief on those grounds. The distinction is important because a person might possess good evidence that something is the case, but believe it simply because they really want it to be true. In such a case, they have propositional but not doxastic justification.

In saying that an experience is 'chequered', Siegel means:

Chequered Experience: An experience E with content P and aetiology X is chequered with respect to P just in case:

(i) X is rationally assessable, and

(ii) a belief with content P and aetiology X* would be doxastically unjustified, where the output of X* is a belief with no intervening experience, and X* has sufficiently similar psychological elements as X (Siegel 2012, 716).

The idea behind DT is quite easy to illustrate with this terminology at hand. Consider a variation on the Prospectors case called Direct Prospectors. In Direct Prospectors, Novice

believes that he has struck gold because of his desire to strike gold. In Direct Prospectors, Novice's belief is doxastically unjustified. That is, the reason on which he bases his belief is not one which suffices for his total body of evidence to support that he has struck gold. The reason is in fact, not evidence at all. Now consider the regular edition of Prospectors where Novice's desire causes an appearance that he has struck gold and this is why he believes that he has struck gold. This aetiology is a rationally assessable one. Unlike a hallucination case, there is a sense in which Novice can be rationally evaluated for the merits of his cognitive processing. This much should be clear from preceding sections. In Prospectors', the cognitive processing exhibited by Novice is poor performance insofar as Novice wants to have true beliefs and avoid false ones. Moreover, Novice's aetiology in Prospectors' shares very similar psychological elements as the aetiology in Direct Prospectors'; in both cases, his beliefs are influenced by his desires. Novice's appearance in Prospectors' is therefore a Chequered experience and therefore, Novice's belief in Prospectors' is doxastically unjustified. Novice's belief is not based on a ground which suffices for his total body of evidence lying in favour of the proposition that he has struck gold. Since Novice's appearance in the scenario is the only thing he has relevant to the proposition that he has struck gold, it follows that Novice's appearance is not evidence. (5) is true.

The trouble with this argument is DT itself. No Phenomenal Conservative will just accept DT. Siegel needs an independent argument for it. What she offers is the following stratagem:

> Consider the features of beliefs that are not shared with experiences, and see whether those features play any role in making ill-founded beliefs transmit their ill-foundedness to subsequent beliefs formed on their basis. I argue that when we examine these distinctive features of beliefs, we find little reason to think that these features play any role in making it the case that ill-founded beliefs generate other ill-founded beliefs. That gives us reason to think that the features of beliefs by virtue of which they generate ill-founded beliefs are shared with experiences. And if those features are shared with experiences, then that's a reason to think that if ill-founded beliefs can generate other ill-founded beliefs, by virtue of their etiology, experiences can generate ill-founded beliefs, by virtue of having a chequered past (Siegel, 2012, 12).

The question we must ask is whether chequered experiences can justify beliefs. Siegel proposes to compare chequered experiences with doxastically unjustified beliefs, and to compare them as aetiologies for belief about which the subject is unaware. We know that if the immediate aetiology of a belief consists in doxastically unjustified beliefs, the output belief is itself doxastically unjustified. What is it about this process which makes the doxastic unjustifiedness (Siegel calls his 'ill-foundedness') transmit to the output belief even when the subject is unaware that the cause of his belief is an unjustified belief? If the features which facilitate this are features shared by beliefs and experiences, this is a reason for thinking that much like doxastically unjustified beliefs cannot generate doxastically justified ones, so too chequered experiences cannot evidentially justify beliefs. That is, it is a reason for thinking that DT is true. Siegel however opts to work in reverse. Rather than arguing that the relevant features *are* shared by beliefs and experiences, she argues that the relevant features are not features which are unique to beliefs. So long as Siegel is thorough, this yields the same result.

Now Siegel considers a variety of proposals including the proposal I take to be correct. The feature which makes possible the transmission of unjustifiedness from belief to belief is unjustifiedness itself. Let me explain. When I hold some belief B1 on the basis of belief B2, B1 is doxastically justified only if B2 is doxastically justified. This is because the justification is at least partially transferred from B1 to B2. If however I believe B1 on the basis of a doxastically unjustified belief B2, B1 cannot be doxastically justified, because it could only be so by receiving justification from B2, and B2 cannot give what it does not have. This is what makes possible the transmission of unjustifiedness when doxastically unjustified beliefs serve as the unknown aetiology of another of the subject's beliefs.

This however, is not a feature shared with experiences. Experiences are not justified or unjustified, as even Siegel concedes. They may be epistemically defective in some way or another, but they are never justified or unjustified; experiences are never on balance supported by evidence. Since the relevant feature is not shared, there is no reason to think that chequered experiences cannot justify beliefs. That said though, one might wonder: if experiences are never justified or unjustified, how exactly is it that they can transmit justification to beliefs? After all, as I have already said, things cannot give what they do not have. Notice though that appearances on the Phenomenal Conservative view are not transmitters of justification, but *conjurers*. It is the phenomenal character of an appearance

which produces, rather than transmits, justification (Huemer, 2013). Hence, although an experience is not itself justified or unjustified, it's phenomenal character is the source of justification for beliefs. In any case, since the relevant feature is unjustifiedness itself and since this feature is not a feature shared with experiences, Siegel's argument fails.

To save the argument, Siegel would have to argue that unjustifiedness (i) is a feature shared by appearances, or (ii) that the feature is not the one which makes possible the transferring of unjustifiedness from doxastically unjustified beliefs in the immediate aetiology to output beliefs. Siegel does say something relevant to (ii):

> Often beliefs are based on clusters of other beliefs, rather than on single beliefs, and not every belief in the basing cluster need be irrational, in order for the subsequent belief to end up that way. If I rationally believe that I'm going to New Jersey today and irrationally believe that in New Jersey it is raining locusts, I can end up with an irrational belief that I'll likely see some locusts when I get there, thanks in part to my rational belief about where I'm going (Siegel, 2012, 708).

She concludes from this that beliefs can be based on perfectly rational –by which she means doxastically justified - beliefs whilst still themselves being irrational. Hence, what makes possible the transmission of unjustifiedness is not unjustifiedness in the original belief. Unfortunately, Siegel's argument misses the point. Although an unjustified belief B1 might be based on a cluster of beliefs B2, B3 and B4 only one of which is itself unjustified, the fact remains that the source of unjustifiedness for B1 lies in the unjustified belief in the group B2-4. Certainly in the case given, the unjustifiedness of Siegel's belief that she will see locusts in New Jersey derives from the unjustifiedness in her belief that in New Jersey it is raining locusts.

I have not shown here that unjustifiedness is the feature which Siegel was looking for, but I have shown that Siegel fails to show that it is not the relevant feature. This is enough to defeat her argument because she needed to show that the relevant feature was one shared by beliefs and experiences by ruling out all plausible features had only by beliefs, and this she has not done. I conclude that Siegel's most promising argument is unpersuasive.

The proponent of the CPO owes us some argument to the effect that Novice's and Jill's appearances are not evidence. I do not see that there is an argument to fill that demand.

Moreover, there is reason to think the critic wrong and the Phenomenal Conservative right. Why does the Phenomenal Conservative not find these counter examples compelling to begin with? Well, clearly the aetiology of an appearance is not *always* relevant. Suppose that we live in a Cartesian evil-demon world. In that world, all of our appearances are produced by the machinations of an evil demon. Certainly my having an appearance that there is a tree in front of me as a result of the machinations of an evil demon constitutes my having an appearance caused by deviant aetiology. Yet, even if this were so, I think it still obvious that I would have evidence that there is a tree in front of me when it appears that way. If evil demon cases are difficult to imagine, take this case offered by Huemer:

> Suppose I have a completely realistic hallucination of a cat in the parking lot, induced by a hallucinogen that I unknowingly ingested two hours ago. If I have no reason to suspect that there is anything unusual about this experience, I would be justified in thinking there was a cat in the parking lot; any rational person in such circumstances would believe that there was a cat present. Nor does it matter if some other mental state enters the causal chain. Thus, suppose I have an odd brain malfunction such that (again entirely unbeknownst to me) having the sensation of a certain shade of violet causes me, five minutes later, to hallucinate a cat. I see the shade in question during my web surfing, then go outside and hallucinate a cat. Once again, I am justified in thinking a cat is present[18] (Huemer, 2013a, 245).

Clearly the aetiology of a seeming is not always relevant to whether or not it serves as evidence, since hallucinations can serve as prima facie evidence, so long as we are unaware that they are hallucinations – certainly this is the case for the Internalist conception of justification with which we are concerned. Proponents of the CPO insist however that the aetiology is at least sometimes relevant. If however, we are right to say that hallucinations are evidence so long as we do not have any reason to think that they are hallucinations, why should we not say the same about other hidden factors? The fact that the appearance is

18 He also rightly points out that this does not mean that the novice prospector and Jill are not epistemically defective in any way. Skene (2011) has illustrated that we may still say that they are without claiming that their experiences do not provide justification. Instead, we may say that Jill displays an epistemic vice in allowing herself to form an unjustified belief at the earlier time and that both form beliefs as a result of an unreliable process. Admitting these things does not require us to say that they do not have justification, but it may, depending on our conception of knowledge, require that we say that they cannot have knowledge. This I think is the right result.

produced by wishful thinking in the Prospectors case is just as well hidden from Novice as an evil demon would be who caused all of our appearances in a Cartesian demon world. Jill's cognitive penetration is just as well hidden from her as is the fact that Huemer is having a hallucination induced by gas. Why should we not say of these Cognitive Penetration cases that when such things are hidden from the subject, they are beyond his evidential reach and so cannot interfere with whether the appearances he has constitute evidence? To the Phenomenal Conservative, these cases of cognitive penetration look strikingly similar to cases of Cartesian evil-demon deception. The natural lesson to take from cases like the Cartesian demon ones is that the '*ability of an appearance to confer justification is independent of whether, unbeknownst to the subject, the appearance is caused by an unreliable process*' (Huemer, 2013, 345), and here we find a prima facie reason for favouring the Phenomenal Conservative response to Cognitive Penetration cases over the response of the critics.

3.8 Schellenberg's Standard Package

In his deeply insightful treatise '*The Wisdom of Doubt*', John Schellenberg is adamant that we place restrictions on Phenomenal Conservatism. Specifically, he wants to restrict Phenomenal Conservatism to sensory, mnemonic, and rational appearances; what he calls 'The Standard Package'. Religious appearances, he says, are not to be granted any 'initial credibility' (Schellenberg, 2007, 166). He writes:

> Assume with Alston and Swinburne (and despite the occasional whiff of non-truth-oriented considerations in the case of Alston) that truth is the goal in all our doxastic dealings: that our aim is not to hang on to cherished or useful beliefs, whatever the cost, but to have correct beliefs and thus to enlarge our understanding of the world. (The meaning of "practical" in the term "practical rationality," as used in this discussion, should be clearly articulated in terms of this aim.) Assume as well that Alston is right about epistemic circularity and the "human cognitive condition": there is no noncircular proof of this or that belief-forming practice's reliability, and since we cannot investigate any issue whatever without utilizing some way of forming and evaluating beliefs, there is no alternative to employing practices we find ourselves using and regarding their outputs as potentially justified if we want to get started in inquiry at all. If this is so, shouldn't would-be investigators extend to religious

> experiential belief forming practices, along with all the rest, an initial credibility?...In a word, no. Although we must utilize some practice to get going in inquiry, there is clearly still a question as to which one(s). It seems natural and appropriate—and has seemed so to others on whom Alston draws, like Thomas Reid —to go with what is universal and unavoidable here, and thus to restrict ourselves, at least initially, to such practices as those we call sensory, introspective, memorial, and (rationally) intuitive (Schellenberg, 2007, 169-170).

This needs some unpacking. I have said that an epistemically justified belief is one which is formed on the basis of adequate grounds (as has Alston, 1991, 76). A ground is adequate when it makes the beliefs which are formed on its basis objectively probable. Do we have any beliefs which are epistemically justified? The Phenomenal Conservative holds that we do, and they are those beliefs which are formed on the basis of how things seem. Now try a different question: Is there any way to *show* that our beliefs are epistemically justified to the satisfaction of someone unsure of it? Is there any way I can show to the satisfaction of a sceptic, for example, that a belief formed on the basis of sense experience may be epistemically justified? Alston argues (1991) that the answer to this question is no. There is no non-circular way of establishing the reliability of our accepted means of forming beliefs. Given that there is no way of showing such things, if we want to get going with our inquiry into the truth, then we shall have to settle for making some assumptions about which methods are reliable and which grounds are adequate, absent defeaters. To which methods should we grant that initial trust? Schellenberg holds that we should make this assumption only with respect to sense experience, introspection, memory and rational intuition.

I have argued that such restrictions are arbitrary. Why not also grant the assumption to religious experience? Schellenberg demurs:

> But how can we prevent this restriction from being arbitrary? I would argue that it is precisely because of the requirements of an investigative stance and an investigative aim that it is non-arbitrary. If we really are would-be investigators, concerned for the truth and seeking understanding, then we will ascribe epistemic innocence—even an initial innocence—only where we have to: assuming that we have to pick certain belief-forming practices as innocent until proven guilty to get started, we will still pick only what we have to pick, in order to minimize the extent to which non-inquiry-based factors influence the direction of inquiry (Schellenberg, 2007, 170).

For Schellenberg, the restriction solely to the Standard Package falls naturally out of the fact that all epistemic agents – or ‘would-be investigators – have a concern for truth. If we are to have any chance of obtaining true beliefs at all, we must choose some methods by which we shall form our beliefs,

without first having a proof that such methods are reliable. That said, Schellenberg maintains, we will not choose any more than we *have* to because, presumably, the more methods we start out with, the more we must be prepared to assume and so the more chance we have of veering off into error. Of course, we have to choose the Standard Package because it is unavoidable and universal, but we do not have to choose religious experience because it is not such. He goes on:

> And though some of us grow up experiencing the world religiously, we may also come to wonder whether this experience tells the truth about the world. Further, many people evidently can and do deny the truth of religious beliefs, even when they have been quite certain about such beliefs before. Religious belief-forming practices are by no means universal or unavoidable (Schellenberg, 2007, 174).

In what sense is the Standard Package universal and unavoidable? It is universal in the sense that all psychologically healthy human beings form beliefs on the basis of Standard Package appearances. It is unavoidable in the sense that we cannot help but form beliefs in these ways; I could not stop even if I wanted to (Schellenberg, 2007, 174). These things are, allegedly, not true of religious experience and, thus, the Phenomenal Conservative is wrong in assuming that they are reliable absent defeaters: insofar as he has the epistemic aim, he ought to restrict his conservatism to the Standard Package.

That said there are several problems with Schellenberg's proposal. The first is that Schellenberg's argument that forming beliefs on the basis of religious experience is not unavoidable is unpersuasive. He infers from the fact that some people are capable of remaining dubious of religious experience and of not believing in God that religious experience is not unavoidable. But this does not follow. It might follow that forming beliefs on the basis of religious experience and believing in God is avoidable for some people – principally those who have done it – but that is no reason at all for supposing that such things are unavoidable for others. What we can and cannot avoid believing is a psychological matter. For some people, perhaps religious experience comes to them with such frequency and vivacity that they cannot help but form beliefs on its basis. Perhaps they cannot help but see God's glory in the night sky, the rain, a beautiful sunset and so on. Indeed I suspect that this is the case for many subjects of religious experience and religious believers more generally; such beliefs are not something they could just 'choose to avoid'. Schellenberg talks plenty of *the* basic picture which *we* – all of us humans – share, and of our desire to fill out said basic picture with the greatest investigative care (Schellenberg, 2007, 175), but it is not clear that there is any such thing as the basic picture we all share. Certainly there are common elements to the picture of the world which most human beings hold, but Christians clearly have a very different basic picture than do Buddhists, and so again with Pantheists, and again with Naturalists. All of the extra, non-universal aspects of these respective pictures no doubt Schellenberg takes to be 'avoidable', but I very much doubt that they are so for

people who actually experience the world in those ways. Hence, even if Schellenberg is right that we should only make use of unavoidable belief forming practices in our epistemic endeavours, forming beliefs on the basis of religious experience will still be quite appropriate where one cannot help but do so.

Of course, religious experience does fail Schellenberg's other criterion: universality. Not everybody forms beliefs on the basis of religious experience, but it is hard to see why one should take the criterion seriously to begin with. Schellenberg's argument for his restriction is that one would naturally make such restrictions if one had the epistemic goal of obtaining truths (and avoiding error). He says that accepting more than what is unavoidable involves making more assumptions than is necessary and so runs a greater risk of errors, but no such argument can be made for universality. There is no *a priori* reason to think that I am at greater risk of error if I form beliefs using methods not everybody uses than if I use only universal methods. Hence, there is no motivation for such a restriction.

I do think that Schellenberg is right about the unavoidability criterion. If we are to obtain as many true beliefs as possible whilst avoiding false beliefs, it makes sense to proceed with caution, not letting any and every method which we stumble upon into the fold, but only using those methods which we cannot help but use, since doing so will involve fewer assumptions. But what I propose is really only a single method: form beliefs on the basis of how things seem to you. Sense experience, memory, rational intuition and religious experience are but sub classes of appearance, and one is using the same fundamental method when forming beliefs on the basis of any of them. One is accepting those propositions which seem to be true. Further, I say this method *is* unavoidable. One often cannot help but form beliefs on the basis of how things seem. When it seems to me, for example, that there is a tree in front of me, or that I had yoghurt for breakfast, or that the law of non-contradiction is true, I cannot help forming the corresponding beliefs. The same, of course, can be said about people to whom it seems that there is a God. Hence, I propose only one method in proposing Phenomenal Conservatism, and it *is* a method which is often psychologically unavoidable[19][20].

19 Perhaps there is another sense of 'unavoidable' which Schellenberg meant to use here, but it is difficult to find any other candidates which make for a plausible argument.

20 This response to Schellenberg might seem to depend heavily on the Phenomenal Conservative view that sense experience, memory, intuition and religious experience are all united in being species of appearance – this common element being what gives them their epistemic force, but the point can be made in other ways. Swinburne's Principle of Credulity takes inclinations to believe to serve the same role as appearances do, and so much the same remarks could be made, replacing the word 'appearance' with 'inclination to believe' in the

I have shown here that there are a number of motivations for Phenomenal Conservatism, that it resourcefully avoids the problems of the Principle of Credulity, that one of the most potent objections to the view is inconclusive and that the most recent attempt to restrict it leaving out religious experience is susceptible to several objections. There are many more arguments concerning Phenomenal Conservatism which are worth exploring, but I fear we have deviated off task for too long already. Hopefully at any rate, enough has been said for the conclusion that Phenomenal Conservatism is plausible.[21]

I shall now turn to the second part of the ARE; the part which aims to answer this question in the affirmative:

(2) Can reports of religious experiences serve as evidence for the existence of God, for those not fortunate enough to have had such experiences?

3.8. Altruistic vs Testimonial Conservatism

Suppose now that we consider an alternative to Swinburne's Principle of Testimony:

> Altruistic Conservatism (AC): For any subjects S and T and any proposition P, if S knows that it seems to T that P, then in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has some evidence that P (Huemer, 2011 in Dougherty, 2011, 23).

Suppose that it seems to someone that the postman has been this morning and they tell me this. If AC is true then this testimony is evidence for me that the postman really has been this morning, regardless of whether or not it seems to me that he has (and regardless of any other

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argument just given. In a similar vein, Alston (DATE) maintains that sense experience and religious experience are structurally similar insofar as both involve an object being presented to a subject's awareness. These elements of Swinburne and Alston's thought appear to have gone unnoticed by Schellenberg. Of course there are many dis-analogies between any particular member of Schellenberg's Standard Package and religious experience, but my response here only presupposes that religious experience is analogous to these other kinds of experience with respect to the elements which confer epistemic value.

21 Vance (2013) discusses many relevant arguments concerning cognitive penetration as well.

considerations for that matter). From AC (and the sociological work on religious experience) it follows that there is significant evidence absent defeaters for the existence of God.

This is essentially the same style of argument as that found in Swinburne's original. But AC has both dialectical and theoretical flaws. Dialectically speaking, proponents of the ARE have very rarely, if ever, had much to say by way of argument for AC or anything like it (Swinburne, 1979; Kwan, 2011). The principle is often taken by such authors more as a starting point for thought rather than as a premise argued to, from somewhere else. This weakens the ARE by forcing it to rely on a premise which is both contested in the wider philosophical community and unsupported by proponents of the argument.

Theoretically speaking, it looks as though Phenomenal Conservatism is more naturally taken without AC. AC is not entailed by Phenomenal Conservatism, nor is there any obvious argument from the latter to the former, or any clear argument for AC from other theoretical considerations. Huemer writes of AC that:

> This thesis does not follow from PC, since you may know that it seems to someone else that p without its seeming to you that P. Nor is the thesis easily explained in terms of any traditionally recognized form of inference—'It seems to T that p; therefore, p' does not follow any well-known pattern of valid deductive reasoning or cogent inductive reasoning. Inference to the best explanation would be one's best hope for explaining the truth of Altruistic Conservatism in terms of inferential justification; defending that approach would, however, be a complex task. It is far from obvious why the truth of p should generally be presumed to be part of the best explanation, or supported by the best explanation, for the fact that it seems to someone that p. [The conjunction of Phenomenal Conservatism and AC] is less simple, and therefore less initially attractive, than [Phenomenal Conservatism alone] because the [former] view requires an extra principle of justification (Huemer, 2011, 23).

If we can do without AC therefore, it would indeed be best to do so, but there is one datum which looks on its face to require that we accept AC. Testimony about how things seem to others is, plausibly, evidence. When someone tells me that it seems to them that P, I do, plausibly, obtain some evidence that P. But there are ways of accounting for this without granting AC. Consider instead:

Testimonial Conservatism (TC): If it seems to S that P, because of the testimony of others, then absent defeaters S thereby has at least some evidence that P[22].

Quite often, when a person tells me that so-and-so, what they tell me may come to seem to me to be true. For example, a metaphysician might tell me that there are not any things which do not exist, and in light of his testimony, this proposition might come to seem to me to be true. Similarly, I might be told by a logician that if it is logically possible that necessarily P, then necessarily P and that proposition might thereby come to seem to me to be true[23]. In such cases, TC dictates that I have some evidence.

TC accommodates the intuition that testimony about how things seem is often evidence, without us having to grant AC. Moreover, TC possesses neither the dialectical nor the theoretical defects of AC. TC is a principle entailed by Phenomenal Conservatism (PC#) since PC# dictates that anytime it seems to S that P, S thereby has evidence that P; and TC merely states one condition in which it might seem to S that P. Therefore, if Phenomenal Conservatism is true, TC is true. For the same reason, it avoids the theoretical defect of being less simple whilst accounting for nothing not already accounted for inferentially. TC is not strictly speaking an extra principle. It is part of Phenomenal Conservatism itself and so in proposing TC we are not really proposing anything new.

More must be said, I suspect. TC has it that I obtain evidence that P from testimony that it seems to someone else that P, *only when it thereby seems to me that P.* It is also surely possible that we obtain evidence from such testimony even when the claims testified do not seem to us to be true. For example, someone might tell me that there is a cat outside my front door, and I might not have any seeming one way or another about whether this is true. Nonetheless, the fact that I have heard this testimony plausibly gives me some evidence that there is a cat outside and TC cannot accommodate this by itself. In addition to TC then, I could obtain *inferential* evidence that P using the testimony of others as premises. I might know that it seems to someone else that P and have a well evidenced background belief that

22 This way of thinking about testimony is suggested by Tucker (2011).

23 Might testimony trigger sensory seemings? For example, might it seem – in the Phenomenal Conservative sense - to me that the postman came this morning as a result of testimony from my friend that the postman did come this morning? I am unsure. But it does not matter for our purposes.

other people's appearances are probably reliable and this would give me a plausible argument for the claim that P, even if the testimony does not make it seem to me that P. Where might I get evidence for my belief that other people's appearances are reliable? Well:

> One's justification for this background belief ultimately derives, in turn, from one's own appearances—one must have had appearances that support the conclusion that the appearances of others are generally reliable. For example, one can compare what one sees in the immediate vicinity of other people with what those others themselves report seeing around them. One can observe others' behavior to determine whether they appear to be successfully detecting the relevant physical objects in their surroundings. It is observations like this that justify one's general background assumption that other people's sensory perception is reliable. (Huemer, 2011, 25)

TC plus these observations about inferential evidence accommodate the datum that testimony about other people's seemings often does serve as evidence and it does so without positing any additional epistemological principles. But now it's hard to see why we should accept AC at all. There is no obvious argument for AC from Phenomenal Conservatism or any other theoretical considerations, so far as I can see. We do not need AC to account for the evidential value of testimony and our epistemology would be simpler and therefore theoretically better off, without it. I have not said anything here to suggest that AC is *false*, but I do nonetheless suggest that unless there is some argument for AC, we are better off leaving it behind. I suggest building the ARE on the back of TC as opposed to AC.

Now from TC, it follows that anyone who has testimony that others have experienced God and to whom it thereby seems that there is a God, thereby has evidence that there is a God, absent defeaters.

3.9 Disagreement and Religious Experience

It is not orange that is the new black, but the Epistemology of Disagreement. Epistemologists are keenly interested in the epistemic ramifications of the vast amount of disagreement we find in areas of great importance for human beings. Religious experience is no exception to this disagreement. I cannot resist offering some reflections in this regard.

Recall the arguments made using epistemological principles about the value of testimony. The argument from TC is weaker, in a sense, than the argument from AC. The argument from TC only gives evidence that there is a God to people to whom it seems that there is one as a result of testimony. The argument from AC gives evidence that there is a God to people regardless of what seems to them to be the case. This turns out to be quite important. Consider a philosopher who is familiar with all the testimonials of religious experience, but who has never had such an experience himself. Suppose he has no particular objection to the argument from religious experience; perhaps he has never even heard it before. Yet, it does not at all seem to *him*, for all that, that there is a God. He just does not see it, so to speak. If AC is true, the philosopher obtains evidence that there is a God regardless of this fact. If only TC is true, the philosopher obtains no evidence that there is a God from reading the testimony of religious experience[24].

This makes the argument from TC friendly to sceptics of religious experience. If the evidence of religious experience is sufficient for justified belief that God exists, as many defenders of the argument have supposed, the argument from AC implies that, absent defeaters, the only justified doxastic attitude toward the existence of God, given facts about religious experience, is acceptance. Hence, it implies that one epistemically ought to believe that God exists and that not believing it whilst being fully aware of the facts about religious experience amounts to an intellectual failure. It implies all of this because AC entails that each person who hears some testimony T obtains the same amount of non-inferential evidence from T as any other person. The argument from TC has no such implication. It implies, like the argument from AC, that many people are justified in believing that God exists on the basis of religious experience, but it does not imply that this is the only doxastic attitude which is justified, precisely because it allows different people to accrue different amounts of non-inferential evidence from the same testimony, depending on the respective seemings of the people involved[25]. It allows that a person might remain sceptical about the testimonials of religious experience and be perfectly justified in so doing, if the testimony does not seem to them to be

24 I have assumed here that there is no way to obtain inferential evidence that God exists from religious experience.

25 I should note that, strictly speaking, it is not the testimony which provides non-inferential evidence here. It is ultimately the subject's own seemings that are evidence and these are *caused* by the testimony.

accurate. The argument from TC thus avoids indicting those who are still somewhat unsure about religious experience of epistemic failure.

In taking this stance toward sceptics of the argument, I believe this new ARE makes better sense of the fact that many intelligent, well informed philosophers remain unconvinced that God exists given facts about religious experience; the only alternative being the arrogant and, I say, implausible suggestion that these philosophers are believing other than they ought to. For it is surely not unreasonable to remain sceptical of religious experience when such experiences are so fundamentally different to anything which you yourself have ever been aware. To some philosophers, reasonable disagreement is an impossibility (Feldman, 2007), but to the extent that we agree that it may both be reasonable to remain sceptical about religious experience and to accept it as veridical, Phenomenal Conservatism shall appear a better epistemological framework for thinking about religious experience.

Regardless, I conclude that absent defeaters, both subjects of religious experience and those who are familiar with the reports of religious experience may have a significant amount of evidence for the existence of God.[26] [27]

26 No doubt it has occurred to the critical reader that whilst some of the religious experiences cited in Chapter 1 are experiences purportedly of the theistic God, many of them are experiences of something other than that –Nirvana for example- and this seems to constitute a difficulty when arguing from the occurrence of these experiences in general to the existence of the theistic God. With this I agree and in Chapter 5 I reformulate the argument to eliminate this defect.

27 Chris Tucker (2011) also claims that religious belief can be evidentially justified if Phenomenal Conservatism is true, but he develops his model on the premise that humans have a faculty, the sensus divinitatis, that produces belief in God when a person is in the right circumstances. In some respects, the view is appealing, but I have developed my approach without reference to the sensus divinitatis in an effort to make the argument more plausible to religious sceptics.

4

Medical Materialism

Thus far I have argued that, absent defeaters, many people often have evidence that there is a God. I now turn to the consideration of defeaters. The next three chapters focus on undercutting defeaters - attempts to show that religious experiences are not indicative of truth. Specifically, in this chapter I focus on alleged undercutting defeaters which derive from empirical work which has been conducted on religious experience.

Many sceptical readers may have agreed with me – more or less - up to this point. They will insist however, that my argument really comes to nothing because there is scientific evidence that religious experiences are unreliable. Many sceptics maintain that, although religious experiences do provide *prima facie* evidence, such evidence is wholly defeated when one has an adequate scientific understanding of the circumstances in which religious experiences occur. For such sceptics, religious experiences are illusions, delusions, signs of mental illness, cognitive malfunction and fundamentally mistaken, as revealed by the methods of natural science. Contemporary Western society has built a greater culture of religious and spiritual scepticism than has ever been built by any other culture in any era (Hay, 2006). From that perspective, it is obvious that:

> The mind of a mystic is a mind that has somehow become fundamentally confused. Mysticism, in other words, is the result of mental pathology, and mystics, whether they suffer from neurosis, psychosis, or functional problems of the brain, are people who have clearly lost track of what is real (Newberg, 2001, 69).

This perspective is the one James calls ‘Medical Materialism’:

> Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as a hereditary degenerate.

> George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a disordered colon (James, 1979 [2012], 20).

The most recent advocate of Medical Materialism is Herman Philipse (2012). He believes that the empirical evidence on religious experience substantiates the claims of the Medical Materialist in many respects. He cites ancient uses of hallucinogenic drugs, schizophrenia, epilepsy and poor mental health as sources of religious experience (Philipse, 2012, 331). In a similar vein, Oppy remarks of the more powerful sorts of religious experience that:

> …in the typical case, the sensory states and conditions for making observations of those who have mystical experiences are of a kind that we have independent reason to suppose are unreliable… we have plenty of independent reason to suppose that 'mystical experiences' are simply cases in which the brain malfunctions as a result of some kind of insult or abuse (Oppy, 2006, 350).

Now, it seems to me that such criticisms are quite right with respect to a comparatively small number of religious experiences. What I hope to illustrate, however, is that the criticisms leave unscathed the majority of religious experiences. There are quite a few ways in which the scientific literature might be used to suggest that religious experiences are unreliable, and in this chapter, I take a look at as many as I have been made aware of.

4.1. Religious Experience as the Effect of Drugs

The suspicion that religious experiences are the result of a subject's being 'on drugs' has a long history. Many of the ancient religions made use of hallucinogenic drugs specifically in order to bring about religious experiences. The Aztecs used mushrooms and the Huicol of Mexico used peyote cactus, for example (Jeeves & Brown, 2009). Other drugs often used by ancient religions included water lilies, opium and marijuana. Some of the drugs used by these ancient religions have been found to produce religious experiences in the right circumstances (Jeeves & Brown, 2009). Sometimes it is suggested that religious experiences are the product of the ingestion of drugs - a suggestion which if true, would show that religious experiences are unreliable, since we know that experiences produced by drugs are unreliable. Which drugs exactly are meant to have produced religious experiences? Different drugs have different effects and so are more or less plausibly posited as the origin of religious experience.

Opium, for example, works by introducing its major component, morphine, into the brain. Morphine predominantly affects regions of the brain stem and parts of the thalamus where it can bind to opiate receptors (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). Morphine, however, and opiates more generally, do not produce hallucinations of any sort (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). Opium acts as an analgesic (a painkiller) and often also as a depressant which slows down breathing, heart rate and other bodily functions (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). If a subject takes opium and has a religious experience which involves visual or auditory stimuli, the fact that he has taken opium cannot be used to provide any explanation for why he had that experience, because opium is not a hallucinogen. Moreover, the depressant effects of opium are not typically the sorts of phenomena experienced by those who have religious experiences (see chapter 1) and so opium will make a poor explanation of religious experiences in general.

Those drugs which are most plausibly offered as explanations for religious experiences are those which increase the firing of neurons which manufacture the neurotransmitter dopamine whilst decreasing the firing of cells which manufacture serotonin (McNamara, 2009, 137-141). For example, Phencyclidine (PCP) is quite often sold illegally as a hallucinogen. PCP stimulates the release of dopamine which has effects on most areas of the brain, with most of the neurons which contain it starting in the midbrain and stretching right through both the cerebral cortex and the brain stem. Dopamine is most often associated with the facilitation of motor control and not with hallucination (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). Nevertheless, PCP does produce hallucinatory effects (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). However, most of these hallucinations leave subjects agitated, hostile and disorganized (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115), whilst religious experiences usually have quite the inverse effect. As shown in chapter 1, religious experiences often leave subjects calm and happy as opposed to the sorts of volatile experiences produced by PCP. A subject's taking PCP therefore makes for a somewhat implausible explanation of his having a religious experience, although since it does produce hallucinations, it may rightly leave us sceptical about experiences which a subject has whilst under the influence of PCP.

A more plausible candidate is LSD. LSD is an incredibly strong hallucinogen. Even a fraction of a milligram of it is enough to produce hallucinations (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). LSD is chemically similar to a neurotransmitter naturally produced by the human nervous system, serotonin. Accordingly, LSD acts by binding to serotonin receptors the stimulation of which has excitatory effects on almost the entire of the brain (Rosenzweig,

Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). LSD tends to produce vivid hallucinatory effects such as 'fantastic pictures with intense colour' and 'a dreamlike, drunken state' (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). For subjects with religious beliefs and inclinations, such hallucinatory effects may cause it to seem to subjects as though a transcendent reality is present (Jeeves & Brown, 2009; McNamara, 2009). Here is an example of a religious experience produced in a subject under the influence of LSD:

> I found myself drifting into another world and saw that I was at the bottom of a set of stairs. At the very top of these stairs was a gleaming light like a star or jewel of exceptional brilliance. I ascended these stairs and upon reaching the top, I saw a gleaming, blinding light with a brilliance no man has ever known. It had no shape nor [sic] form, but I knew that I was looking at God himself. The magnificence, splendor, and grandeur of this experience cannot be put into words. Neither can my innermost feelings, but it shall remain in my heart, soul, and mind forever. I never felt so clean inside in all my life. All the trash and garbage seemed to be washed out of my mind. In my heart, my mind, my soul, and my body, it seemed as if I were born all over again (Unger, 1965 cited in Mcnamara, 2009, 135-136).

If a subject takes LSD therefore, the religious experience which he has is plausibly explained by his having taken LSD.

Marijuana is perhaps the first drug which springs to mind in connection with hallucinations. The main active ingredient in marijuana, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) actually has varied effects across individuals. Some who take THC (in any form, either through marijuana, hashish or any other cannabinoid) experience nothing at all; others experience a great relaxation and others indeed experience vivid hallucinations (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). THC receptors can be found in largest concentration in the hippocampus, the *substantia nigra* and the cerebral cortex and are stimulated by dopamine (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). Marijuana then, works by increasing the release of dopamine in neurons found within these three areas. Due to the predominance of dopamine receptors in the three aforementioned regions, the ingestion of THC can interfere with the formation of memories (in the hippocampus), motor control (*substantia nigra*) and with thinking and information processing in general (cerebral cortex) (Rosenzweig, Breedlove & Leiman, 1996, 87-115). As with many hallucinogens, it is by no means clear how the increase of dopamine in these brain regions results in hallucination. Nevertheless, it does so result and if a subject has taken marijuana, this is plausibly an

explanation for why he has religious experiences. If the subject holds religious beliefs or inclinations, the euphoria produced by THC may cause it to seem to the subject that a transcendent reality is present.

Fairly recently, Psilocybin, the active compound in 'magic' mushrooms has been shown to produce experiences phenomenologically identical to some religious experiences. Psilocybin mimics serotonin, binding to serotonin receptors found throughout the brain, crucially including the cerebral cortex. In a study, 36 healthy volunteers were told that they would be given Psilocybin in one of three sessions over an extended period of time, but were never told in which session they would receive it. In sessions in which they did not receive it, they were given Ritalin as a placebo. Using psychological measures of 'mystical experience', researchers found that 22 out of the 36 participants reported mystical experiences and more than one third of these said the experience was the most spiritually significant moment of their lives. Only 4 subjects reported such experiences after taking Ritalin (Griffiths, Richards, McCann & Jesse, 2006). This study is reminiscent of the doctoral research conducted by Walter Panhke who made use of a very similar procedure with 20 students finding the same results (Hay, 2006, 166). Again, religious experiences produced as a result of the ingestion of Psilocybin, like many of those experiences found in ancient religion, appear rather suspect.

A number of other hallucinogens work in similar ways; the stimulation of regions of the brain associated with information processing through the increased release of neurotransmitters (Jeeves & Brown, 2009, 93). Some drugs act by interfering with serotonin release in the thalamus, which is hypothesized to alter the way in which the cerebral cortex processes sensory information. No doubt this might cause things to seem differently to a person than they normally would. Other drugs increase release of dopamine in regions of the midbrain which are implicated in the detection of salient and novel stimuli (Jeeves & Brown, 2009). Again, overstimulation here may result in subjects taking stimuli as particularly significant when in fact they are not - perhaps as when a subject takes themselves to be experiencing a transcendent reality through their experiencing of some ordinary object, such as the rain (see chapter 1 for examples). Hallucinogenic drugs in general then,

> perturb the key brain structures that inform us about our world, tell us when to pay attention, and interpret what is real. Psychedelics activate ancient brain systems that project to all of the forebrain structures that are involved in memory and feeling; they

> sensitize systems that tell us when something is novel and when to remember it. (Jeeves & Brown, 2009, 93)

They may produce,

> altered perception of reality and self; intensification of mood; visual and auditory hallucinations, including vivid eidetic imagery and synaesthesia; distorted sense of time and space; enhanced profundity and meaningfulness; and a ubiquitous sense of novelty. (Jeeves & Brown, 2009, 93)

Such experiences do indeed sound very much like religious experiences. In fact, many experiences produced by means of hallucinogenic drugs are phenomenologically indistinguishable from religious experiences produced without such drugs.

Experiences produced by these hallucinogenic drugs are highly unreliable. Such experiences often turn out to be misleading. It is also true that a fair number of religious experiences are produced by the ingestion of hallucinogenic drugs and demonstrably so. Many religious experiences which were had by ancient religions were the result of the ingestion of hallucinogenic agents of just the sort described. Further, a small number of such experiences today may be attributable to the ingestion of drugs. It is naïve, however, to think that religious experiences all result from the ingestion of drugs. Religious experiences occur in far too great a number for the claim that all such experiences are the result of drugs to be at all plausible. In chapter 1, I pointed out that 1/3 of the population of the UK have had a religious experience. The number in the US and numerous other countries approaches almost half. The number of people in the world who have had religious experiences is in the millions and the number is even greater when it is remembered that millions of others across time have had such experiences. Not all of these people were on drugs at the time of having the experience. Many of these people have never even taken drugs at any time (Hick, 2006, 76-77; Davis, 1989, 214-216). Religious experiences, particularly experiences of Oneness and of the presence of God, often come as the result of meditation, prayer or other religious practices. Often times they occur spontaneously to the non-religious as shown in chapter 1, but only very rarely is the having of these experiences contemporaneous with the ingestion of drugs. Religious experiences which result as an effect of drugs are the exception rather than the rule

(McNamara, 2009, 136). Thus, although some comparatively small number of religious experiences have their evidential force undercut by the subject's having ingested drugs, the majority of religious experiences survive this challenge.

What does the research on hallucinogens and religious experience suggest? Well, one tentative conclusion we might draw is the one drawn by Patrick McNamara:

> In sum, the phenomenological properties of chemically induced religious experiences share many features with religious experiences not induced by these chemicals – sometimes known as "entheogens." We can be relatively confident then that entheogens produce religious experiences by activating the same brain circuit that normally handles religious experiences – else how would one obtain such similar phenomenological features? The formal similarities in the cognitive, experiential, and phenomenological features obtained by both chemically induced religious experiences and non–chemically induced experiences suggest that both sets of experiences are tapping the same brain circuit. That brain circuit must crucially involve dopaminergic (DA) and serotoninergic neurochemical systems (McNamara, 2009, 138).

This is quite an interesting finding –that religious experiences involve systems of dopaminergic and serotoninergic neurons- but this by itself does nothing to show that religious experiences not produced by the ingestion of drugs are unreliable.

4.2. Religious Experience and Epilepsy

A great number of studies have convincingly demonstrated a link between temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) and a TLE patient's having religious experiences (McNamara, 2009). A seizure occurs when an excessive amount of neuron firing spreads across brain regions. It may plausibly be claimed that experiences which result from TLEs are hallucinations and therefore unreliable, providing an undercutting defeater for religious experience. The temporal lobe is a region of the cerebral cortex for the processing of auditory information and the production of new memories via the contained hippocampus. Many studies have reported stark increases in religiosity – an incredibly vague term used to denote the extent to which a person engages in religious activity - from patients who have undergone a temporal lobe

epileptic seizure. Ramachandran, for example, finds that roughly a quarter of his TLE patients undergo vivid religious experiences during their seizures (Ramachandran 1998 in Hay, 2006, 173). In a much larger sample, TLE patients exhibited extreme preoccupation with religious and mystical issues and often claimed to have been face-to-face with God (Dewhurst and Beard, 1970). The patient's religiosity returned to its previous level upon receiving treatment for TLE. Dewhurst and Beard describe a number of cases which we shall look at here.

> The patient's first conversion experience occurred in 1955 at the end of a week in which he had been unusually depressed. In the middle of collecting fares (he was a bus driver), he was suddenly overcome with a feeling of bliss. He felt he was literally in Heaven. He collected the fares correctly, telling his passengers at the same time how pleased he was to be in Heaven. When he returned home he appeared not to recognize his wife, but she did get from him a somewhat incoherent account of his celestial experience. Later the patient told his G.P (general practitioner) that he felt as if a bomb had burst in his head and that he thought he was paddling in water. On admission to St. Francis Hospital Observation Unit, he was constantly laughing to himself; he said that he had seen God and that his wife and family would soon join him in Heaven; his mood was elated, his thought disjointed and he readily admitted to hearing music and voices: "I wish they would tell me I could go to earth. Look at you cooped up here. I could give you a game of tennis." He remained in this state of exaltation, hearing divine and angelic voices, for two days. Afterwards he was able to recall these experiences and he continued to believe in their validity. He was discharged from hospital after ten days. During the next two years, there was no change in his personality; he did not express any peculiar notions but remained religious. In September 1958, following three seizures on three successive days, he became elated again. He stated that his mind had "cleared." (A letter to his wife, in which he attempted to express his religious ideas, was, in fact, unintelligible.) During this episode he lost his faith. "I used to believe in Heaven and Hell, but after this experience I do not believe there is a hereafter." He also lost his belief in the divinity of Christ – he had been born, had a father and mother, and therefore could not be the son of God. This sudden conversion was marked by an elevation of mood and a general sense of well-being and clarity of mind. He considered that this second episode also had the nature of a revelation. Investigations: Three electroencephalographic studies with sphenoidal leads showed spiked discharges, predominantly on the left but with the occasional discharge on

> the right. The supposition was that the focus lay in the left temporal lobe, but the skull X ray showed an elevation of the right petrous bone which was taken to favour a right-sided lesion. An air encephalogram also favoured a right-sided lesion. However, when sodium amytal was injected into the left carotid artery the patient became aphasic, and as this was a feature of his minor seizures a left temporal lobectomy was decided on. This was carried out in March 1959. Follow-up: The patient remained fit-free over the next eighteen months, though he had to have a course of E.C.T. for a depressive episode in September 1960. Throughout this period he retained belief in the validity of his second experience and continued in an attitude of agnosticism (Dewhurst and Beard, 1979, 498-499).

In this case, a temporal lobe seizure appears to have been involved in creating a particularly forceful religious experience. It seemed to the subject of this case that he was in the presence of God, but not in any ordinary sense. It firmly seems to the subject that he is in heaven, not only during the seizure, but continually thereafter. The subject literally believes himself to be in heaven with God and speaks to those around him as though he is speaking to them from heaven. This marks a major difference between regular religious experiences and experiences induced by epileptic seizure. Most religious experiences, no matter how strong, never have such deeply distorting effects on their subjects. A person who has a religious experience may feel as though, for example, they are in the presence of God during the experience, but very few religious experiences outside of those demonstrably produced by TLE involve subjects believing anything as evidently false as that they are continually in heaven even whilst clearly speaking with others on earth. To note another difference, subjects who have ordinary religious experiences may convert to a religion on their basis, but very rarely does a subject have yet another experience of completely the opposing sort. In any case, let us look at another case often cited.

> In 1954 he stopped taking his anti-convulsants; within six weeks he was having fits every few hours; he had become confused and forgetful. At this point he suddenly realized that he was the Son of God; he possessed special powers of healing and could abolish cancer from the world; he had visions, and believed that he could understand other people's thoughts. At a subsequent interview he mentioned a "holy smell" and gave the following account of his conversion. "It was a beautiful morning and God was with me and I was thanking God, I was talking to God; I was entering Aldwych, entering the Strand, between

> Kingsway and the Strand, going down some steps . . . I was not thanking God, I was with God. God isn't something hard looking down on us, God is trees and flowers and beauty and love. God was telling me to carry on and help the doctors here, and I was telling Him back, not aloud, I wasn't talking to myself; they would call you crackers if they heard that; God was telling me, at last you have found someone who can help you, and He was talking about you, doctor, He was talking about you. . . " Investigations: An air encephalogram showed moderate dilatation of the whole of the left lateral ventricle including both temporal and frontal horns. An electroencephalogram showed that the main focus of abnormal discharge was localized to the temporal lobe, although there were occasional similar discharges from the left side. The patient was not considered suitable for temporal lobectomy. Follow-up: In 1957 the patient appeared very much the same as he had on his discharge from hospital 21 years previously. His talk was rambling, his thoughts disordered, his manner inconsequential and his mood fatuous and euphoric. He had been admitted to psychiatric hospital for nine months and was still attending as an outpatient. (Dewhurst & Beard, 1970, 500–501)

Again there appears to be a direct correlation between the subject having a TLE and his having a powerful religious experience. McNamara (2009) remarks that there are marked similarities between this religious experience and regular ones. He notes that *"The features of the patient's experiences are also noteworthy as they recur in all kinds of religious experiences reported by all kinds of people without brain disorders. These are a change in the sense of Self (he realized he was the Son of God); a feeling of "insight" (he suddenly realized . . .); a feeling of having special perceptual powers (he could understand other people's thoughts); positive affect (I was thanking God); and special practical powers (he could heal cancer)"* (McNamara, 2009, 85). The similarities he notices however are only very general features. It is true that normal religious experiences result in changes in the sense of self, but they almost never result in grandiosities such as claiming to be the Son of God. To the contrary, religious experiences tend to leave their subject's humbled (Hick, 2006). Moreover very few religious experiences result in the subject's claiming to have special powers of either a perceptual or a practical sort. Let us look at another case.

> When he was a boy the patient was taken to church by his father, who was very concerned that his son should live a religious life. This was the more so when the father was converted from Methodism to Christian Science. At the age of 9 the boy decided to

become a minister, and at that time he used to get up at 6 a.m. to sing hymns. However, his interest in religion ebbed as the years passed and had become minimal by the time he was 21. At the age of 23 the patient had his first minor seizure. He was then in Iraq with the R.A.F. living a Spartan and isolated life. A fortnight after the seizure, while walking alone, he suddenly felt God's reality and his own insignificance. As a result of this revelation, he recovered his faith and determined to live in a Christian manner. However, this conversion experience gradually lost its impact and he once again ceased concerning himself with religion. Then in 1954 he had two of his rare grand mal attacks in one day. Within twenty-four hours of the second seizure he had another conversion experience as part of a florid religious psychosis that lasted a week. He remembered feeling dizzy for a period following the second seizure, then returning home with a dull headache and going to bed. Several hours later he had a sudden dream-like feeling, saw a flash of light, and exclaimed "I have seen the light." He suddenly knew that God was behind the sun and that this knowledge meant power; he could have power from God if he would only ask for it. He had a series of visions in which he felt that his past life was being judged; a book appeared before him, a world atlas with a torn page; a pendulum was swinging and when it stopped the world would end. Some elements in this experience had a paranoid trend. He knew that his thoughts were being recorded. He saw people looking down at him from Heaven and heard one of them laugh and say "H – is going to commit suicide." Later, in hospital, he heard heavenly voices abusing him, felt rays were being shone on him to punish him (they caused a sensation of burning), and said he had been twisted round until his bones were nearly broken. He made an attempt at suicide by breaking a window and trying to cut his throat. Investigations: Serial electroencephalograms suggested a left anterior temporal lobe focus. A left carotid arteriogram was normal, but the air encephalogram showed some contraction of the anterior horn and body of the left lateral ventricle and some enlargement of the lateral cleft of the left temporal horn. The straight X-ray was also suggestive of a left temporal lesion. A left temporal lobectomy was performed in January 1955. Follow-up: Five months later, the patient was still so involved in his psychotic experience that he had no interest in other topics. He completely believed in the validity of everything he had seen and heard during the acute phase, and specifically rejected the idea that the experience could have been the product of a disordered mind. He considered that he had received a message from God to mend his ways and help others, and the fact that he had been singled out in this way meant that he was God's chosen instrument. Twelve months after operation there were no new

> psychotic experiences to record, but his religious beliefs remained strong and he was attending church regularly. The patient had since remained fit-free (Dewhust and Beard, 1970, 499).

Once more we have the association between changes in the temporal lobe and religious experiences. Specifically, a temporal lobe seizure caused it to seem to the subject that God was 'behind' the sun and that God would grant him power. Again however these experiences are markedly different from normal religious experiences in which the subject is humbled before transcendent reality. Moreover, regular religious experiences very rarely come with additional more volatile experiences such as being abused by voices, being burnt or having one's bones feel as though they are being broken. Some TLE patients do, however, report experiences much closer to ordinary religious experiences. Newberg (2001) describes a case in which an older woman had a temporal lobe seizure resulting in an experience in which it seemed to her that God was 'pervading her mind with a sense of delight'; and another case in which the seizures *"...consisted of feelings of detachment, ineffable contentment, and fulfilment; visualizing a bright light recognized as the source of knowledge; and sometimes visualizing a bearded young man resembling Jesus Christ.*" (Newberg, 2001, 70). One particularly striking account comes from the observation of a TLE patient undergoing a seizure characterized by religious ecstasy:

> The patient is a 30-year-old unmarried man who had a normal birth and gives no history of familial epilepsy, severe illness, or cranial injury. He attended secondary school and is currently employed full-time. A self-contained, suspicious, unsociable person, he is prone to lonely meditation. His only intellectual concerns, music and travel, are in harmony with his need to establish rarefied contacts with the environment. He has a taciturn nature and expresses himself slowly and with difficulty. At the age of 13 he began to have attacks of short duration (20–30 sec) characterized by psychomotor arrest, slight lapse of consciousness, and, above all, an ineffable sensation of "joy." The episodes had a frequency of 1 or 2 per month but have become almost daily in recent years. In January, 1979, he was referred to us after a tonic-clonic nocturnal seizure. He had never seen a physician before, as he did not consider his small attacks as negative events. Seizures generally come on when he is relaxed or drowsy. The subjective symptoms are defined by the patient himself as "indescribable," words seeming to him inadequate to express what he perceives in those instants. However, he says that the pleasure he feels is so intense

> that he cannot find its match in reality. Qualitatively, these sensations can only be compared with those evoked by music. All disagreeable feelings, emotions, and thoughts are absent during the attacks. His mind, his whole being is pervaded by a sense of total bliss. All attention to his surroundings is suspended: he almost feels as if this estrangement from the environment were a sine qua non for the onset of seizures. He insists that the only comparable pleasure is that conveyed by music. Sexual pleasure is completely different: once he happened to have an attack during sexual intercourse, which he carried on mechanically, being totally absorbed in his utterly mental enjoyment. The neurological examination was negative. The EEG in the waking state is normal. A focus of spike activity appears in the right temporal zone during sleep. During a 24-hr polygraphic recording, a psychomotor seizure was observed, at the end of which the patient said he had experienced one of his short and sudden states of ecstasy (Dewhurst and Beard, 1970, 705 - 709).

This case is remarkable in that it, in many ways, parallels the descriptions offered by many healthy subjects in chapter 1. Even in these more closely aligned cases there are yet other marked differences between TLE patients and healthy subjects. Most TLE patients have numerous seizures with corresponding experiences per week, and sometimes per day. Meanwhile, those who have religious experiences only tend to have a handful of experiences which are comparable in force and vivacity to those had by the TLE patient per lifetime (although some people do have many much weaker religious experiences quite often). TLE patients do not have 'one-off' seizures. Moreover, TLE patients tend to have the same episodes repeatedly, whilst subjects of ordinary religious experiences typically have experiences with different content each time; emotional tones vary, different messages are contained in the experiences and so on (Newberg, 2001, 71).

There are then, many differences between regular religious experiences and the religious experiences had by TLE patients. What's more, for the most part TLE patients display no increase in religiosity at all. Devinsky and Lia (2008) find that increased rates of religiosity in TLE patients may not exceed 5%, and Ogata and Miyakawa (1998) find that out of 137 patients with TLE, only 3 reported any religious interests.

In a similar vein, Persinger (cited in Hick, 2006, 62) has reported that by stimulating the temporal lobe of a subject electrically, "*people report a presence. One time, we had a strobe*

light going and this individual actually saw Christ in the strobe. Another experienced God visiting her. Afterwards, we looked at her EEG and there was this classic spike over the temporal lobe at the precise time of the experience" (Persinger cited in Hick, 2006, 62). Since, Persinger has developed a helmet which many are calling 'The God helmet' (a transcranial magnetic stimulator) which stimulates the temporal lobe with electrical signals. Carter (2002 cited in Hick, 2006, 63) reports that nearly all who have used the God helmet have had a religious experience. These findings come with caveats. Most of the subjects who have been involved in experiments with the God helmet have been epileptics. Austin (1998, 386) reports that when relatively normal brain tissue is stimulated, either very little happens or it happens inconsistently. In one large study of 1500 uses of the God helmet by different participants, only 1 reported a religious experience (Austin, 1998, 386). Granqvist (2005 in Hood, 2009, 371) have well evidenced that the sense of a presence in these temporal lobe stimulation studies is largely a result of suggestibility rather than the stimulation of the temporal lobe. It turns out then, that religious experiences are *"no more common in actual patients with such epilepsy than in control populations with normal temporal lobe activity"* (Hood, 2009, 373).

With all this in mind, what then is meant to be the relationship between religious experiences in healthy subjects and religious experiences in TLE patients? What is the epistemological significance of these findings? I suggest, not much. Is there any way in which the research on TLE patients can show that ordinary religious experiences are unreliable? I cannot see that there is. There are myriad differences between TLE patients and ordinary subjects of religious experience:

- TLE patients quite often ascribe themselves mental and physical powers granted to them by the divines (McNamara, 2009, 85). Healthy subjects come away from religious experiences humbled by contrast (Hick, 2006, 39-51).

- TLE patients often suffer disturbing psychotic attacks in addition to their religious experiences (McNamara, 2009, 85-86). Healthy subjects suffer from no disturbing psychological attacks of any kind (Hick, 2006, 39-51; Newberg, 2001).

- TLE patients have many different sorts of hallucination including hallucinations of being watched, being tortured and being verbally abused (Mcnamara, 2009, 85-86). Healthy subjects of religious experience do not suffer general hallucinations.

- TLE patients, in most cases, realize after treatment that their experiences were illusory (Newberg, 2001, 71-75). It is very difficult to convince Healthy subjects that their experiences were falsehoods.

- TLE patients have vivid religious experiences every time they have a seizure. In most cases healthy subjects have only one or two major religious experiences per life time (Newberg, 2001, 71-75).

And perhaps most conclusively:

- Healthy subjects who have religious experiences do not have Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (Hood, 2009, 373).

Given these differences between healthy subjects and TLE patients, it is difficult to see how the fact that TLE patients can sometimes have religious experiences similar to those of healthy subjects, is supposed to show that the experiences of healthy subjects are unreliable.

What the studies do suggest is that there is a link between religious experiences and an increase in activity in the temporal lobe. Sometimes increased activity in the temporal lobe is as a result of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, and sometimes the increased activity is the result of a seizure. But such findings, interesting as they are, tell us nothing about the reliability of religious experiences in healthy individuals, unless one is prepared to endorse the implausible suggestion that every person who has had a religious experience suffers from TLE.

4.3. Religious Experience and Mental Health

Having a religious experience may seem to many a little ‘odd’. Indeed, to some sceptics, beginning with Freud and stretching through to the present in many circles, such experiences have been indicatory of mental health problems. Those who have religious experiences may, it could be suggested, be having these experiences as part of a deeper pathological illness from which they are suffering.

Schizophrenia is the most obvious candidate for subjects of religious experience because it involves, as one of the chief symptoms, the having of hallucinations and the holding of delusory beliefs - for example, that one has met God. Reports of religious experiences are more frequent among Schizophrenics than they are among the general population, especially in those who have the positive symptoms of hallucination and delusion (Huguelet, Mohr, Borras, Gilli´eron, & Brandt, 2006; Siddle, Haddock, Tarrier, & Garagher, 2002 both cited in McNamara, 2009). For example, in a study of 193 Schizophrenic patients, 24% had religious delusions (Siddle et al, 2002 in McNamara, 2009) and Haguelet et al (2006 in McNamara, 2009) find that 16% of their sample had positive symptoms with religious content.

There are other less well evidenced links between religious experience and mental health conditions. There is of course the Freudian suggestion (1975) that religious experiences are a manifestation of the human desire to return to an infantile state in which great joy and security can be found, and the suggestion that subjects of religious experiences are psychotics, or else overly anxious individuals.

The question is then, are religious experiences in seemingly healthy subjects in fact the result of pathological illnesses such as Schizophrenia? Let me first make an obvious point. The vast majority of people who have religious experiences are not residents of mental health institutions; nor on medication for mental health illness; nor do most of them ever even come to the attention of a psychiatrist. With regard to the general population of people who have religious experiences, there is no convincing evidence – perhaps even no evidence *simpliciter*- that they are suffering from mental illness. Some may suggest that the fact that schizophrenics have religious experiences is evidence that the undiagnosed are also mentally ill in having religious experiences. This would make for a poor argument because schizophrenics can also be demonstrated to have had experiences of cats and dogs. Is this convincing evidence that everyone who experiences cats or dogs is mentally ill? Not at all. Given that most subjects of religious experience have not been diagnosed with mental illness, there is no reason at all to suspect that their experiences are the product of mental illness.

There is actually evidence in the opposite direction which suggests that subjects of religious experience are usually of *better* mental health than others. In Hay and Morisy's (1978) survey of the British population, it was found that positive answers to The Hardy Question were weakly positively correlated with psychological well-being as measured by self-report. In the

very same study, there was a significantly strong correlation between claiming to have had a religious experience and reporting psychological well-being ($P<0.05$). In Hay's (1979) study of University students, 39/100 reported that their religious experiences had 'made them happy or better people' and 28 report that the experience gave their life 'depth'. In a different study by Wuthnow (1978) making use of 1000 participants, those who reported having been 'in contact with something holy or sacred' were significantly more likely to be less materialistic, less status conscious, show more social concern, more reflective and more self-confident.

There is also a large body of evidence indicating that religion and its related practices are positively correlated with psychological well-being (Mcbrayer, 2014). For example, a meta-analysis of 100 studies indicates that over 80% of them find positive correlation between religion and well-being (Koenig, 2001 cited in Mcbrayer, 2014). Moreover, meditation, which quite often results in religious experience, is well-evidenced as having a wide range of psychological benefits including improved attention, learning ability, short and long term memory (Hussain & Bhushan, 2010; Ireland, 2012). In particular, the effect size of transcendental meditation (the focussing of the mind to achieve a transcendent state of consciousness) on self-actualization is very large (Hussain et al, 2010). Transcendental meditation has also been significantly positively correlated with psychological well-being (Gelderloos et al., 1990). In the same study, the meditators were also shown to improve significantly more over time in their psychological well-being than a control group of non-meditators. After a large scale review of the literature on religion and mental health, MentalHealth.org.uk (Cornah, 2006) conclude that religion and spirituality actually provide significant psychological *benefits* to many suffering from depression, anxiety, PTSD and schizophrenia - as opposed to being symptoms of such illnesses.

As David Hay wrote, *'all the evidence gathered…suggests the likelihood of a positive association between report of a religious experience and a good mental health'* (Hay, 1978, 264). Hood comes to the same conclusion upon an evaluation of the survey data, writing that *"…[religious experiences] are characteristic of educated and affluent people; and are more likely to be associated with indices of psychological health and well-being than with those of pathology or social dysfunction"* (Hood, 2009, 347). Not only then is there no evidence of the

majority of those who have religious experiences being mentally ill, but the evidence we do have, albeit inconclusive, points in the opposite direction.

4.4. Three Further Arguments

So far I have argued that there is no obvious way in which the literature on pathology and religious experience can undercut the evidential force of religious experience, principally because most people who have religious experiences do not, or at least have never been shown to, suffer from any sort of pathological condition. Nevertheless, there are three more subtle arguments which I think underlie the initial suspicion one might have toward religious experience in light of this research.

First, there is the cumulative challenge argument. The basic idea is that although religious experiences are not all the result of drugs, nor all the result of epilepsy, nor all the result of any one pathological condition, all religious experiences are the result of at least one such condition. More formally:

(6) Religious experiences are always the result of either the ingestion of drugs, temporal lobe epilepsy, schizophrenia, hyper suggestibility, or some other pathological condition.

(7) Experiences produced by any pathological condition of the aforementioned sort are unreliable.

(C) Religious experiences are all unreliable.

The trouble with such an argument is (6). Although a good number of religious experiences are the result of some pathological condition of the sort discussed, it is not the case that all such experiences are so produced. There are millions of subjects of religious experience for whom there is no reason at all to suspect that they suffer any pathological condition. That is, there are many subjects who do not take drugs, nor suffer from epilepsy, schizophrenia, hyper suggestibility or any such phenomenon. (6) is therefore false.

The second argument worth addressing is an improvement upon this one. It weakens (6) to the claim that the majority of religious experiences are demonstratively produced by some

sort of pathological condition, keeps (7) constant and changes the conclusion to the claim that the majority of religious experiences are demonstratively unreliable. That is:

(6*) The majority of religious experiences are demonstratively produced by some sort of pathological condition.

(7) Experiences produced by any pathological condition of the aforementioned sort are unreliable.

(C) The majority of religious experiences are unreliable.

Arriving at that conclusion has two consequences. First, it significantly damages the evidence base for the ARE by limiting the number of experiences which count as evidence to far fewer. Second, so long as the number of religious experiences demonstratively produced by a pathological condition is significantly greater than the number which are not, it may lead us to conclude that probably all religious experiences are produced by a pathological condition - overthrowing the ARE entirely. Fortunately however, (6*) would be false even in this weakened form. It is false that the majority of religious experiences are produced by some pathological condition. As I mentioned, there are millions of subjects who do not suffer any such condition. The fact is that the vast majority of people who have religious experiences are not demonstrably psychologically, physiologically, or otherwise defective, unhealthy or unreliable. *"On the contrary, the biological basis of religious experience in general and mysticism in particular suggests that, if anything, such experiences are normal. They can occur in persons with neurophysiological or psychiatric disorders, but this does not make mystical experience itself psychopathological…there is no firm empirical basis from which to assume neurophysiological deficiencies in those reporting mystical experiences."* (Hood, 2009, 372). This argument will not suffice as a defeater either then. From the empirical research, it appears that what constitutes the difference between healthy subjects of religious experience and those who suffer from disorders is the subject's ability to interpret and integrate the experience into their lives and practice (Kohls, Hack, and Walach, 2008; Hood & Byrom, in press; Granqvist & Larsson, 2006 all in Hood, 2009); this is opposed to the far more naive view that people without disorders simply do not have religious experiences.

Lastly there is what I take to be the most powerful argument. It goes something like this. We know that religious experiences can be produced by numerous unreliable processes. For

example, we know they can be produced by drugs, by epileptic hallucinations, by schizophrenia and psychosis, and so on. Given this, religious experiences in general must be taken to be unreliable. Put formally, this argument will be:

(8) Religious experiences can be produced by unreliable processes.

(9) If an experience can be produced by an unreliable process, that experience ought to be taken to be unreliable in every case.

(C) Religious experiences should be taken to be unreliable in every case.

Peterson (2010) takes an argument of this kind to be dangerous for proponents of the ARE and for religious belief more generally. He writes:

> it seems that the theist would have to concede that, at best, the human mind is primed for such religious experiences but that it can be manipulated to produce false positives. Admitting this would cast doubt on the veracity of religious experiences generally, so some further account must be given for distinguishing genuine from false religious experiences (Peterson, 2010, 522).

Note crucially that this argument does not claim that if an experience can be produced by an unreliable process, then the experience *is* always unreliable. That would be fallacious, since it does not follow from the fact that X can be Y that X always is Y. Rather, the argument claims that if an experience can be produced by an unreliable process, we ought to take a certain *attitude* toward that experience in general. Specifically, we ought to be sceptical of experiences which can be produced unreliably; we ought to take them to be unreliable in every case unless there is some reason to trust them. Of course, if we are to do that, religious experiences will never be evidence, since we will think them unreliable and hence have an undercutting defeater grounded in our suspicions.

Let us take a look at (9). (9) has a nostalgic feeling for me. It reminds me an awful lot of what Descartes has to say in his *Meditations*:

> I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once (Descartes, 1951, 60).

What is common between Descartes and (9) is this theme of never trusting experiences if they *can sometimes* deceive us. Descartes however, unlike the proponent of (9) thoughtfully realizes that such scepticism reigns over all of experience. All of our experiences sometimes deceive us and so all experiences ought not be trusted. By the same token, all of our experience can be produced by an unreliable process. It is logically possible, as any philosophy student will recognize, that I am merely a brain in a vat being tricked by scientists into thinking that I have a body; that I am writing at the moment; that I am sitting in my house; that I went to town this morning, and so on, when in fact I never did any of this. In fact, I am nothing more than a brain in a vat of chemicals being stimulated by scientists to give me various hallucinations. But since all of my experiences can in principle be produced in this extremely unreliable way, (9) will force me never to trust my experiences. I must therefore regard all my experiences as unreliable, or at least suspend judgement on the matter.

If the reader is not a fan of fantastic brain-in-a-vat scenarios, try these reflections instead. All of our experiences have a brain state which is correlated with its occurrence. All of our experiences are mediated by the brain state which is correlated with them, as any textbook on neuroscience will reveal (Newberg, 2001; Rosenzweig et al, 1996). Scientists do have technology which is capable of stimulating regions of the brain. Given a finely tuned advancement on this technology, and knowledge of which brain states mediate which experiences, scientists could produce any experience at all in a lab via the stimulation of the relevant brain regions. Moreover, given advanced enough science, they could introduce chemicals into the brain, which alter its neuro-chemical state to produce any experience they desire. Since this is so, all of our experiences can be produced by unreliable processes. Specifically, all of them could in principle be produced either artificially in a lab, via the introduction of the relevant chemicals into the nervous system in the right proportions, or via the right alterations to brain structure and chemistry. If (9) is true therefore, we ought to regard all of our experiences as unreliable.

This result I take to be itself a reason to reject (9) and so to dispose of this line of argument, but there is another reason that (9) cannot serve as a premise in an argument of this sort. (9)

presupposes a rejection of Phenomenal Conservatism. Phenomenal Conservatism advices us to trust our experiences unless there is some positive reason to think they are unreliable. (9) advices us to regard all our experiences with suspicion because they could in principle be unreliable, even though we have no reason to actually think they are in our particular case. The fact that a type of experience *can* be produced in an unreliable way does nothing to show that this type of experience is in general unreliable or produced by an unreliable process in all cases. Hence, in advising a sceptical attitude toward such experiences, (9) is straightforwardly rejecting Phenomenal Conservatism; and this is no surprise, given the parallels between (9) and Descartes's sceptical principles.

This causes real trouble for the proponent of this argument. How is the argument meant to be understood as a challenge to the ARE? It is quite natural to take it in the following way. The natural sciences purport to discover that religious experience can be produced by various unreliable processes and this is meant to constitute a *defeater* for religious experiences. That is, the challenge to the ARE is one which accepts the truth of Phenomenal Conservatism but insists that religious experiences have their prima facie evidential value defeated by considerations in the natural sciences. Construed in this way the argument is an abject failure. As I have said, the argument crucially depends on (9) and (9) entails the denial of Phenomenal Conservatism. This means that in putting forward the argument, the proponent is actually denying even the prima facie evidential value of religious experiences on the grounds that there is a possibility of unreliability – a possibility illustrated by findings in the natural sciences. For the proponent of this argument, it is false that *religious experiences are evidence until shown to be unreliable*, as Phenomenal Conservatism dictates. Hence, there is no possibility of this challenge providing a defeater for religious experience, since it does not consider such experiences as prima facie evidence in the first place.

Now suppose we try to read the challenge a different way. Suppose that instead of offering a defeater for religious experience given Phenomenal Conservatism, the proponent is offering (9) as an alternative to Phenomenal Conservatism. On this reading, the proponent asserts (9) as a superior epistemic principle to Phenomenal Conservatism and draws from (9) the corollary that religious experiences are not evidence. On this reading the argument has three flaws. The first is that (9) is maximally implausible, since it entails, as I have already illustrated, that ordinary sensory experiences are never evidence for anything. The second is

that it is difficult to see what the point is in citing all the scientific research. The only premise that is needed in order to deny that religious experiences are evidence, given (9), is that there is the logical possibility of religious experiences being unreliable (delusory). This premise does not require any scientific research in its defence. It only requires some fairly basic Descartes' inspired reflections on the possibility of dreaming and deception. This reading of the argument thus reduces the utility of the scientific literature to a mere illustration of the possibility of error – a possibility already discernable in philosophy. Finally, and most crushing for this challenge, is that since (9) entails the denial of Phenomenal Conservatism, and asserting (9) without any argument given the numerous motivations for Phenomenal Conservatism is an egregious case of begging the question. One cannot legitimately just assert (9) against the ARE without criticizing Phenomenal Conservatism or the arguments for it or even arguing for (9) itself.

I conclude that there is no undercutting defeater to be found in this argument and that unless the proponent of it gives us a reason to reject Phenomenal Conservatism in favour of (9), there is no objection at all to the ARE here.

4.5. Non-pathological Models of Religious Experience.

In the sections previous, I hope to have shown fairly conclusively that there is no compelling argument from the fact that some subjects have religious experiences produced by pathology to the claim that all religious experiences are unreliable. There is one other way in which a Medical Materialist might deploy the results of natural science to show that religious experiences are unreliable. By offering a model of how religious experiences are produced in the brain and implicating the major neuronal circuitry involved, one might hope to 'reduce' religious experiences to 'nothing but' a series of flashes and blips on a brain scan. That is, one might hope to show that religious experiences are wholly the product of brain function, and nothing to do with the presence of a transcendent reality.

As I see it, once we give up trying to show directly that religious experiences are the result of pathology or some other unreliable process, there are serious difficulties with trying to provide an undercutting defeater for religious experience by appeal to non-pathological accounts. In fact, I say that it cannot be done. If we give up on pathological and dysfunctional models of religious experience, there is simply no way that an ordinary model could provide

an undercutting defeater. To make that point, I shall sketch one plausible model of some religious experiences and then proceed to highlight the difficulties a sceptic faces in trying to use the model as a defeater.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg is equally dissatisfied with the attempt to explain religious experience as the product of some sort of pathology:

> Still, we do not believe that genuine mystical experiences can be explained away as the results of epileptic hallucinations or, for that matter, as the product of other spontaneous hallucinatory states triggered by drugs, illness, physical exhaustion, emotional stress, or sensory deprivation (Newberg, 2001, 71).

He does however insist, quite rightly, that religious experiences must be, like all experiences, a product of brain function. To shed some light on this, Newberg devised an influential experiment involving 8 expert Tibetan meditators. The meditators were to engage in their usual practice of meditation with the aim of obtaining an experience which they had many times previously, which Newberg calls an experience of Absolute Unitary Being. He describes this as follows:

> The mind would perceive a neurological reality consistent with many mystical descriptions of the ultimate spiritual union: There would be no discrete objects or beings, no sense of space or the passage of time, no line between the self and the rest of the universe. In fact, there would be no subjective self at all; there would only be an absolute sense of unity—without thought, without words, and without sensation. The mind would exist without ego in a state of pure, undifferentiated awareness. The name Gene and I have used for this state of pure mind, of an awareness beyond object and subject, is Absolute Unitary Being, the ultimate unitary state. The mystical traditions of the East have all described some version of this ineffable unity — Void Consciousness, Nirvana, Brahman-atman, the Tao — and all hold it up as the essence of what is inexpressibly real (Newberg, 2001, 75).

The experience that the meditators are to achieve via meditation is one of absolute Oneness; the dissolution of the self into a greater transcendent reality. I gave many examples of this experience in chapter 1.

The meditators are to obtain this experience via meditation and then indicate this to Newberg by a small pull on an extended length of cotton twine. At which point, Newberg administers, from a non-distracting distance, a radioactive substance called tc-99m-HMPAO into the blood stream of the meditator. This substance acts as a tracer which allows Newberg to use SPECT cameras to capture a freeze frame of the blood flow patterns in the meditator's brain at the time of his religious experience. The resulting scans revealed an unusual level of activity in the left superior parietal lobe (Newberg, 2001, 75-80). It is known that this region of the brain is responsible for the orientation of the individual in space, and for allowing us to clearly distinguish between self and not-self; between what is part of me from what is not (Newberg, 2001, 75-80). This area of the brain is unsurprisingly at work almost all of the time at staggering rates. The brain scans of the meditator prior to his having a religious experience show just this. What the scans reveal at the moment of the religious experience however, is a severe reduction in activity in the left superior parietal lobe. Coinciding with this reduction in activity, the meditators felt a loss of separation between themselves and their surroundings, and eventually even came to lose all sense of 'self' and 'surroundings' (Newberg, 2001, 75-80); they had an experience of Absolute Unitary Being, or Oneness.

Later on, having convinced several Franciscan nuns to take part in his experiment by engaging in prayer, Newberg was able to find exactly the same results once more, though this time with the nuns reporting, not an experience of Oneness, but an experience of 'union with God' (Newberg, 2001, 75-80). In both studies, at the same time as parietal lobe activity was reduced, activity was starkly increased in the frontal lobes which are strongly implicated in attention. This is of course to be expected because meditators purposefully attempt to focus the mind as sharply as possible, which results, as in this experiment, in an increased intensity of experience. That is, as a result of increased efforts to focus attention in the frontal lobes, and reduced activity in the parietal lobes, subjects undergo a very intense awareness of absolute unity characteristic of many religious experiences (Newberg, 2001, 75-80). The findings were later corroborated by Beauregard (cited in Hay, 2006, 177) using fMRI scans on 15 Carmelite nuns.

Now, Newberg goes on to sketch plausible models of how such states could be brought on by meditation of two different types, prayer, religious practice and ritual, as well as mundane practices like taking a relaxing bath. In his model he, in line with other empirical work,

implicates the amygdala – a centre for the control of emotions- the hypothalamus – which controls the limbic system - and the hippocampus – which regulates the effects of the limbic system on other areas of the brain. Let us not press the details too much, but here is some of what Newberg has to say about the way in which religious rituals can result in some sorts of religious experience:

> The ability of human ritual to produce transcendent unitary states is the result, we believe, of the effect of rhythmic ritualized behaviour upon the hypothalamus and the autonomic nervous system and, eventually, the rest of the brain. Studies have shown that participating in spiritual behaviours such as prayer, religious services, meditation, and physical exertion can lower blood pressure, decrease heart rate, lower rates of respiration, reduce levels of the hormone cortisol, and create positive changes in immune system function. Since all these functions are regulated by the hypothalamus and autonomic system, the effect of ritual upon autonomic states seems clear. The process of ritual begins as rhythmic behaviours subtly alter autonomic responses in the body's quiescent and arousal systems. If those rhythms are fast—in the case of Sufi dancing, for example, or in the frenzied rites of Voudon—the arousal system is driven to higher and higher levels of activation. This increasing level of neural activity soon becomes an issue for the hippocampus, the diplomat of the limbic structure that is responsible for maintaining a sense of equilibrium in the brain In the hippocampus, information is exchanged between various parts of the brain. Yet this center of the brain also frequently acts as a kind of floodgate, regulating the flow of neural input between various regions of the brain. This regulatory function moderates the level of neural activity, and keeps the brain in a state of relative equilibrium. For example, when the hippocampus senses that brain activity has reached excessively high levels, it exerts an inhibitory effect on neural flow — in effect, it puts the brakes on brain activity — until action in the brain settles down. As a result, certain brain structures are deprived of the normal supply of neural input on which they depend in order to perform their functions properly. One such structure is the orientation association area—the part of the brain that helps us distinguish the self from the rest of the world and orients that self in space — which requires a constant stream of sensory information to do its job well. When that stream is interrupted, it has to work with whatever information is available. In neurological parlance, the orientation area becomes deafferented — it is forced to operate on little or no neural input. The likely result of this deafferentation is a softer, less precise definition of the boundaries of the self. This softening of the self, we believe, is responsible for the unitary experiences practitioners of ritual often describe The same neurobiological mechanism underlying unitary experiences can also be set in motion, in a slightly different manner, by the intense, sustained practice of slow ritual activity such as chanting or contemplative prayer. These slow rhythmic behaviours stimulate the quiescent system, which, when pushed to very high levels, directly activates the inhibitory effects of the hippocampus, with the eventual result of deafferenting the orientation area and, ultimately, of blurring the edges of the brain's sense of self, opening the door to the unitary states that are the primary goal of religious ritual. (Newberg, 2001, 57)

The idea of Newberg's model is, in essence, that religious practices can push the sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous system to higher and higher levels of activation. This provokes a response from the hippocampus to slow down the brain's processing, so to speak. It exerts an inhibitory effect on neuron firing in many areas of the brain – save for the frontal lobes, which are working particularly hard because of the subject's insistence on sharpened focus. The inhibition chokes the parietal lobe – the 'orientation area'- of sensory information which is needed to make the self/not-self distinction. Without any such information, the brain has no means to make any such distinction which results in an experience of unity, or Oneness. When such experiences occur to people familiar with religious concepts, it may come to seem to them – without any conscious interpretation, importantly - that they are in union with God, or that they have achieved Nirvana or something of this sort. Newberg offers very similar models for experiences produced in other circumstances.

Suppose it is right that the parietal lobe and the limbic system are involved in the experience of Oneness. Is there anything epistemically significant in this work? Newberg recalls many occasions in which academics have taken his work to provide a defeater for religious experience; occasions on which people have thought that 'science has finally explained away religious experience'. As Newberg puts it, some have thought that his model reduces religious experience to 'a fleeting rush of blips and electrochemical flashes' (Newberg, 2001, 88). Can his model pose any threat to religious experience? Newberg (2001, 88) certainly does not think so. As he points out, we should remember that all of our experiences have neuro-chemical correlates and so a model of this sort could be produced for any experience at all. Such a model could never show, however, that my experience of a tree is 'nothing but a series of fleeting blips and electrochemical flashes'. Nor could the correlation of my experiences of trees with particular brain states suffice to show that my experiences were unreliable, untrustworthy or otherwise suspect. How could it? Why would anyone think then that a model like Newberg's could show that religious experiences were unreliable? What sort of argument might you make? Let's consider a few:

(10) If an experience has a neural correlate then it is unreliable.

(11) Experience of Oneness has a neural correlate.

(C) Experience of Oneness is unreliable.

This clearly will not work. If (10) were true, all of our experiences would be demonstrably unreliable, since all of our experiences have neural correlates in the brain. It will not do to simply find some neural correlate or other; it must be shown that this neural correlate is *defective*. What you need is something like this:

(12) The neural correlate of the experience of Oneness is a brain malfunction.

(13) If the neural correlate of an experience is a brain malfunction then that experience itself is unreliable.

(C) Experiences of Oneness are unreliable.

Here we have a better argument. The experience is claimed to be unreliable because it is the product not just of some brain processes, but of brain malfunction; in crude terms, the brain goes haywire and produces hallucinations. The trouble, however, is that one would have to *show* that the neural correlate really is a brain malfunction and not something that should be expected to happen when a person experiences transcendent reality, and this is not something which Newberg's model can do. His model implicates many areas of the brain in producing religious experience, but at no point is there any reason to think that the process is unreliable, defective, or a result of malfunction.[28]

One might - as a last-ditch effort - argue that this research shows that religious experiences are the product of religious practice, not interaction with any transcendent reality. One could claim that the idea behind Newberg's research is that when people engage in certain practices, these practices have effects on the brain which lead to religious experiences and that we therefore have a complete account of religious experiences which demonstrates that they are never caused by the purported objects of those experiences. This would mean that religious experiences were unreliable, since they were never actually indicative of the presence of transcendent reality, but instead wholly products of religious practice. It is tempting to interpret Newberg's findings this way, but mistaken nonetheless. The empirical findings of Newberg's experiments show that certain practices have effects in the brain which result in religious experiences. Do these practices have such effects on the brain because they put

28 Newberg (2001) himself agrees with this. He maintains that there is nothing in his model which shows that religious experiences are the result of psychotic or otherwise problematic brain processes. In fact, he seems to think that his model shows religious experiences to be a 'perfectly normal' part of human existence.

humans in touch with transcendent reality or is it the mere going through the motions of the practice, without there being any such transcendent reality present, which causes the required experience? Nothing in the model nor in the empirical findings suggests either answer to this question.

To illustrate, I could offer a model like this for my experience of the tree in my garden. If I want to have an experience of the tree in my garden, what I do is I go down the stairs, out the front door and stand squarely on the grass just outside the house. My doing this has certain effects on my brain and those effects in turn have other effects on my brain; this must be so, since all my behaviours and experiences have effects on my brain. By the time I get down to my garden and look around me, my brain is in brain state X. Brain state X is the sort of brain state which makes possible an experience of a tree in my garden, and lo and behold, I do actually have an experience of a tree in my garden. Ought we then conclude that my experience of the tree is wholly a result of my practices of going down the stairs, standing on the grass, and looking around? Ought we conclude that my experience of the tree is 'nothing but' the by-product of a brain event caused by my behaviours?

Of course not. My behaving in the way that I did certainly made possible an experience of the tree in my garden, but there was something else which contributed to my having the experience; namely, the tree in my garden. Being able to sketch a model of the behaviours which lead to an experience does not show that the experience is wholly a product of those behaviours, and making reference to what these experiences do in the brain does not change that. Does my going and looking in the garden make it possible for me to experience the tree that is actually there? Or, alternatively, does my going and looking in the garden simply produce – all by itself - an experience of a tree in the garden, together with brain state X? This is not something which can be answered by a description of the practices which lead to the experience.

Similarly, religious practices often do lead to experiences of Oneness, and this is, as with all experiences, mediated by the subject's being in a certain brain state. We cannot tell, however, from this alone, whether the practices put us in a position to experience the real Oneness behind all reality or whether the practices simply generate these delusory experiences. Newberg's model cannot be used to argue for the Medical Materialist conclusion that religious experiences are delusions produced by religious practice.

To be sure, if one stipulates a priori, or already believes prior to inquiry that there is no such thing as a transcendent reality then one is always going to believe that religious experiences are unreliable delusions generated by religious practice. What else could they be on the assumption that there is no transcendent reality for them to be portraying? This does not show that religious experiences are unreliable; it shows that if you assume from the outset that there is no transcendent reality, you will get out that which you put in.

There are other non-pathological theories of religious experience which are certainly interesting in their own right, but, they are all useless for the purposes of Medical Materialism. Once one abandons pathological explanations of religious experience, there is no means by which an ordinary account of such experiences could undercut their evidential value, precisely because all experiences will have ordinary neurological, cognitive and psychological accounts of their origins. For a substantive defeater to derive from the natural sciences therefore, it must be shown that religious experiences are the result of unreliable processes, not simply that they are the result of some process or other – or some brain state or other. The account of religious experiences must show them to be pathological, dysfunctional or otherwise untrustworthy. Unfortunately for the sceptic, there is no plausible account of the majority of religious experiences which would even suggest any of this, as our discussion reveals. It turns out therefore, that there is no defeater for religious experience to be found in the natural sciences.[29]

29 There is a fairly recent debate about the implications of cognitive science for religion. Many in cognitive science think that religious belief is the result of a cognitive mechanism in the brain they call the hyper-sensitive agency detection device. There have been many reflections on the implications of this research for religious belief and I suspect that the research is also relevant here. It might be thought to pose a defeater for religious experience by showing that when it seems to a subject that God is present, this is the result of the hyper-sensitive agency detection device, and that this shows the experience to be unreliable. I have opted not to discuss this here because the research is about religious belief, not religious experience and so it may be somewhat cumbersome to spell out the exact relation to the ARE. In any case, many philosophers have convincingly argued that there are severe difficulties with using these cognitive science theories to pose a defeater for religious belief (Murray, n.d; Thurrow, 2011; Barrett, 2013). Ultimately, it seems to me that the research in cognitive science, showing as it does, that religious belief is the product of perfectly natural human faculties (Barrett, 2013), would have the same difficulties providing a defeater for religious belief or experience as Newberg's model would have. There is no reason to think that the processes implicated are unreliable with respect to the production of religious belief, save for the assumption that religious beliefs are all false.

5

The Prior Theory Objection

By far the most often registered complaint about religious experiences is that they are supposedly heavily (or even entirely) shaped by prior theory. That is, in many cases when it seems to S that a transcendent reality is present, this seeming is far too heavily produced by S's strong beliefs about transcendent reality. As Oppy puts it:

> it is pretty obviously true that, in almost all cases, those who do have these kinds of religious experiences are already believers in the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods: those who don't already suppose that there is an orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god very rarely look at the night sky and see it as the handiwork of a god of that kind. So, when it comes to the question of finding evidence for the claim that there is an orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god, there is good reason for non-believers to suppose that this kind of experience doesn't count, since it is so obviously polluted by prior theory (Oppy, 2006, 348).

The idea here is meant to be that religious experiences are either wholly or at least, too heavily a product of prior beliefs; they are social constructs, rather than experiences tied to an objective reality. This prevents religious experiences from being evidence, says the critic. This is the objection that religious experiences involve religious people having ordinary sensory experiences upon which they 'add' an 'interpretation' of a religious or mystical nature, preventing the experiences from counting as proper evidence. Oppy is not the only critic to levy this objection against religious experiences. The objection is most famously levied by Proudfoot (1985). In a thoughtful and entertaining paper, Bryan Frances (Forthcoming) offers this objection as one of the chief sources of scepticism about religious belief. He puts it this way:

> Theists are having the same meaningful experiences as the non-theists but then they are immediately grafting a theistic interpretation on to the experiences without any objective basis to do so (Frances, Forthcoming, 7)

Philipse (2012, 321) puts it much more curtly, saying that NREs involve:

> interpreting the feeling of [for example] being overwhelmed by the beauty of a landscape as feeling God's presence. With regard to these feelings, for example, it is implausible to claim that their occurrence is prima facie a good reason to believe that God exists, since only those who already believe that God exists will endorse a religious interpretation. Unbelievers may have the very same feelings while not interpretaing them in a religious sense (Philipse, 2012, 321).

I propose that we best understand this objection as a claim about Cognitive Penetration. The claim of the critic is that all normal people have certain appearances; for example, the appearance that there is a night sky, or the appearance that it is raining, or that there is a sunset. Religious people however, have another appearance on top of this. For them, it appears that there is a transcendent reality 'behind' or 'in' the night sky, the rain, or the sunset. This appearance or seeming, says the critic, is one which is caused by the regular appearance that all people have, plus the subject's religious beliefs. How things seem is cognitively penetrated by the subject's religious beliefs. Unless those religious beliefs are justified, such seemings cannot count as evidence. Hence, religious experiences cannot by themselves count as evidence.

6.5. The Interpretation and Judgement Reply

Kwan (2011), for example, points out that many of our experiences are influenced by prior theory. Kwan quotes Psychologist Ralph Baergen who, after surveying the empirical work in Psychology, concludes that the *"Psychological evidence shows that the operation of the human visual system certainly is influenced by beliefs, assumptions, expectations and so on… [Moreover] the processing involved is, to some extent, top-down…our beliefs, expectations and so on influence our visual presentations, and not merely their interpretation"* (Baergen, 1993 cited in Kwan, 2011, 87). Kwan uses the findings of empirical psychology, which are

carefully laid out by Davis (1989), to support the claim that experiences being influenced by prior theory is in fact very common. How things seem to me can be influenced by my prior beliefs, expectations and emotions, even in ordinary cases of sense perception. To give a clear example, when I have prior beliefs about the artistic style of Da Vinci, when I see a painting it may seem to me that there is a Da Vinci painting. Meanwhile, a person unfamiliar with Da Vinci's work can fail to have this seeming. It will only seem to him that there is a painting of some kind. Such influence by prior beliefs permeates a large portion of our experiences, and Kwan and Davis are thorough in pointing this out. Kwan sometimes implies that pointing this out is sufficient for undermining the Prior Theory Objection (Kwan, 2013, 87)[30]. Sadly, it is not.

There are several different ways of interpreting the prior theory objection. On the weakest interpretation, the critics claim that any experience influenced by prior theory cannot count as evidence. This I think is obviously false. We illustrated in our discussions of Cognitive Penetration that when seemings are influenced by justified prior beliefs, they can constitute good evidence. For example, if I seem to see a Da Vinci painting and this seeming is partly influenced by justified beliefs about what Da Vinci paintings are like, the seeming is perfectly good evidence that there is a Da Vinci painting. It is precisely the point of learning how to identify things that we can then reliably identify them when needed. These common sense remarks, together with the argument of Kwan allow us to dispense with this weak version of the prior theory objection.

On stronger interpretations of the Prior Theory Objection, such remarks will not do. It is true that many of our experiences are influenced by prior beliefs and that quite often there is no problem with this. It is also true however, that sometimes this *does* constitute a problem.

30 Although, it was admittedly difficult for me to see exactly which response Kwan was giving to the Prior Theory Objection. He does cite the aforementioned psychological evidence and concludes that '*prior theory does not necessarily pollute*' (Kwan, 2013, 87) – this being the point which he develops in the most detail, which is why I take it to be his main argument. But he also, no doubt influenced by his study under Richard Swinburne, makes hints at approving of Swinburne's response (Kwan, 2013, 86) – which I discuss next – but he does not develop it in any detail or clarity.

Sometimes an experience's being influenced by prior theory can give us reason not to count it as evidence. When seemings are influenced by unjustified beliefs, it can affect the evidential value of such experiences. For example, in the Jack and Jill case from earlier, if Jill realizes that the only reason it seems to her that Jack is angry is because of her prior unjustified belief that Jack is angry, the evidence of her seeming will be undercut. It sounds to me that this is more like what Oppy, Proudfoot and others have in mind. They think that religious appearances are the product of normal appearances plus unjustified beliefs, and that since this is evidently so, the appearances cannot serve as evidence.

A related but stronger line of thought involves rejecting the distinction between interpretation and experience all together. Swinburne (1979) takes this line. Commenting on the Prior Theory Objection, he rightly notes that it presupposes that we can draw such a line between experience and interpretation:

> That there is such a line to be drawn is a common and seldom argued assumption in many discussions of religious experience. Once the line is drawn, the consequences are evident. For the line always leaves the typical objects of religious experience as matters of interpretation rather than as true objects of real experience. It follows that, even if it seems to you strongly that you are talking to God or gazing at Ultimate Reality, this fact is no reason in itself for supposing that you are (Swinburne, 1979, 307-310)

Swinburne's exemplar of the way in which the lines are typically drawn is the work of Chisholm:

> The characteristics include being blue, red, green, or yellow; being hard, soft, rough, smooth, heavy, light, hot, or cold; and that of sounding, or making a- noise. The relations include: being the same, or different with respect to any of the characteristics in question; being more like one object than another with respect to any of the characteristics, or with respect to hue, saturation, and brightness, or with respect to loudness, pitch, and timbre. The class of characteristics and relations also includes the 'common sensibiles'—that is, 'movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude'—as well as what is intended by such terms as 'above', 'below', 'right', 'left', 'near', 'far', 'next', 'before', 'after', 'simultaneous', and 'to last', or 'to endure'. In short, the

> characteristics and relations in question are co-extensive with what Aristotelians have traditionally referred to as the 'proper objects of sense' and the 'common sensibiles' and what Reid described as the objects of 'original' perception (Chisholm, 1957, cited in Swinburne, 1979, 307-310)

Swinburne writes of Chisholm that:

> according to Chisholm, if something seems to S to be brown or square or solid, that is good grounds for believing that it is. But if something seems to be a table, or a Victorian table, or a ship, or a Russian ship, that is in itself not good grounds for believing that it is. You can have good grounds for believing that something is a table only in terms of it looking brown, square, and solid and in terms of things that look like that having appeared (in the past) to be used for writing on (the notion of 'writing' perhaps being spelt out in terms of 'sensible' characteristics) (Swinburne, 1979, 307-310).

On this view, one can have interpretation free appearances of the blueness of the night sky and of the brightness of the stars, but if one has an appearance that there is a God in the night sky, this must have involved some interpretation; it must have involved cognitive penetration. Swinburne thus rightly notes that the supposition that some such line can be drawn between appearances which are 'given' and appearances which are interpretations is necessary for the Prior Theory Objection to get going. Swinburne's response is then to claim that *'no such line as the one that Chisholm attempts to draw can be drawn between real experience and interpretation.'* (Swinburne, 1979, 309)[31].

Swinburne supposes that all of our experiences are always coloured by prior theory; that there is no reprieve from cognitive penetration, and that the mind is far more like a factory than it is a straightforward mirror. On this view, when I say, 'it looks to me as if P', I am stating a conclusion which I draw from my experience; I am placing an interpretation on the experience which is not an intrinsic part of the experience itself. For example, if I were to say that a stick in water appears bent, on this view I would be making a judgement about the stick on the basis of a visual experience.

31 This also appears to be the response of Hick (2006).

Note that what is of importance is not the semantic issue of how "appears" is used in English but rather, the issue is, whether our experiences actually represent the stick as being bent or whether the representational content is something added by us, as interpreters of content-less visual sensations. As Huemer puts it, "*the question is whether the senses are telling us that the stick is bent or whether they are simply giving us certain qualia we interpret (or are inclined to interpret) as being caused by a bent stick*" (Huemer, 2001, 71). Swinburne (1979) takes the latter option; call it the Judgement Theory. If the Judgement Theory is right then the prior theory objection amounts to nothing. The charge that religious experiences are ordinary experiences with 'unjustified interpretations' added to them will amount to little more than confusion since such unjustified interpretation is, on the Judgement Theory, ubiquitous. It seems to me that the Judgement Theory might lead one to find the Principle of Credulity very plausible. If all of our experiences are penetrated by our prior beliefs, there would seem to be little option than to take our beliefs or inclinations toward them as our starting evidence, since there is nothing else from which we could start. Not only then does the Judgement Theory constitute a strong motivation for the Principle of Credulity, but it defends Swinburne's argument from the Prior Theory Objection – a fact most often missed by his critics.

Despite the success of Swinburne's defence, my view is that the Judgement Theory is incorrect. Indeed my view is that experiences do, intrinsically, represent things to be certain ways. Michael Huemer offers the strongest arguments against the Judgement Theory. First, there is a clear independence of sensory appearances from beliefs in many cases. Take the stick which appears bent in water again. When it appears to me that the stick is bent, I do not judge, nor am I even tempted to judge, believe or otherwise interpret, that the stick is bent. I know that the stick straight, yet none of these facts about my judgements make any difference to how the stick appears to me. It still appears to be bent, despite my opposing judgements. No matter how much I know about the illusion created by the water and light interacting with the stick, I cannot *see* the stick as straight (Huemer, 2001, 73).

The second mark against the Judgement Theory is the real problem. If we suppose that I do judge, or at least am inclined to judge, that the stick is bent in water, *why* is it that I judge that? Why am I not instead inclined to judge that there is an elephant on a trampoline? If we do not suppose that experiences have representational content, it is inexplicable why we form particular beliefs in response to particular experiences. Why is it that, when I have an

experience of the stick-bent-in-water kind, I am not inclined to judge that there is an elephant on a trampoline rather than a stick bent in water? Why is it that, when I have an experience of a tree-in-a-field kind, I am inclined to judge that there is a tree in a field and not inclined to judge that there is a knight on horseback? The intuitive answer to these questions is '*because it looks that way*' but if the Judgement Theory is correct this answer is unavailable. If the Judgement Theory is correct, the entire issue is a mystery (Huemer, 2001, 74). The Judgement Theory is, for these reasons, unacceptable, and without the Judgement Theory, Swinburne's response to the Prior Theory Objection will not suffice.

6.6. The Empirical Reply

In-spite of my hitherto defence of Oppy's Prior Theory Objection, I think the objection ultimately ineffective. To make progress, first note something important about the dialectical situation. If how things appear to be is cognitively penetrated by my prior unjustified beliefs, but I am entirely unaware of this, nor can I access it by introspection, this fact will not defeat the evidential force of the appearance. It is only once I become aware of the cognitive penetration of my appearances that they are then defeated and cease to become evidence (See "5.5. Cognitive Penetration: Tainted Sources"). So, if the critic is to defeat the evidential value of the religious appearances in question, he must show, or at the very least make plausible the suggestion that those appearances are a product of prior belief.

Let us ask why the critic would think that there are cases of such cognitive penetration with regard to religious experience? I note that such an explanation of religious experience is only even remotely plausible for certain categories of them. For incredibly powerful religious experiences like the experience of Nirvana found in Newberg's studies, I think it highly implausible that such experiences come entirely from prior beliefs. This explanation is much more plausible for experiences like the sense of presence and the sense of presence in nature wherein it appears to subjects that there is a transcendent reality in the rain, or something similar. This is quite serious because these categories constitute large bodies of our evidence base. Still, why think it is true even in this range of cases? Well, Oppy (2006, 348) and Philipse (2012, 321) seem to think this because, they say, in almost all cases, only religious believers have these sorts of experience.

Is this true? When Oppy and Philipse say it, they provide nothing by way of sociological data which evidence the suggestion, and so the objection is hardly convincing. Still, perhaps they felt as though they did not need to provide such data; perhaps thinking that the claim was obvious. Indeed many people think that it is obvious that only religious believers have religious experiences of this very frequent kind[32]. No one who doesn't already believe in something like the Christian God, supposedly, looks at the night sky or the rain and has the seeming that there is a God present. At face value, it looks as though this is right. There is a significant correlation between religious belief and religious experience, with religious believers having such experiences more often than non-believers (Hay, 1979). Still, as is often the case, what is commonly thought is in fact false.

Note that some of the qualitative examples given at the beginning of the chapter were reports from people who were not religious believers. In addition to this, there are three main lines of evidence which indicate that religious experiences occur quite often to non-believers. First, there are many reports of religious experiences occurring to children who lacked any religious beliefs or concepts at the time. Hardy (1979, 75) found some of his respondents reported experiences of 'a presence' as young children which they only called experiences of 'the divine' as adults. Edward Robinson (1977) finds that a substantial proportion of 5000 examined reports of religious experience were recollections of experiences had as a child. Most of these people had no religious training at the time of the experience, nor any familiarity with the ideas which they later reported having been expressed by the experiences. Many times, those children who did have some religious training (attending Sunday School) consciously chose to distinguish between what was taught to them at Sunday School and the object of their experience, as two very different things (Robinson, 1979; Davis, 1989, 162 - 163; Hay, 2006, 23 - 25).

Second, the survey data we have from the USA and the UK suggests that both agnostics and atheists have religious experiences, though to a lesser extent than believers. I pointed out already that one UK national poll estimates that 23-24% of those who report the experience of a higher power identify as agnostics or atheists. Moreover, in Hay's (1979) study of

32 Numerous friends of mine have made this suggestion in conversation in fact.

university students, 23% of respondents do not describe their experiences as 'religious' and 10% admit to not doing so because they are not religious believers. In addition, 38% of the same sample both reported an awareness of a presence and opted for 'none of these' when asked to which religious denomination they belonged. Religious experiences were far more common in those who 'seldom attended church (42% compared with 23%); and importantly 25% of the sample reported being aware of a transcendent reality and being agnostic or atheist (Hay, 1979). Hay reports as a result of these findings that '*of the population of people describing this experience, an absolute majority claim no religious adherence*' (Hay, 1979).

These findings are further corroborated by Hay's (1978) Nationwide survey. 62/412 of those identifying as having 'no religious belief' answered affirmatively to the Hardy question reporting having had at least one 'awareness of a presence'. Even more surprisingly, 23% of those identifying as 'agnostic', 23% of those identifying as 'don't know' and 24% of those identifying as atheist also report having had at least one awareness of a presence. In this survey, these groups reported the least religious experiences, in contrast to the survey on university students. Nevertheless, the numbers reported are quite significant.

Lastly, David Hay's body of work indicates that with respect to the UK at least, identification as a member of a religion has declined significantly since 1987 whilst reports of religious experience have markedly increased. Table 1 shows that the cumulative total of what Hay calls religious experiences has increased from 48% in 1987 to 76% by 2000 whilst the awareness of the presence of God rose from 27% to 38%, and the awareness of a sacred presence from 16% to 29%. These dramatic increases occurred in tandem with a decline of identification with religion. Christianity has exhibited a marked reduction in denominational membership. In 1937, 78% of the UK were members of a Christian denomination; by 2000, this had fallen to 42%. Similar changes are exhibited in church attendance and self-identification with 'religious belief' (Hay, 1978; 1979). As Hay writes:

> …the British data…show a relative independence of the population reporting religious experience from the population actively belonging to a religious institution (Hay & Socha, 2005, 591)

Contra the received wisdom, religious experiences do not only occur to religious believers, but to many non-believers as well[33]. In light of this, not only is there no reason here to think that experiences like the sense of presence in nature are entirely social constructs, but there is actually a decent amount of evidence *against* it. This cannot therefore serve as a reason for thinking that all religious experiences like the sense of a presence in nature are cognitively penetrated.

A staunch critic could claim that *all* experiences which are had by believers are wholly a product of prior theory, but this claim would be incredibly unmotivated, not to mention ad hoc. Given that non-believers very often have experiences of the same phenomenological character and that these experiences cannot be explained as constructions out of prior belief, nor as interpretations of ordinary experience in light of beliefs, the critic will have to claim that those had by believers are cognitively penetrated whilst those had by non-believers are not, but without any reason for making this distinction.

One might attempt, as a further effort at a Prior Theory Objection, to argue that cognitive penetration explains *all of the difference* in percentage of experience between believers and non-believers. That is, one might claim that if it were not for cognitive penetration, religious believers would have roughly the same amount of religious experiences as unbelievers. First, notice that this would still entail that there is a body of evidence remaining in the form of religious experiences and so would fail to overthrow the argument from religious experience; although it would be a severe blow. In response to this line of argument, I say that it strikes me as speculative. Cognitive penetration was first offered as a possible explanation of all senses of a presence on the grounds that only religious believers had such experiences. That argument was at least somewhat plausible. The claim upon which it is based has been demonstrated false, and so now cognitive penetration is offered as a possible explanation of why religious believers have more religious experiences than none believers. There may however be myriad other reasons why religious believers have such experiences more often,

33 It is true that the experiences of non-believers are not described in terms of religious concepts. It is quite rare, for example, for a non-believer to have an experience which he/she describes as being of the holy trinity or Jesus Christ (though there are a few instances of this as well!). Nonetheless, the experiences of these non-believers are reported in answer to the Hardy question and so in that sense are religious experiences. Such descriptions also clearly fit my definition of a religious experience; an experience in which it seems to the subject that a transcendent reality is present.

and there is no reason whatever to think that the sole contributor to the difference between believers and unbelievers is cognitive penetration. With that in mind, it is an egregious speculation to propose cognitive penetration as the *only* factor at play.

One final incarnation of the Prior Theory Objection involves claiming that religious experiences which occur to religious believers are at least partially the result of their prior beliefs. For example, some people may have experiences in which it seems to them that the holy trinity is present to them with the reason that they experience the trinity in particular being that they believe that the trinity is the real transcendent reality. This suggestion is supported by the fact that experiences of the holy trinity in particular are far rarer amongst atheists and agnostics than amongst Christians. The Prior Theory Objection has some weight in this context, but it is by no means a definitive objection even here. It does not logically follow from the fact that, 99/100ths of the time only Christians have experiences of the trinity, that the appearance that the trinity is the true God is one caused by illicit cognitive penetration. There are other theories which might explain such things. It might be instead that Christians are in something like a better spiritual position, and so things are revealed to them in religious experience which are not revealed to others; much like a person with perfect vision is in a better position with respect to seeing sensible objects than is one with impaired vision or one who is blind. I say this is a possibility, but it must still be admitted that the hypothesis of illicit cognitive penetration is a simpler, less and hoc and more plausibly suggested one than this alternative; hence my admission that the Prior Theory Objection has some force in this regard. Still, insofar as we mean by 'God' a conscious, powerful, majestic, holy, and, above all, good, being beyond the material universe, there is no reason here to think that religious experiences of God are unique to religious believers, and indeed good arguments against it.

6.7 A Closing Word about Chisholmian Doctrine

The argument just dealt with is the only argument I can detect in the writings of objectors for the claim that religious experiences are cases of illicit cognitive penetration. If the arguments supporting the Prior Theory Objection are largely impotent, why is it that the objection sounds so plausible, as it does to me, when one hears it? In part, the answer to this question is

that most people, proponents of the objection included, are unaware of the strength of the empirical reply given above, erroneously taking it as obvious that only religious believers have religious experiences.

Yet, I suggest that this is only a partial answer. Earlier on I noted that Chisholm drew a principled distinction between interpretation and experience. Swinburne keenly observed that the drawing of this distinction is a necessary assumption for the Prior Theory Objection. He further observes that '*attempts to draw such lines as Chisholm draws between real experience and interpretation, real perception and mere inference, are, of course, as old as the empiricist tradition in philosophy'* (Swinburne, 1979, 307-310). The empiricist tradition, I speculate – though it is far from a wild speculation – has had an enormous influence on contemporary analytic philosophy, and on the Western world in general. It is the continued influence of the old empiricist tradition, I suggest, which provides the remainder of reason for why the Prior Theory Objection is so initially plausible despite its deficiencies.

Suppose that we accept a view like Chisholm's on which we can only have interpretation free appearances of blueness, brownness, square-ness, motion, and those other sensible properties which he takes care to list. If we were to accept Chisholm's ways of drawing the dividing line, then we would be forced to say that religious experiences are all cases of cognitive penetration. Any alleged experience of God would have to involve interpretation of other experiences in a religious manner. We might even end up calling religious experiences 'feelings', as opposed to appearances, in much the same way as Philipse (2012, 321). The Prior Theory Objection presupposes that there is some way or other of drawing the dividing line between experience and interpretation, but it is the age-old empiricist recommendation of exactly *where* to draw the line which completes the objection, and it is this lingering conviction, that '*you just can't have experiences of those things'*, which explains the initial plausibility, at least to my mind, of the Prior Theory Objection.

It seems to me, however, that adherence to Chisholm's – or any similar – way of drawing the distinction between experience and interpretation embodies a certain degree of parochialism. It might well be true that we humans are capable, at least sometimes of having interpretation free appearances of those sensible properties listed by Chisholm. But why should we suppose, *a priori*, that these are the only such properties and that experience of anything else must involve interpretation? Moreover, why should we suppose this when large numbers of

both religious believers and non-believers are having appearances of God – a being none of whose properties are of Chisholm's preferred flavour? Let us be humble and let experience teach us where to draw the line.

6

Testing, Conflict and More

We are reaching the end of our journey. If you have followed me on this long road you will be aware that I have so far argued for two conclusions. First, absent defeaters, a person who has had a religious experience, or several, has good evidence that there is a transcendent reality with many of the properties often ascribed to God. Second, a person who has not themselves had a religious experience can still have evidence that there is a God if testimony about religious experience causes it to seem to them that there is a God. I have also argued that there are no defeaters for these experiences to be found either in the natural sciences or in the Prior Theory Objection. In this final chapter, I deal with a battery of remaining objections.

6.1 Phenomenal Conservatism is too Liberal

Obj 1) Your conclusions hang entirely on the truth of Phenomenal Conservatism as a theory of evidence possession. Given Phenomenal Conservatism, you are right, but so what? Phenomenal Conservatism is clearly an absurdly liberal view.

Reply) Many philosophers find Phenomenal Conservatism overly liberal and so the objector is not alone. However, I did offer numerous motivations for thinking Phenomenal Conservatism true and defend against the most common variation on the charge that Phenomenal Conservatism is too liberal. There are other variations on the charge which I have not had space to cover, because a full defence of Phenomenal Conservatism was too large a project to undertake here. There are, I think, good responses to this charge in the literature (Lycan, 2013; Tucker, 2013; Huemer, 2013).

6.2 The Swamp of Gullibilism

Obj2) If [Phenomenal Conservatism] applies to religious experiences, we may find ourselves 'landed in the swamp of Gullibilism'. In the absence of defeating considerations, we must not only accept the existence of God, but also the existence of numerous Hindu deities, of flying saucers, of Martians who rape American ladies, of witches, of all kinds of demons and devils, of wood elves and goblins, etcetera, since with regard to all these things there are or were many people who claim to have experienced them. (Philipse, 2013, 331)(Also in Martin, 1986)[34]

Reply) We shall never find ourselves in these swamps to begin with, even when we apply Phenomenal Conservatism universally. What Phenomenal Conservatism – specifically, Testimonial Conservatism - will dictate is that if we receive testimony which makes it seem to us that the claim testified to is true then we will have some evidence that it is true. It is perfectly possible, and in fact actually the case, that when we receive testimony about goblins, wood elves and the like, such claims do not seem to us to be true. To me at any rate, such claims typically seem to be fantastic, and so, on Phenomenal Conservatism alone, I do not receive evidence from such testimony (the same point can be made about the sceptic of religious testimony, as has already been admitted). Strictly speaking then, Phenomenal Conservatism will never land us anywhere near the swamps of Gullibilism.

Suppose for a moment however that something like Altruistic Conservatism is true, on which we have evidence that P when we know that someone told us that it seems to them that P, absent defeaters. Even still, there would be no real problem. What would follow is that since many people have claimed to experience goblins, there is some evidence that there are goblins, absent defeaters; since many people have claimed to experience Hindu deities, there is evidence that there are Hindu deities, absent defeaters; and so on. In many such cases however, most of us at least think there are such defeaters and so such evidence as there is will ultimately come to nothing. However, there may be a few instances in which such claims are not defeated. Reports of goblins and wood elves may, in some small number of cases, not be in any way obviously unreliable, nor do we have any good argument that no such things

34 Neither Martin nor Philipse attack Phenomenal Conservatism. They attack the Principle of Credulity. However, since Phenomenal Conservatism is in the same spirit, their objection hits in just the same way.

exist anywhere in the universe. In such cases, we would have to admit that there was some evidence of goblins and wood elves, but this is a far cry from our rationally having to actually believe that there are goblins or wood elves. Perhaps the evidence is quite slender such that it might still be rational to suspend judgement on the matter. "But what if there is lots of testimony of experiences of wood elves?"- says the objector. "Surely then, Altruistic Conservatism will imply that it is rational to believe in wood elves, and that it is irrational not to believe it". To this I say, right, but this is surely not a far-fetched result. It cannot be an a priori truth that there are no wood elves or goblins, and so I do not see that either Phenomenal Conservatism, Testimonial Conservatism nor Altruistic Conservatism would land us in the swamps of Gullibilism. We shall be clean and dry.

6.3. The No Possible Defeaters Objection

Philosopher Michael Martin complains of the lack of testability concerning religious appearances. He writes:

> There are no tests agreed upon to establish genuine experiences of God and distinguish it decisively from the non-genuine (Martin, 1986, 67).

The same thought is echoed by William Rowe:

> There is an important difference between (1) knowing how to proceed to find positive reasons, if there should be any, for rejecting an experience as probably delusive, and (2) not knowing how to proceed to find such positive reasons if there should be any. When we are in situation (1), as we clearly are in the case of those who habitually drink alcohol to excess and report experiences which they take to be of rats and snakes, the application of the principle of credulity is clearly in order. But when we are in situation (2) as we seem to be in the case of religious experience, I am doubtful that the application of the principle of credulity is warranted. Since we don't know what circumstances make for delusory religious experiences…we can't really go about the process of determining whether there are or are not positive reasons for thinking religious experiences to be probably delusive (Rowe, 1982, 90-91).

The complaint here is that appearances can only provide prima facie evidence if there is some way to discover whether or not said appearances are probably delusive. Reasons for thinking

that an experience is delusive are what are referred to in PC# as *defeaters*. Martin and Rowe make it a necessary condition of an appearance's providing prima facie evidence that there be ways of discovering defeaters should there be any. Martin and Rowe offer the following restriction on Phenomenal Conservatism:

(PC#$_{M\&R}$) If it seems to S that P and there are tests which enable S to tell whether there are any defeaters, then S has at least some evidence that P, absent defeaters.

They then claim that religious seemings fail in the test department. There is no way to discover defeaters for religious appearances, they say. The easy reply to this argument however is that there *are* such tests and ways of discovering defeaters. Most every religious tradition has been concerned to establish criteria for distinguishing false and veridical religious experiences. Here, for example, St Teresa offers her own tests for such things:

> I believe that it is possible to tell whether this state comes from the spirit of God or whether, starting from devotion given us by God, we have attained it by our own endeavours. For if, as I have said before, we try of our own accord to pass on to this quiet of the will, it leads to nothing. Everything is quickly over, and the result is aridity. If it comes from the devil, I think an experienced soul will realize it. For it leaves disquiet behind it, and very little humility, and does not do much to prepare the soul for the effects which are produced when it comes from God. It brings neither light to the understanding nor strength to the will… (St Teresa, 1957 cited in Alston, 1991, 201-202)
>
> …I think it possible that a person who has laid some request before God with most loving concern may imagine that he hears a voice telling him whether his prayer will be granted or not. This may well be, though once he has heard some genuine message, he will see clearly what this voice is, for there is a great difference between the two experiences. If his answer has been invented by the understanding, however subtly it may be contrived, he perceives the intellect ordering the words and speaking them. It is just as if a person were composing a speech ...and the understanding will then realize that it is not listening but working, and that the words it is inventing are imprecise and fanciful; they have not the clarity of the real locution In such cases it is in our power to deflect our attention, just as we can stop speaking and be silent But in

the true locution, this cannot be done Another sign, which is the surest of all, is that these false locutions leave no results, whereas when the Lord speaks, words lead to deeds, and although the words may be of reproof and not of devotion, they prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness… (St Teresa, 1957 cited in Alston, 1991, 201-202)

…By now I have had so much experience of the devil's work that he knows I can recognize him and so torments me less in these ways than he used to His part in an experience can be detected by the restlessness and discomfort with which it begins, by the turmoil that he creates in the soul so long as it lasts, also by the darkness and affliction into which he plunges it, and by its subsequent dryness and indisposition for prayer or anything else that is good In true humility, on the other hand, although the soul knows its wretchedness, and although we are distressed to see what we are, there is no attendant turmoil or spiritual unrest True humility does not bring darkness or aridity, but on the contrary gives the soul peace, sweetness, and light… (St Teresa, 1957 cited in Alston, 1991, 201-202)

…I merely believed the revelation to be true in the sense that it was not contrary to what is written in the Holy Scriptures, or to the laws of the Church, which we are obliged to keep…(St Teresa, 1957, 201-202 cited in Alston, 1991)

…If it proceeded from our own mind, not only would it not have the great effects that is has, but it would have none at all instead of being restored and fortified, the soul will become wearier, it will become exhausted and nauseated But it is impossible to exaggerate the niches that accompany a true vision, it brings health and comfort even to the body I advanced this argument, amongst others, when they told me—as they often did—that my visions were of the devil and were all imaginary I once said to some of these people whom I used to consult "If you were to tell me that someone I knew well and to whom I had just been talking is not really himself, and that I was imagining things and you knew what the truth really was, I would believe your statement rather than my own eyes But if this person had left me some jewels as a pledge of his great love, and if I were still holding them, and if I had possessed no jewels before and now found myself rich where I had been poor, I could not possibly believe that this was delusion, even if I wanted to " I said too that I could show them

> these jewels, for everyone who knew me saw clearly that my soul had changed I could not believe, therefore, that if the devil were doing this in order to deceive me and drag me down to hell, he would adopt means so contrary to his purpose as to take away my vices and give me virtues and strength instead For I clearly saw that these visions had made me a different person… (St Teresa, 1957 cited in Alston, 1991, 201-202).

From these passages and ones like it many of those interested in religious experience have distilled criteria for genuine experiences of God. To choose just one list of criteria, here are those of de Guibert (1953 in Alston 1991, 203):

Criteria for veridical experiences:

(a) Not concerned with useless affairs.

(b) Discretion

(c) Interior peace

(d) Trust in God

(e) Patience in pains

(f) Simplicity, sincerity

(g) Charity that is meek, kindly, self-forgetful

Criteria for false experiences:

(a) Futile, useless, vain preoccupations

(b) Exaggerations, excesses

(c) Perturbation, disquiet

(d) Presumption or despair

(e) Impatience with trials

(f) Duplicity, dissimulation

(g) False, bitter pharisaical zeal

The criteria above all pertain to the effects that the experiences have on the subject. In a nutshell, the idea is that 'by their fruits ye shall know them' and that veridical experiences yield sweet fruits and false ones sour fruits.

Are these tests satisfactory? To answer this question, it is important that one understands the way in which these tests are meant to function. Bruce Russell does not think much of these tests. He writes:

> It's not clear that the best explanation of the transformation in people after they've seemed to have had an experience of [God] is that the transformation was caused by God…. Wouldn't the best explanation of those experiences be that they were somehow produced by me alone, say, by the neurons in my brain firing in certain ways, and wouldn't the best explanation of the change in my life be that my belief [that there is a loving God] somehow caused those changes? (Russell, 2009, 1).

Here, Russell is thinking of applying the tests outlined above as part of an inference to the best explanation. One first starts out making observations about the occurrence of religious experience and then wonders whether they have any evidential value. Then, one argues that the best explanation of the occurrence of religious experiences which have yield a positive transformation in the individual is that there is God which has been experienced in those cases. Now, it might be that St Teresa had something like this in mind in the above quotations from her work. She does, after all, say that finding such a transformation in one's life as a consequence of a religious experience makes it, she seems to suggest, ridiculous to believe that the experience is a delusion. I agree with Russell that this way of thinking about the test is without merit. It cannot be used to make inferences to the best explanation.

There is, however, a better way of thinking about the test. Religious experiences are, by Phenomenal Conservatism, evidence absent defeaters. With that in mind, St Teresa's tests are best thought of as auxiliary tests which play a corroboratory and defeating role. If some subject, S, really had come into contact with a very (morally) good, very valuable, powerful transcendent being which is well disposed towards us, we might reasonably expect that this have effects on S's life. We might reasonably expect that these effects be *positive* effects. If S undergoes a religious experience, then S thereby has some evidence absent defeaters and if,

thereafter, S finds the experience to have borne moral and spiritual fruits such as those outlined above, S finds himself with, at least to some small degree, further reason to suppose that he really did come into contact with God. More importantly, one would not expect interaction with such a being as God to result in *deleterious* effects and so, if as a result of such experiences, S suffers moral and psychological set-backs, we will have some reason to think that S did not really come into contact with God. When St Teresa's tests are deployed in this fashion – though they are still far from perfect by themselves – they are worth deploying as one epistemic tool among others.

There are still further ways of discovering defeaters. If a person who has a religious experience can be diagnosed with psychological conditions known to produce hallucinations, or it can be shown that he was in a situation that makes him particularly susceptible to hallucinations at the time of the experience, his experience may well be regarded as probably delusory. It might alternatively be discovered that probably God does not exist and so probably is not experienced, or that a given religious appearance contradicts a far larger, more coherent set of appearances. There are thus numerous ways in which we might discover defeaters for particular religious appearances and so even if Rowe and Martin were right in restricting Phenomenal Conservatism in the way that they do, religious appearances would still be prima facie evidence absent defeaters.

6.7 The Conflicting Claims Objection

I have, so far, ignored one of the biggest elephants in the room: the fact that religious experiences quite often appear to be incompatible with one another. For each religion of the world, there appears to be a different body of religious experiences corresponding to the teachings of that religion. Christians have experiences of the Christian God; Muslims experience Allah; Buddhists and Hindus have experiences of Nirvana or Oneness; the list goes on. In fact, in chapter 1 I explicitly listed all of these types of religious experience and gave evidence of the occurrence of all of them. At a glance, it would appear that all of these experiences contradict one another. An experience of the Christian God is not an experience of Allah and so the two experiences seem to favour opposing conclusions. Even more obviously, the experience of a Christian God is not an experience of the Buddhists' Nirvana and indeed appears to be straightforwardly incompatible with it. If any one of these groups of religious experience is veridical, all of the others are delusory – since if P is true, no

proposition which entails ¬P can be true. Is this not epistemically problematic? Michael Martin advances the objection most forcefully. He writes:

> Religious experience…tells us no uniform or coherent story, and there is no plausible theory to account for discrepancies among them. Again the situation could be different. Imagine a possible world where part of reality can only be known through religious experiences. There religious experiences would tend to tell a coherent story. Not only would the descriptions of the experience be coherent, but the descriptions of the experiences of different people would tend to be consistent with one another. Indeed, a religious experience in one culture would generally corroborate a religious experience in another culture. When there was a lack of corroboration, there would be a plausible explanation for the discrepancy….
>
> In the Western Tradition, God is a person distinct from the world and from His creatures. Not surprisingly, many religious experiences within the Western tradition, especially nonmystical ones such as the experience of God speaking to someone and giving advice and counsel, convey this idea of God. On the other hand, mystical religious experience within the Eastern tradition tends to convey a pantheistic and impersonal God. The experience of God in this tradition typically is not that of a caring, loving person but of an impersonal absolute and ultimate reality. To be sure, this difference is not uniform: There are theistic trends in Hinduism and pantheistic trends in Christianity. But the differences between East and West are sufficiently widespread… and they certainly seem incompatible. A God that transcends the world seemingly cannot be identical with the world; a God that is a person can apparently not be impersonal (Martin, 1990, 178).

Anthony Flew makes a similar complaint by noting that *'religious experiences are enormously varied, ostensibly authenticating innumerable beliefs many of which are in contradiction with one another'* (Flew, 1976, 126-127). Most recently, Louis Pojman has complained of the same problem:

> The problem for those who would strongly justify the practice of religious experience—that is, show that we are rationally obligated to believe the content of the experience—is to differentiate the valid interpretations from the invalid. Which of

> these experiences are valid? That is, do any of these guarantee the truth of the propositions contained in the experience? For the believer or experient, each is valid for him or her, but why should the nonexperient accept any of these reports? And why should the experient continue to believe the content of the report himself after it is over and after he notes that there are other possible interpretations of it or that others have had mutually contradictory experiences? It would seem that they cancel each other out (Pojman, forthcoming, 131).

What exactly is the Conflicting Claims Objection? Suppose that it seems to me that there is a God of the theistic kind. How is the fact that it seems very differently to other people meant to undermine the justification I accrue via my own seemings? Pojman's final words suggest a straightforward interpretation. It seems to me that P, but it seems many other people that all manner of other propositions, incompatible with P, are true. The seemings of others, on this interpretation of the objection, give me evidence that P is false. This version of the objection however, is quite easily dealt with. When levied against Swinburne's version of the argument which makes use of the Principle of Testimony, the objection is forceful. On his view, the religious appearances of others are prima facie non-inferential evidence for me. However, on my view, which denies any such principle, the appearances of others are never non-inferential evidence. Hence, the fact that other people have religious appearances incompatible with mine does not, on my view, entail that I have strong non –inferential evidence against the beliefs formed on the basis of my own religious appearances. [35]

A second pass at the objection involves what Kwan (2006, 16) calls the Sceptical Rule (SR):

(SR) When experiences contradict one another, we should (epistemically) reject all of them.

From (SR) and the conflicts among religious experience, it follows that no religious experience has any epistemic value. Michael Martin seems to advance something like (SR). He attributes to Swinburne the view that as long as there are not vast numbers of religious experiences of an omnipotent devil, religious experiences will not exhibit incompatibility such to defeat its epistemic value (Martin, 1990, 177). Martin then replies that:

35 Nor will there be any inferential evidence against my belief here. Since the religious appearances of others differ so drastically, in this scenario, from my own, I will have no reason for thinking their appearances are reliable and so will lack the crucial premise needed for an inference of the relevant kind.

> it is not necessary to have experiences of an all-powerful devil to claim that religious experiences are systematically incompatible. [Swinburne] must do more than argue that the beings described in the religious experience of non-Western cultures have properties similar to those of God in the Western tradition in order to show no incompatibility. He must show that these beings do not have any properties that are incompatible with properties of God (Martin, 1990, 177).

Martin is right that in order to show that there is no incompatibility there must be no properties in contradiction with one another between any given religious experiences. But, he is wrong in thinking that *total* compatibility is necessary to defeat the Conflicting Claims Objection. (SR) is quite implausible. Consider a case in which a detective, Smith, wants to know who murdered Jones. He calls upon ten witnesses who all allege that a different person did it. All ten witnesses, though they identify different people, all identify tall, brown haired males. What is the rational procedure here? Should Smith reject the testimony of his witnesses and suppose himself to have absolutely nothing to go on? I suggest not. What Smith can discern from his witnesses is that the murderer was a tall, brown haired male, and whilst it is not as much information as Smith would have liked, it is certainly valuable information. (SR), then, is false. When experiences contradict, it is rational to draw from them what they have in common, setting aside the areas of conflict.

A final pass at the objection is to suggest that when there is marked disagreement within a type of experience, that type of experience is probably unreliable. I might believe, on the basis of how things seem to me, that there is a theistic God and then I might realize that other people have had many different conflicting religious experiences. Whilst their experiences do not give me non-inferential evidence against my belief, there are two ways in which the diversity can still affect its epistemic status. First, if there is a large amount of agreement and only a small amount of disagreement, one will obtain inferential evidence directly against the truth of the belief in question. This is because, if the religious appearances of others do, for the most part, agree with mine, then I will have good reason to think that the appearances of others are reliable and so, when they do disagree with my appearances, I have reason to think that they are right and I am not. Secondly, suppose that that the disagreement in religious experience is vast. Then, the diversity gives me a reason for thinking that religious experience in general, and accordingly my own religious experience, is unreliable and so the epistemic

value of my religious experience will be undercut; my experience will no longer serve as evidence.[36] Of course, the diversity in religious experience is vast in the actual world and so the Conflicting Claims Objection is to function in the latter of these two ways. The same response can be given here as to the objection from (SR): religious experience might be unreliable with respect to things about which there is great disagreement, but there will be no reason to suppose this is so when there *is* agreement. Is there any agreement amongst religious experiences?

5.1 Exaggerations Removed

It is quite the exaggeration to suggest that religious experiences exhibit such total incompatibility as that alleged by critics. It is often pointed out that experiences of God, Allah and other conceptions of the Abrahamic God are not always contradictory. When the descriptions of the experiences leave out doctrinal differences like, for example 'I experienced the holy trinity' such experiences are perfectly compatible and indeed supportive, regardless of whether or not the object experienced is called 'God', 'Allah' or something else by the subject (Swinburne, 1979, 318,). Further, both the general sense of a presence and the sense of a presence in nature are perfectly compatible with each other and with experiences of a God, so long as the God described has the same general characteristics, as it usually does. Most often, the sense of a presence in nature and the general sense of a presence are described as having for the most part the same characteristics, whether these are cached out in terms of religious concepts or not. Most often, the presence is described as very good, very powerful, yet peaceful and kindly disposed toward the subject (see chapter 1). Several authors have identified this common core for theistic experiences (Davis, 1989; Gutting, 1982; Kwan, 2011).

Perhaps we can be a little more careful than this. Let's focus on the sense of a presence, whether identified as God or not; the sense of a presence in nature; the awareness of God; and the experience of Oneness, since these are the most prevalent types of religious experience (see chapter 1). Within these categories there are three levels of apparent conflict. At the most detailed level of description, there are conflicts arising about the precise nature of the

36 This illustrates that one cannot avoid the epistemic problems generated by disagreement by endorsing something like my view about the epistemic value of testimony.

transcendent reality experienced. For example, many Christians claim to experience the triune God and such an experience is incompatible with any experience of Allah who is not three in one and one in three. There are quite a few conflicts of this sort. These, it seems, are irreconcilable. Religious experience must be admitted to be markedly unreliable with respect to claims about very specific conceptions of God.

There are many detailed descriptions of religious experience which appear to conflict with others when they in fact do not, however. Many examples given in chapter 1 involve it seeming to a subject that Christ was guiding them, comforting them, or supporting them (some of these experiences use the language of 'possession' but from the context it is clear that they do not mean that Christ literally took control of their bodies). These experiences seem on their face to be incompatible with experiences of Allah, Oneness, or any Sikh or Hindu God(s). They are however not so incompatible. It is true that in Islam, Buddhism and the other world religions, there is no doctrine of the deity of Christ as in Christianity. Some of these religions even explicitly deny that Christ is God or son of God. However, it is the *religions* which are incompatible with the experiences of Christ, and not the religious experiences themselves. There is no incompatibility between an experience of Christ comforting a subject on the one hand, and an experience of Allah on the other. There is no incompatibility unless the subject describes Christ as having certain attributes which subjects who experience Allah do not report Allah having, *and* if experiences of Christ purport to be experiences of God. Both conditions must be fulfilled if there is to be conflict. If only the first is fulfilled then it could simply be that the two subjects experience different transcendent realities. If only the second is fulfilled, then it could be that the subjects are using the names 'Christ' and 'Allah' to refer to the same being. If we compare two religious experiences of the relevant kind, quite often these two conditions fail to obtain, although to be sure they do sometimes obtain.

Additionally, religious experiences across traditions typically exhibit very similar descriptions even at the detailed level. The Christian God, Allah, and Shiva are all described as being very powerful, very loving, mighty, awesome and brilliant (Davis, 1989).[37] The same general characteristics are found in religious experiences in Judaism, Christianity,

37 Shiva is often also described as invincible and terrifying, and we should remember that both the Christian God and Allah are also often given such descriptions.

Islam, theistic strands of Hinduism, Buddhism, African religions, Sikhism, Aboriginal religions, theistic Confucianism and other religions (Talaiferro, 2012, 104). Experiences not identified with any religious tradition are also described using these terms. Even experiences of oneness exhibit commonalities in description with experiences of God insofar as they also, in many cases, describe transcendent reality as awesome, brilliant, peaceful and good (see chapter 1). There are, then, many areas of agreement. As Kwan puts it:

> …although the religious experiences taken as a whole hardly point to a determinate supernatural reality, they still cohere in that they all point to *something beyond* the naturalistic world, that is, the Transcendent realm (Kwan, 2006, 17).

In addition to this very general statement, it looks as though most of the religious experiences I have discussed here contain some further similarities. All of these experiences reveal a transcendent reality of supreme value and goodness; a holy power which is both awesome and loving (Davis, 1989, 191-192).

At a more general level of detail, there are two troubling conflicts. First, there is a conflict which arises between experiences of transcendent reality as either separate to ourselves or as one with not only ourselves, but everything. That is, the sense of the presence of God and the sense of a presence more generally appear to be in direct conflict with the experience of Oneness. Second, the conflict between experiences in which transcendent reality is personal and experiences in which it is not. Any sense of a presence tends to be described in personal terms, whilst most experiences of Oneness (though we have already seen not all) are described in impersonal terms. Transcendent reality cannot be both personal and impersonal.

Are these conflicts serious? Take an experience of the Christian God and an experience of Nirvana as a case study:

> Just occasionally when I was sure no-one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by a running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of Meadow Sweet or a mass of Purple Loosestrife (Rankin, 2008, 10).

> Without any sense of perception, I was made aware of a Reality beyond anything that my own mind could have conceived. And that Reality was a total love of all things in heaven and earth. 'It' enclosed and accepted everything and every creature: there was no distinction of its love between the star, the saint and the torturer (Tschudin, 1990, 61).

There are clear conflicts in these experiences. One is of a very personal God separate to the self and the other is of an impersonal Reality which encloses everything. It would appear that it is logically impossible for both reports to be veridical given that transcendent reality cannot both be personal and separate on the one hand, and impersonal and all-encompassing on the other. Either all-is-one and there is no division between, as the mystics say, 'this and that', or there is a personal and loving God separate to ourselves. Both cannot be true.

Are experiences of a personal God incompatible with experiences of an impersonal transcendent reality such that if the former are veridical then the latter are necessarily delusory and vice versa? Not directly. It is not possible that transcendent reality is personal and impersonal in the same respect, but it certainly is possible –it involves no contradiction- that transcendent reality be personal in one aspect yet impersonal in other aspects, and that this should be revealed in religious experience. As Charles Tallaiferro puts it:

> The difference between God being "a caring loving person" and an "impersonal absolute and ultimate reality" may at first also seem a stark, in-eliminable difference. But even here the contrast need not be strict. Could God be at once personal and yet also appear to have an impersonal aspect? God might be adequately described as a person insofar as God has intentions, knowledge and acts, and yet God may be described as impersonal in that God necessarily exists, or that as an essentially good being God can function as a moral reference point (Tallaiferro, 2012, 104).

There is, then, no incompatibility between experiences of a personal and experiences of an impersonal God. Yet, it must be admitted that Tallaiferro's theory requires an *ad hoc* or revisionist move, supposing as it does that God has two aspects in order to resolve the apparent contradiction. Consequently, the evidence provided by such experiences for this view must, in the end, be quite slim; certainly in comparison to the amount of evidence available in religious experience for the other properties of God so far discussed.

The last conflict is between experiences of a God separate to the self and experiences of Oneness. It seems that these experiences are indeed irreconcilable. It is logically impossible that transcendent reality be both separate to everything and one with everything. We could not say here, that transcendent reality is separate in some aspects but one with everything in other aspects, because in saying that we would be denying that transcendent reality is one with everything by distinguishing *two* aspects. Such disagreements are even more prominent in Buddhist experiences in which it is revealed that the universe is *nothing*. We cannot therefore draw any conclusions with respect to these disagreements using the data on religious experience alone.[38] Nevertheless, I have shown here that the Conflicting Claims Objection cannot provide a decisive refutation of the argument from religious experience because there are many areas of agreement amongst religious experience.

I conclude that for anyone with the relevant seemings in response to the testimony in chapter 1, religious experience provides substantive evidence that there is a transcendent reality of supreme value and goodness; a holy power which is both awesome and loving and that it provides some, although, no doubt severely less evidence, that this reality has both personal and impersonal aspects.[39]

5.2. A Response from Herman Philipse

Herman Philipse (2013) argues in response to this common core claim that it does very little by way of aiding the proponent of the argument from religious experience. He writes:

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38 Suppose that I believe that transcendent reality is separate to the self on the basis of my religious appearances. I then come to notice that others have religious appearances of a transcendent reality which is one with the self – and everything else. I also note that the religious appearances of others are like mine in many of the respects noted above. What sort of epistemic trouble does this cause? Recall the two ways of thinking about the Conflicting Claims Objection. If the disagreement is small, I obtain inferential evidence directly against my belief but if it is vast, I obtain inferential undercutting evidence against the reliability of my religious appearance. Which of these sorts of defeat takes hold here? Perhaps it is both to some degree.

39 Unreliability arguments look to be quite potent as sceptical objections in general. One might try to make such arguments against the use of intuition, for example, or against the very practice of philosophy itself. In fact, such arguments might even pose a threat to the possibility of justified belief *tout court*. I suspect that plenty of philosophical insight might be gained from a more careful look at such arguments. For all that, this is not the time for such matters.

> However, even if this solution of an evasion into the undefined were acceptable, it would not help theists. For their argument from religious experiences purports to make it 'very, very likely', in the absence of defeating considerations, that God exists, and not merely that there is 'some supernatural being'. It is the former…claim that they want to establish, not the latter less committed contention (Philipse, 2013, 333).

There appear to be two objections within this passage. The first objection is that the retreat to a common core evidenced by religious experience ends up being an 'evasion into the undefined'. Presumably, this means that the common core response involves using religious experiences to evidence an incredibly vague claim of hardly –perhaps even no- significance. Philipse finds this move unacceptable in itself, but he does not offer any reason why independent of the second objection later in the same passage. Regardless, it does not matter whether or not such a move is unacceptable, since the common core argument need not make that move. The common core argument offers a fairly substantive and significant claim about the existence of a very good, very powerful transcendent reality, not something 'undefined'. Perhaps Philipse's (2013) criticism might be forcefully levied against Swinburne's (1979) or Kwan's (2006) common core response since they restrict their arguments to making claims about 'some supernatural reality' in general without making any further claims; but even against these authors, it is hard to see what Philipse has against making arguments for less descriptive claims.

Philipse's second argument against the common core response is that, as he puts it 'it will not help theists' since they must establish that the being is *God* in particular, rather than any transcendent reality more loosely described. This is surely quite an odd way to look at it. The conclusion of the argument from religious experience is that there is substantive evidence that there is a transcendent reality of supreme value and goodness; a holy power which is both awesome and loving and that there is some, although significantly less, evidence, that this reality has both personal and impersonal aspects. Now perhaps this does not get us all the way to the God of Christianity, for example, but it does provide evidence that there is a being with many of the properties often ascribed to God by most world religions. This, it seems to me, is a significant conclusion in its own right.

6.8. Concluding Remarks

The argument from religious experience is an argument to the conclusion that there is some good evidence for the proposition that there is a great, valuable, powerful, thoroughly good transcendent reality beyond the material universe. It also aims to provide some support for the proposition that the reality involved has both personal and impersonal aspects, although substantially less support for this thought than for the other conclusions. These propositions are of great religious significance, since a being with just these attributes has been the centre of the religious life for most all of human history across every culture. The being described by those propositions, I shall call 'God'.

We have seen both that religious experiences are evidence for the existence of God, absent defeaters, and that there are no potent defeaters. More carefully, I should say, unless it can be shown that very probably there is no such being as God, there is no reason whatever to think that religious experiences are significantly unreliable. What will be most surprising to many is that religious experience cannot be reduced without vastly significant remainder, to dysfunctional brain processes and unjustified interpretation of non-religious experience.

With the potential defeaters to religious experience put aside, I still believe many will remain sceptical of religious experience, even to the point where they doubt that such experiences are even evidence for those who have them. Bruce Russell (2009), for example, treats religious experiences as phenomena from which we must infer the best explanation, coming to the sceptical conclusion that the simplest, and thus most acceptable explanation is that religious experiences are entirely subjective phenomena. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Russell is right about this. Ought we conclude that religious experiences are not evidence for the existence of God? This is certainly Russell's (2009) conclusion. But if Phenomenal Conservatism is true, then the potential for inferring the existence of God by best explanation from the phenomenon of religious experience is entirely irrelevant. If Phenomenal Conservatism is true – and I have argued that it is at least plausible – then religious experiences are *non-inferential* evidence for the existence of God, meaning that they are evidence regardless of which explanations are best *inferred* from them by our usual criteria for best explanation. Yet, for a philosopher who denies Phenomenal Conservatism, insisting on a best explanation approach to religious experience – perhaps even to experience in general – scepticism about religious experience will likely rear its head.

This serves to illustrate an important truth about debates over religious belief in general. Disagreement over the value of religious experience is not, in the end, a matter which can be settled through the citation of empirical theory and data. The dispute, at its very heart, has to do with differing philosophical attitudes and opposing epistemological theories. Are religious experiences even prima facie evidence? That is the heart of the dispute, and I have argued for an enthusiastic 'yes'.

The object of this work has not been to demonstrate beyond all doubt that there is a God or even to convince anyone of that. The object has been to examine the philosophical work concerning religious experience and to motivate and defend a plausible line of the argument from religious experience. Still, sometimes arguments do convince.

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