

# Title Page

Divine Disclosures: Religious Experiences as Evidence in Theology

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# Summary or Abstract

**Title:** *Divine Disclosures: Religious Experiences as Evidence in Theology*. **Author:** Hugh Burling

The first half of this thesis argues that scepticism about the evidential force of religious experiences is driven by concerns about the traditional practices used to discern between 'illusory' and 'genuine' experiences. As these practices require commitment to a particular tradition, we have no way of deciding which practice to trust. Furthermore, the tests the practices employ do not bear on whether the experiences are veridical; and they are too coarse-grained for theologians to use them to regulate religious beliefs or seek theological truth. The thesis argues that we should seek new ways of evaluating religious experiences, and beliefs based on them, which address the concerns.

The fourth chapter develops a procedure in which parties to religious disagreements understand God to be a perfect being, and use shared moral beliefs from outside their religious tradition to assign probabilities to putative divine actions, including religious experiences. The likelihood the divine action occurred given those moral beliefs is the likelihood the religious experience was veridical, addressing the second concern. The procedure attends closely to different sources of doubt, so avoiding the coarse granularity traditional practices are charged with. The thesis thereby argues against a sceptical response to difficulties faced by religious experiential evidence by offering a non-sceptical alternative which is articulated in enough detail to show how these difficulties can be surmounted.

The fifth chapter completes the description of the procedure and shows how it can be used to formalize disputes in philosophical theology concerning the evidential import of divine hiddenness and religious diversity. The sixth chapter defends the procedure's presumption that God is a perfect being by evaluating an Anselmian account of the reference of "God".

# Preface

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text

It does not exceed the word limit prescribed by the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Divinity – that is, 80,000 words.

# Divine Disclosures:

Religious Experiences as Evidence in Theology

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# 0. Introduction

## 0.1 Unfinished Business in the Epistemology of Religious Experience

Assessment of the role religious experiences should play in supporting beliefs about God has been a central feature of contemporary philosophy of religion. Much of this assessment has been concerned with the question of whether religious-experience-based beliefs are ‘rational’, ‘justified’ or ‘warranted’, and whether these beliefs are rational in a range of circumstances broad enough to include many ordinary believers. With an appropriate epistemology in hand, the outcome of these assessments looks positive. Granting that religious experiences might provide better or worse support for theological beliefs for various subjects in different circumstances, however, an important question remains. How much evidence does a given religious experience provide for the belief based on it – and what determines that evidential force? This thesis offers an answer to this question which is fine-grained enough to make religious experiences useful theological data, and to defend the answer from theological and philosophical objections which would leave us in the undesirable position we are currently in.

In looking to meet these two objectives, the subject has already been changed from that of the ‘epistemology of religious experience’ recently conducted. The projects of William Alston and other ‘Reformed epistemologists’ were intended to provide a defence of the careful claim that religious experiences could in principle confirm positive epistemic status on the theological beliefs of many people;<sup>1</sup> others<sup>2</sup> were concerned to show in addition that this epistemic relevance should bear positively, if imprecisely,<sup>3</sup> on wider judgments about God’s existence and nature. But even if we are persuaded that religious experiences can have some evidential force, we might be left wanting more.

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<sup>1</sup> See Alston 1991 (henceforth *PG*), 2-4. See Kwaan 2006, 642-3 for a catalogue of precursors with this goal.

<sup>2</sup> Other than Swinburne’s influential *Existence of God* (2004), McLeod (1993) and Gellman (1997) have written extended treatments explicitly targeting this specific goal.

<sup>3</sup> See Swinburne 2004, 341-2.

We may be not only interested in evaluating how rational an individual, or group of, believers is, but also want to discern how likely the truth of some particular theological belief is, insofar as it is based on some particular religious experience. Asking this second question might take us out of the realm of the epistemology of religious belief and into theology: our interest might be driven more by a desire to know about God, than to know about the epistemic status of some theological beliefs.

In what follows I will present a way to regulate the evidential interaction between prior beliefs, theological disagreements, and beliefs about God based on religious experiences.

There is another way in which the following differs from many recent discussions of religious experience, particularly those driven by the phenomenological study of religious behaviour: I am exclusively interested in beliefs about God, except where otherwise noted. By the end of this introduction 'religious experience' will have been defined in a way which may strike many as unnaturally narrow, a way which makes my project of little interest to those philosophers who are interested in 'religion' construed in some more generic way; and hence interested in 'religious experiences' as a sort of experience circumscribed by stimulus conditions or phenomenal content which link them to practices or doctrines regarded as 'religious' in that generic sense. But it should be relevant to anyone concerned about refining our theological methods, or at least about the possibility of doing so; and also to those with a theistic motor driving their interest in religious experience.

Epistemologies of religious experience in the twentieth century typically describe or appeal to tools by which the subjects of religious experiences might discern how far they should trust those experiences. In my first chapter, I will describe and consider objections to Alston's influential epistemology of religious experience and its precursors, which typically describe or appeal to tools by which the subjects of religious experiences might discern how far they should trust those experiences.

My contention will be that the best versions of sceptical complaints reduce to one argument, what I call the 'Circularity Objection'.

The motivation behind this objection need not be a concern about irrationality, or other ways in which the epistemic status of religious-experience-based beliefs might be jeopardized; but, rather, about how we are to find the truth about God given the diversity of religious experiences. I explain how this line of argument complains that traditional mystical practices are too imprecise, do not adequately connect positive evaluations of religious beliefs with likelihood of their truth, and, most importantly, rely upon taking for granted a particular practice's reliability rather than offering counsel on how to make judgments 'from the outside'.

During the course of this chapter I also explain why I exclude from our assessment of a religious experience's evidential force considerations of how far an experience's report accurately represents its phenomenal contents, how far those contents as processed by the subject accurately represent any pre-conceptual content 'given' in the experience, and how neatly the report or the phenomenal content map onto the propositional content of the belief supported by the experience.

The Circularity Objection does appeal to concerns about irrationality in the mouths of some critics, however. To make a sound argument from religious diversity to the evidential poverty of religious experience, these critics appeal to a particular approach to peer disagreement: that parity should lead disagreeing epistemic peers to suspend judgment on their controversial beliefs. Once we are looking at the question through the lens of how best to do theology, rather than what the epistemic status of the beliefs are, appeals to such principles about peer disagreement amount to the advocacy of a particular method for resolving experience-based religious disagreements. So, in Chapter 3, I consider versions of the principles appealed to by sceptics, as well as those appealed to by 'defenders' who

would be content to 'stand fast' with controversial religious-experience-based beliefs, rather than engaging in the method I develop.

I examine the motivations behind these principles and conclude that the only motivation to adopt them is a lack of a well-articulated alternative, combined with a particular way of representing experiential evidence which I describe in Chapter 2. There, I present a paradigmatic internalist, evidentialist epistemology of religious experience owed to Richard Swinburne. I show how its way of representing and quantifying experiential evidence has limitations when it comes to considering hard cases. So I argue that if we can do better in the case of any given class of experiences, we should try.

In Chapter 4 I begin to develop an account of what theologians should do with religious experiences, supposing that they start 'from nowhere', that is, without theological priors based on religious experiences or testimony thereto. This fourth chapter is effectively a defence, in terms of perfect being theology, of a traditional 'moral fruits test' for the veridicality, or divine causation behind, a religious experience. It advocates a decision-theoretic apparatus for using our moral beliefs and doubts to establish the probability that God would do some specified action, allowing us to more precisely predict or 'retrodict' whether He would produce a given religious experience, thus allowing us to take a religious experience and determine the probability that it was in fact produced by God, rather than in some non-veridical fashion. It offers a way of representing religious-experiential evidence which does not have the limitations of the model described in Chapter 2.

But this model leaves open two major questions. Firstly, it relies on a conception of religious experiences as instances of divine testimony: if we're certain some religious experience is an honest testimony from God, or "Divine Disclosure", then we should be certain that the belief it supports is true, assuming God's omnipotence and moral perfection. But these aspects of God cannot rule out the possibility that there are circumstances where God would be motivated to care for a creature by

giving them a religious experience which would or could lead to a false belief. So, in the fifth chapter, I discuss how to elaborate my framework to account for these possibilities.

Secondly, it presumes that the object of theology, that is, the object which the theologian (or ordinary believer!) wants to use religious experiences as a source of information about, is to be defined as necessarily omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. But many theologians and ordinary believers might take other claims about God to be equally if not more essential (such as His triunity). In other words, it relies on the contentious claim that perfect being theology is more fundamental than revealed theology. Chapter 6 therefore offers an argument that the term “God” refers to whatever being is worthy of our worship. Then it argues that the being most worthy of our worship is, in most plausible epistemic situations, the perfect being. So when we disagree about God, we disagree about the nature of the same Being – the best One – and more fine grained claims are subordinate to that characterization.

## 0.2 Some Assumptions Concerning Beliefs and Experiences

I will use the rest of this introduction to define some central terms and make explicit some assumptions. We are ultimately seeking an ideal representation of the relationship between religious experiences, as evidence, and religious beliefs, as bearers of theological claims we are interested in the truth of. This means that the success of the project does not depend on the truth of these assumptions, but only whether or not they enable us to build a useful representation.

In describing the project above, I referred to ‘religion’ and ‘theology’ and their cognates many times, and used them to describe classes of experiences and beliefs as well as believers or inquirers. But not everyone uses or reads these terms in the same way. Both terms will receive stipulative definitions below. While these will be counterintuitively broad or narrow in different ways for different readers,

I expect the arguments I make, and framework I develop, to still track the phenomena which the current debate about religious experiences concerns – tightly enough, at any rate, for those arguments and that framework to be interesting.

Since I distinguish between different kinds of belief about God according to their structure of epistemic support, and define ‘religious experiences’ as a type of experience, I will now define different kinds of epistemic support.

### 0.2.1 Doxastic and Nondoxastic Grounds

Whenever anyone holds a belief, they will hold it ‘for a reason’, ‘because of’ something, or ‘in virtue of’ something. The diverse connotations of expressions like these have led to controversy over whether or not all beliefs must be ‘grounded’. Without the presumption that a ground must be another belief,<sup>4</sup> it is very hard to find an example of a groundless belief. Postulating grounds for every belief serves to helpfully isolate the specifically mental components in a complete explanation of why some person holds some belief. Among these, it’s also helpful to differentiate between more and less proximate, and between necessary and sufficient, components among these. For example, I hold my belief that “there is a laptop before me” on the basis of my visual perceptual experience. My having had this visual perceptual experience, however, is not a sufficient condition for my holding the belief: I must also, for instance, know (or have prior beliefs about) what laptops look like in order to identify this object in my perceptual field as a laptop. This knowledge may be entirely implicit, but it is still ‘downstream’ of wherever the line is between mental and non-mental explainers for a belief. This knowledge won’t be sufficient for explaining my belief in the presence of the laptop, however: to complete the story I must have that visual perceptual experience.

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<sup>4</sup> This presumption is the basis for Plantinga’s arguments that properly basic beliefs (see below) are ‘groundless’ – see Plantinga 2000, 104.

Mental components playing the role the visual experience plays in this example I will call the ‘grounds’ of beliefs. Some grounds will, like the visual perceptual experience of a laptop, not be beliefs, and hence they will be called ‘nondoxastic grounds’. Conversely, sometimes these necessary, but not sufficient, mental components will be other beliefs, rather than experiences – ‘nondoxastic grounds’. We can think of them as supporting the belief in question inferentially.

When I use the term ‘support’, as where some ground supports some belief, or some entire structure of concepts, prior beliefs and experience supports some belief(s), I mean it in the non-evaluative sense. That is, an unjustified belief will be supported, but have support of the wrong kind. When I want to use it in an evaluative sense, I’ll use in addition some appropriate term such as “strongly”, “appropriately”, and so on. Sometimes I’ll write of a first belief’s being ‘based’ on a second, rather than that second supporting the first. The nature of the ‘basing relation’ or how to characterise the relevant relationship between a belief and its grounds, is controversial and not a little mysterious<sup>5</sup>, but what I say below should be compatible with all contending accounts.

### 0.2.2 Perceptual and Other Kinds of Experiences

Nondoxastic grounds certainly won’t be limited to ‘perceptual’ experiences. My belief that “two and two make four” may require among its grounds some non-perceptual experience about the belief, of a kind which makes it appropriate support for a belief like “two and two make four”. Likewise, my belief that “I ate sandwiches for lunch” may have among its grounds experiences which are in some way like perceptual experiences (visual imagery as part of my recollection), or they may not – they may only include, when I reflect on the fact that I had sandwiches for lunch, a feeling of “pastness”<sup>6</sup> which impels me to accept that fact.

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<sup>5</sup> See Evans 2013 for a recent, concise and critical overview of accounts of the basing relation.

<sup>6</sup> Alston 2005a, 88; see also Plantinga 1993, 59 for a discussion of the diversity of nondoxastic grounds.

A third kind of nondoxastic ground should be mentioned here – testimony. Testimonial grounds might be reducible to experiences of receiving a testimony, or they might not. I will treat them as *sui generis* for simplicity's sake.

### 0.2.3 Basic and Nonbasic beliefs

With the above types of ground differentiated, I can explain how I will be using the term 'basic belief'. To be completely basic, a belief needs to have only nondoxastic grounds.

This definition allows for partial basicity. Among the grounds for my belief may be an experience as well as an inference. For example, my belief that "there is a burglar in my garden" might be grounded partly in a visual experience of a man outside who looks to me like a burglar: he looks so much like what I unconsciously take a burglar to look like that no inference is required for the apparent object of my visual experience to be a burglar. But perhaps this belief is also immediately supported by an 'adjacent', perhaps even conscious inference: I infer "there is a burglar in my garden" from the prior beliefs that "there is a man in my garden", "it's night time" and "any men hanging around in my garden at night are likely to be burglars". Perhaps only one of these two 'pillars' of support is necessary for the belief to be justified, or for me to be entitled to it, or whatever: the point is that both are there as a matter of mental fact.

This means that a 'nonbasic belief' is just one all of whose grounds are doxastic – it is believed because inferred, consciously or otherwise, from other beliefs the believer holds.

In Chapter 2 I introduce the term 'relevant evidence' to refer to all the beliefs and nondoxastic grounds for some belief in whose rationality or truth we are interested. There, I point out that we are sometimes not only interested in which grounds in fact support the candidate belief, for the candidate

agent, but also in whether other information available to them would be good evidence for them; whether it would provide good support if it did play a supporting role in their holding the belief. So ‘relevant evidence’ is extended to cover those hypothetical grounds as well as the beliefs and experiences which we are aware in fact support the belief.

#### 0.2.4 Theological Beliefs *simpliciter*

Whenever I use the terms ‘theological belief’, ‘belief in God’, or ‘belief about God’, I am referring to propositional beliefs where the propositions either quantify over God or are of a subject-predicate structure where God is the subject. A theological predication can say that God is like some creatures in some way, or that God is unlike some creatures in some way, or that God is carrying out some activity, or that God is carrying out some activity involving some specific creature(s). So “God is alive”, “God is immaterial”, “God creates” and “God cares for sparrows” are all theological predications, as are any differently tensed alternatives. I take it that beliefs which quantify over God – “there is a God”, “there is one God” – presuppose that the believer accepts the truth of at least one theological predication by which she can give a sense and hence reference to the name “God”.<sup>7</sup> One cannot be a theist without believing in some theological predications.

A glaring omission from this definition of theological predications, and thereby theological beliefs, is a definition of their subject, “God”. In Chapter 6 I will argue that theists implicitly understand by “God” something that is omnipotent and morally unsurpassable, at least.

I have described theological beliefs entirely in terms of beliefs about God. All religious traditions, however, take their claims about God to have implications for the nature and purpose of creatures,

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<sup>7</sup> See Alston 1988 and Plantinga 2000, 35 for theories where the name “God” is transmitted from an initial baptism by ostension. On these accounts, the claim that the referent existed would entail theological predications about whichever of God’s activities made possible this ostension. Chapter 6 will defend a descriptivist view.

including ‘supernatural’ entities and states of affairs besides God (angels, sacraments, etc.). ‘Theology’ broadly conceived concerns claims about all of these; likewise, when we are considering the rationality of engaging in an actual religious tradition, and the plausibility of an actual religion, we must also consider all these ‘theological’ claims which are not about God. Sadly, I must leave discussion of these claims almost entirely aside. I make this omission partly for concision and partly because I suspect that the plausibility of all such claims depend heavily on the standing of particular basic theological beliefs and almost never on natural theological beliefs (see below). So under ‘theological beliefs’ I don’t include any beliefs about creatures, natural or supernatural.

#### 0.2.5 Non-theological beliefs

I will use the term ‘non-theological beliefs’ to describe any beliefs about creatures. Non-theological beliefs are differentiated from the three types described below in terms of their content: the proposition they contain must not include God as a subject or a divine action as a predicate.

An important subset of non-theological beliefs, which I’ll refer to as ‘N-beliefs’, are those which are not supported by any basic (or partially basic) theological beliefs or derived theological beliefs (see below, 0.2.8): if it is nonbasic, it must be inferred only from other N-beliefs or natural theological beliefs (see below). If basic, however, it must not be supported by any nondoxastic ground of a type taken to provide appropriate support for basic theological beliefs.

#### 0.2.6 Basic Theological Beliefs (and D-beliefs)

The following threefold distinction between different kinds of theological beliefs is one of ground, not content: the categories differ with respect to how their beliefs are supported within the believer’s noetic structure. This means that beliefs with the same propositional content can fall into different categories for different believers, depending on how they came by that belief and why they continue to hold it. Some examples following the definitions illustrate how this works.

By ‘basic theological beliefs’ I mean beliefs about God which are basic according to the definition of basicity above. This does not exclude prior beliefs from taking other roles in the formation of ‘basic’ theological beliefs and contributing to their epistemic value – for example, some prior beliefs might be necessary conditions for having the concepts required to form the belief.

There will, of course, be theological beliefs which are ‘partially basic’ – which are supported for the believer partly by inference from prior beliefs, and partly by their nondoxastic evidence. The existence of such partially basic beliefs doesn’t cause significant problems, since the epistemic value of a belief partly inferred from other beliefs and partly based on nondoxastic grounds will simply be the sum of, on the one hand, the evidential force of the implicating priors and, on the other, the evidential force of the nondoxastic grounds.

An important subset of basic theological beliefs are what I will call ‘D-beliefs’ – ‘D’ for ‘disclosure’. D-beliefs are theological beliefs which are based partly or entirely on the believer’s religious experience – or are taken to be so for the purposes of evaluation. It is the truth of D-beliefs, and perhaps the rationality of some individuals’ holding them, that this thesis is going to develop a framework for assessing. My terminology here is intended to be reminiscent of Alston’s “M-beliefs”,<sup>8</sup> beliefs about God supported by a putative “manifestation” of God to the believer. Since I don’t advocate treating religious experiences as perception-like, his term would be misleading.

#### 0.2.7 Natural Theological Beliefs (A-beliefs)

‘Natural theological beliefs’ are beliefs about God supported solely by prior N-beliefs, other natural theological beliefs, or combinations of both. A natural theological belief does not have any of the following in its support structure: basic theological beliefs, derived theological beliefs (see below),

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<sup>8</sup> See Alston 1991, 1, 93-4, and 2010, 72-3.

religious experiences, or other experiences of types appropriate for supporting basic theological beliefs. This allows them to be evaluated, in principle, independently of evaluations of basic theological beliefs and their experiential bases – particularly D-beliefs and religious experiences. I will use the shorthand “A-beliefs” for natural theological beliefs.

To use a term of art from Reformed Epistemology, a natural theological belief is one all of whose grounds are provided by the foundational cognitive processes privileged by Locke in what Plantinga calls “classical foundationalism”: sensory perception, rational intuition, memory and introspection.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps there are beliefs which belong in the N-belief or A-belief categories, but have grounds other than these. Such cases will only matter for us, in practice, if the evidential force of those other grounds is controversial among parties to religious disagreements in the way that religious experiences are. Then these counterexamples will create a problem for my framework, which uses N- and A-beliefs as the ‘overlapping consensus’ for resolving such disagreements, by pushing back the question to how to adjudicate the evidential force of these other grounds. But what would these other grounds be? Religious experiences are defined in a very broad way below, so many candidates will be captured under it. Perhaps testimony is not, and I have admitted that as a ground for basic beliefs above. But evaluating competing testimonies in terms of the reliability and trustworthiness of testifiers does not seem so troublesome as evaluating competing religious experiences. One reason for thinking this is that the difficulty of evaluating competing religious experiences has generated a literature of sceptical arguments I will discuss – whereas there is no equivalent for religious testimony.

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<sup>9</sup> Plantinga 2000, 80-4.

### 0.2.8 Derived Theological Beliefs

By 'derived theological beliefs' I mean beliefs about God inferred from other beliefs, where those beliefs include one or more basic (or partially basic) theological beliefs. That supporting belief set may include A-beliefs and non-theological beliefs.

Suppose that Photine hears Jesus telling her that her sins are forgiven, immediately before enjoying a sense of God's forgiveness. She thereby forms the basic sense-perceptual belief that (1) "Jesus is forgiving my sins", and the basic theological belief that (2) "God is forgiving my sins". From 1 and 2 she infers that (3) "God is incarnate in Jesus". Here 3 is a derived theological belief for Photine because it is based on a basic theological belief, and a basic N-belief.

Suppose, in addition to all this, Photine had in the past concluded that (4) "only God can forgive sins", by analysing the nature of sin and forgiveness. Then 4 would be a natural theological belief for her. If it helped support 3 alongside 1 and 2, then 3 would still be a derived theological belief.

### 0.2.9 The Above Division is Exhaustive of All Beliefs

In summary, then: a derived theological belief must be based on a set of other beliefs, which must include at least one basic theological belief and can, but need not, include any non-theological beliefs and any natural theological beliefs. A natural theological belief must be based on a set of other beliefs, which cannot include any basic theological beliefs and cannot include any non-theological beliefs based on nondoxastic grounds which could justify a basic theological belief. A basic theological belief must not be based on inference from any other beliefs.

Whether a theological belief is natural, basic or derived for a given believer will depend on how she has come by, or continues to base, that belief. A belief such as 3 ("God is incarnate in Jesus") might be basic for me if, for instance, I came to believe 3 only as a psychological consequence of regularly

reciting the Nicene Creed in an affective ritual context. In this case 3 is basic for me, based on those affective experiences in Mass or the memories of them; but derived for Photine.

The kinds of belief I have described here – non-theological (basic or inferred) beliefs (including N-beliefs), basic theological beliefs (including D-beliefs), natural theological beliefs (i.e. A-beliefs), and derived theological beliefs – are exhaustive of all possible propositional beliefs. This may sound bold, but it should come out as trivial. Exchange ‘God’ for any other subject of belief and we can carry out a similar division – although there may be no analogue to religious experience, grounds peculiar to basic beliefs about that subject, and hence no analogue to N-beliefs. The purpose of the division is not to reveal something hitherto mysterious about the structure of our beliefs, but rather to isolate beliefs about God which depend for their support, however partially or indirectly, on the nondoxastic grounds I am going to characterise as ‘religious experiences’, from those which do not depend on such support. Then we can use that division to describe a means for evaluating religious experiences which doesn’t accidentally presuppose we already know how to do so by appealing to the truth of beliefs themselves supported by religious experiences.

#### 0.2.10 A Note on Degrees of Belief and Support, and Structures of Support

I assume that we can hold beliefs more or less strongly, and so will often write of someone’s ‘degree of belief’ with respect to some proposition; I’ll use this language interchangeably with writing of someone’s ‘credence’ with respect to some proposition. For those who wish to reserve the term ‘belief’ for an attitude of assent to a proposition which passes above some threshold, they can simply read any usage of ‘degree of belief’, where the degree falls below the threshold they think required for genuine belief, as ‘credence’ instead – or using their preferred set of terms.<sup>10</sup> Since our ultimate purpose is not to evaluate the epistemic status of D-beliefs, but the truth of the claims they are beliefs in, whether or not ideal rationality is best understood as consisting in probabilistic consistency or

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<sup>10</sup> Such as Swinburne’s ‘semi-beliefs’ and ‘inclinations to believe’ (Swinburne 2001, 140).

logical coherence should not affect what I have to say. On the other hand, whether or not the 'true' "metaphysics" of belief is binary or degressed will matter insofar as, if it is binary, there will be a whole range of phenomena not covered by my discussion since the attitudes I consider under the term 'beliefs' may not count as instances of 'genuine' belief. At the risk of significant digression, therefore, I will from now on assume a degressed metaphysics of belief, and rely on others' arguments in favour of this view.

In due course I'll sometimes represent credences, or degrees of belief, using decimal figures where 1 represents absolute certainty and 0 represents absolute certainty that the proposition in question is false. I'll also sometimes use expressions like 'strong', 'weak', and so on. When I am talking about an attitude to a proposition using one of the categories of theological or non-theological belief above I will always use the term 'belief' even if the attitude in question is weak. So, for example, I could have a credence of 0.1 that "God is eternal", and if it is supported partially or entirely by a religious experience, it will be a D-belief.

Beliefs can, of course, receive different degrees of support from experiences and other beliefs, both as a matter of psychological fact and normatively speaking. If my belief that there's a burglar downstairs is partly based on my seeing that it's light in the hallway and partly based on hearing quiet footsteps, and (implausibly, but for simplicity's sake) entirely based on these two other beliefs, then we can think of each of them as offering degrees of support for my burglar-belief which can be represented as fractions summing 1. We can also describe them comparatively (my light-visual-experience supports my burglar-belief more than my footsteps-auditory-experience) and absolutely but verbally (my burglar-belief is heavily based on my light-visual-experience; it's lightly based on my footsteps-auditory-experience). However beliefs are in fact grounded (based, supported), there's also the question of how they ought to be – whether the grounds are good ones, ones which make the beliefs more likely to be true – and whether they could be better supported. Some ground for some

belief not only supports it more or less (than its other grounds, than alternative hypothetical grounds), but better or worse. The easiest way to begin characterising these degrees is probabilistically – some supporting belief provides better support insofar as it confirms, makes more probable, the candidate belief. In Chapter 2, I describe Swinburne’s probabilistic characterisation of support and advocate using elements of it for representing evidential relationships between religious experiences and theological claims.

### 0.3 Assumptions Concerning “Religious Experiences”

A ‘religious experience’ in the sense we are interested in must be a nondoxastic, non-testimonial, non-mnemonic ground on which someone bases a belief about God. It must also be an experience the subject takes to be a communication from God, in the broadest sense – whether His ‘appearing’ to them, or His speaking to them, or His contacting them in some way difficult to analogize to a sensory mode. Perhaps they hear a voice; perhaps a proposition arises in their head and seems important and true in a way that indicates to them God is the source of that arising; perhaps they are overcome with an emotion which impresses cognitive content about God on them, and they take the occurrence of that emotion to be an instance of divine communicative action.

This narrows what follows in various ways. The stipulative sense I give to the term emphatically does not determine which experiences count as ‘religious experiences’ according to whether they were produced within any particular practice or set of practices, and hence ‘religious’ because the practice is considered ‘religious’; nor, according to whether their contents fall within some particular range of phenomena, concepts or claims considered ‘religious’.

#### 0.3.1 Narrowing the Interests of Analyses of Religious Experience

First, we can, if we wish, exclude experiences whose subjects take them to be ‘about’, or produced by, some other supernatural or natural state of affairs – angels, beautiful mountains, kind spiritual

advisors. If they reach beliefs about God from experiences of that kind, then they might be natural theological beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Aspirationally, everything which follows should be applicable to borderline cases where it is unclear whether someone has ‘seen God in nature’ or seen a beautiful natural object and inferred its creatureliness and hence inferred something about God. Historically important are also borderline cases where someone sees a supernatural entity such as an angel or a saint, and take (implicitly or explicitly) the vision to be phenomenally ‘ratified’ by God so that they don’t consider their support for the beliefs based on the vision to be a question simply of being very impressed by the stranger and trusting their theological testimony. The framework I develop can evaluate these by treating the non-divine entity as an instrument of God’s communicating with them.

Secondly, we can exclude discussions of what emotional significance such experiences might have.<sup>12</sup> Since our interest is epistemology and how to refine theological practice, and not in the first instance cultivating certain kinds of character or advancing in a spiritual practice, many implications of the emotional effects of religious experiences won’t concern us. In the last analysis, however, it will turn out that the long-term affective consequences of religious experiences will bear on the likelihood of truth of the beliefs they support because of the evidential significance of an experience’s ‘moral fruits’. But defending this relationship will not involve an application of any general views about affectivity and belief-formation.

Thirdly, we can exclude discussions about the phenomenology of religious experience. In what follows, I argue that we should not be too concerned about the bearing of the complexity and ambiguity of these phenomena on religious experiences’ evidential force. Instead, we should ‘take subjects’ word

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<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, insofar as God has control over other supernatural entities, we can still characterize these experiences as ‘event propositions’ (see section 2.3) and apply the Anselmian Augury (see Section 4.3) to evaluate their evidential weight using evidence shared across inter-confessional lines.

<sup>12</sup> See Wynn 2013b for an extended study with this interest in focus.

for it', as to the fit between their experiences and their beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Although the peculiar phenomenology of religious experiences may have implications outside epistemology or theological method, I will not explore these implications below.

### 0.3.2 Broadening the Extension of the term "Religious Experience"

Since what we are worried about, when considering a religious experience, is what about it, if anything, makes a belief based on it more likely to be true, there is no obvious reason to begin by investigating affective or phenomenological dimensions of religious experiences. If we did, we might approach the epistemological questions by asking what other kinds of experience 'religious experiences' were like, in terms of their typical phenomenal contents or affective components.

Instead, we can start from the direction of true belief. We should ask the question: "if God wanted me to believe that  $p$ , and He couldn't do it by testimony or by making the world such that I would deduce that  $p$  using my 'classical package', what kind of experience should he give me which might impel me to believe that  $p$ ?" The answer to this question, of course, is "whatever kind of experience will impel you to believe that  $p$ ". No reasons have yet been put forward here which suggest that the experience which supports my belief about God,  $p$ , must typically have some phenomenal contents, or inspire some feelings, rather than others.

That question is framed so as to exclude the possibility of God's simply bringing it about that someone believes  $p$  without their ever basing  $p$  on an experience. This exclusion is not arbitrary: *some* mental state or event must serve the role we gave to grounds, and experiences as we have defined them are just non-testimonial, nondoxastic grounds. Alternatively, suppose that God brings it about that

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1, section 1.3.1 for an argument as to why excluding these considerations is a good idea, and Chapter 2, section 2.2.3.1 for an explanation of the consequences of this when representing religious-experiential-evidence in a probabilistic framework.

someone believes that  $p$  and there is really no, and never was, any nondoxastic ground for  $p$ .<sup>14</sup> If a belief can be held rationally even when the believer cannot remember or identify what experience impels or impelled them to hold it, the situation of someone who really has no ground for a belief God has made them hold will be identical, as far as they themselves or anyone who wants to assess their belief is concerned, to the situation of someone who has forgotten (or cannot describe) the experience which led them to form and hold this belief. This situation will also be identical to someone whose belief is grounded in a doxastic experience – an experience simply of some proposition as seeming true<sup>15</sup> – but cannot introspect or describe the nature of this doxastic experience. If we want to evaluate a belief which, as a matter of inaccessible fact, God has brought about in someone without any mediating mental state or event, we (including that someone) will have to treat it as though it is grounded by an experience they cannot identify or describe. So even beliefs which in fact have no ground may be amenable to evaluation in terms of the evidential force of a ‘religious experience’, where this religious experience is an indescribable experience we hypothesise on behalf of the believer.

The functional definition of religious experience I have offered is therefore broad because it is not limited to perceptual or quasi-perceptual experiences of God, nor limited to doxastic experiences with some affective or qualitative feature we associate peculiarly with beliefs about God. Indeed, it can cover perceptual, doxastic and indeed any experiences which form the grounds for beliefs about God – and even merely hypothesized experiences where no report, recollection, or identification of an experience is possible or available. Feeling an emotion without any associated representational content will fall under this definition, just so long as that emotion supports a belief about God. A perceptual experience of creatures will also fall under this definition, just so long as that experience

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<sup>14</sup> This is one way of understanding Plantinga’s “A/C Model”, instead of taking him to be suggesting that certain feelings or doxastic experience provide evidence that the Holy Spirit is up to something with regards my mind and ‘heart’.

<sup>15</sup> See Plantinga 2000, 111 for an explanation of this term.

immediately supports a belief about God, rather than by way of inference from beliefs about the creatures. The only restriction on the scope of application of the term is a provisional one: given that there could be a huge range of nondoxastic bases for theological beliefs which aren't amenable to assessment via the framework which follows, I've restricted the extension to experiences taken by their subjects (or reporters, or assessors) supposed to involve some direct action on God's part to communicate a belief about Him.

# 1. The Limitations of Mystical Practices

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of a popular approach to the epistemology of religious experience in recent English-speaking philosophy, associated with externalist approaches to knowledge and justification, and sometimes regarded as an instance of “Reformed Epistemology”.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, I review recent literature in the epistemology of religious experience by drawing on it to lay out the most popular approach, its objections, and replies, in dialectical rather than chronological form.<sup>17</sup> That review will be completed in a similar fashion when we turn to explicitly “internalist” approaches to religious epistemology in the next chapter. My aim in this chapter is to consider objections to trusting religious experiences in order to persuade the reader that scepticism about religious experience is best understood as motivated by a worry about how best to do theology, given its inevitable relationship to religious experiences, rather than a worry about whether some or many religious believers and beliefs have enough ‘justification’ or ‘rationality’. If, as I hope I have shown below, standing concerns about the epistemic status of religious experience are really concerns about the inadequacy of our theological methods, then whatever interest philosophers of religion have in addressing scepticism about religious experience should transfer into interest in developing and refining a framework of the kind I go on to develop in subsequent chapters.

I will call the family of approaches to the epistemology of religious experience which I consider in this chapter “Alstonian”. I use this label not because the members of this family are all inspired by William Alston’s work, but rather because of a similarity in approach between those developed by figures such

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, McLeod 1993 and Tweedt and Dougherty 2015, 550-1.

<sup>17</sup> As will be clear from the footnotes, a dialectical ordering fits the nature of this body of literature better: the question of the evidential value of religious experience is frequently addressed by philosophers of religion *ab initio*, rather than explicitly in light of the most recent work, and sophistication over time increases due to progress in wider epistemology as much as due to direct objection and reply between parties.

as William Wainwright, Caroline Franks Davis, Keith Yandell, and Jerome Gellman,<sup>18</sup> and the account of why and how religious beliefs based on religious experiences are justified set out in Alston's seminal *Perceiving God*.<sup>19</sup>

I begin by setting out the "perception analogy"<sup>20</sup> between "mystical", "theistic" or "religious" experiences,<sup>21</sup> and explaining how this analogy defends the claim that religious experiences can justify beliefs based on them. Then I will consider three families of objections to epistemologies of this kind, so considering the course of the twentieth- and early-twenty-first century debate on the epistemology of religious experience. Considering these objections also leads to three recommendations for methods of evaluating religious experiences. I recommend that we treat religious experiences as acts of divine communication and, to begin with, disregard the phenomenal means God might use to communicate truths about Himself. I recommend that a framework for evaluating the truth of D-beliefs should be constructed so as to easily provide for, and encourage, degreed judgments as to D-

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<sup>18</sup> For book-length expositions of these positions, see, respectively, Wainwright 1981, Franks Davis 1989, Yandell 1993, and Gellman 1997 and 2001. Bagger has called these, Alston's, and Swinburne's approaches "virtually interchangeable" (Bagger 1999, 111).

<sup>19</sup> I.e. Alston 1991. The argument Alston presents in *PG* is a developed form of similar arguments made in his 1981, 1982, and 1983. Its roots are in interpreting Wittgenstein's remarks about religious 'language games' in a manner which would render religious claims cognitive. See Sayre 1981 for a closely connected reading of the relevant passages of the later Wittgenstein.

<sup>20</sup> See Gale 1991, 288 for an overview of these strategies which argues that an analogical argument comparing religious to sensory experience is (fatally) central to them.

<sup>21</sup> These different terms are often used by interlocutors in a way which makes them either interchangeable, or given stipulative meanings so as to render them in practice interchangeable. Compare the usage of "mystical" by James (1997, 301-4), Matson 1965, Alston (in *PG*, 11 and 2005b, 199-203), Fales (1996a, 1996b, 1996c and 2004), Elwood (1999, 39), Gellman (2001, 4 and 2005, 139), Katz (1978), Hick (1989, 165-9), Pike (1978, 1986), and Wainwright (2010) and Harper (2014), with "theistic" and "of God" by C. Martin (1959), Hick in earlier work (1971), Corcoran (1996), Davies (1993, 120-140), Wainwright (1992, 116), Forgie (1984, 1994, 1998) and Gellman in other work (1997), with "religious" as used by Alston in early presentations of his position (1982), Knudson (1937), Broad (1939), Trueblood 1957, 147-52, Mavrodes (1970, 1978), Becker (1971), Ewing (1973, 112), O'Hear (1984, 26-9), Brakenhielm (1985), Franks Davis (1989, 30-2), Gale (1991), Gutting (1982, 141-144), M. Martin (1989, 154), Oakes (1972, 1976, 1979, 1981), Yandell (1977, 1993, 16-17), Wainwright in earlier work (1984), Wall (1995), Swinburne (2004, 296-303), Zangwill (2004) Kwaan (2006, 641) and Dumsday 2011. A more specialised meaning for "mystical", often distinguished from other religious experiences by having certain kinds of phenomenal content, derives from discussions of so-called 'mystical' traditions in religious studies: contrast, for example, Wainwright's 1981 (1) definition of the term with his 2010 (27) usage, and Alston's in *PG*. In what follows I gloss over whether an argument concerns the evidential force of religious experiences in the more general sense, or mystical experiences in the more precise sense.

beliefs' likelihood of truth, or religious experiences' likelihood of veridicality. Finally, I recommend that our framework be usable to any theological enquirer, regardless of their confessional presuppositions.

I first consider the "Interpretation Objection", which objects to subjects' need to interpret religious experiences' phenomenal content in a certain way in order for them to justify religious beliefs. Then, I consider the "Bad Tests Objection", which argues that the actual checks and tests offered in religious traditions aren't precise enough; or, that they don't bear on whether or not the experience is 'veridical', that is, caused by God in a way that's supposed to make the supported belief more likely to be true; or that they depend on other theological beliefs in a way which is viciously circular. Consequently, I focus on this "Circularity Objection". Noting that the kind of circularity at stake here is not always regarded as vicious, I look at why those who have posed it regard religious experience as a special, vicious case. In order for this objection to sway us it must, I suggest, 'change the subject' from a consideration of the possibility of experiential justification for religious beliefs, to what the role of religious diversity might be in reducing that justification. By changing the subject in this way, we move into two new dialectical contexts: firstly, we move into a discussion of the normative consequences of deep theological disagreement. Secondly, we move into the 'first-order' context of theological methodology. That is, what is likely to be true about God, all things considered – and how should we discover these truths? Moving into these new contexts will, on the one hand, take us into the third chapter, and, on the other, motivate the positive project of the thesis as a whole.

## 1.2 The "Perception Analogy"

Reports of religious experiences available from various sources – medieval, Eastern and Western classical 'mystical' writers<sup>22</sup> as well as accounts accumulated within modern psychology – often lend

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<sup>22</sup> See Alston (e.g. *PG*, 13), Pike (1986 and 1992, 129-136) and Gellman (2001, 5) for representative surveys and interpretations. William James' research as described in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1997, see especially 63-73) has been influential on all of these thinkers, and his examples are quoted in *PG* (12-14)

themselves to interpretation by contemporary philosophers as reports of having an encounter with God that was ‘direct’ or ‘immediate’<sup>23</sup>, rather like the encounters we have physical objects in sense-perceptual experiences. These interpretations offered promise for theistic philosophers in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century context where philosophical arguments from miracles, general features of the world, or the concept of God, were widely considered to be too weak to justify belief in God. If beliefs could be rational even when not inferred from arguments, then perhaps theistic belief could be.<sup>24</sup> One such case of non-inferential support which was nonetheless rational – of beliefs being “properly basic”<sup>25</sup> – was the support sense-perceptual experiences could lend to beliefs about external physical objects. So, if there were a wider category of perceptual experiences, which religious experiences belonged to, or if religious experiences were like sense-perceptual experiences in the right way,<sup>26</sup> then they might confer justification, rationality or warrant on beliefs based on them.<sup>27</sup>

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alongside more recent reports (17-18) from ‘ordinary believers’ collected by Oxford’s Religious Experience Unit (Beardsworth 1977). The use philosophers make of these sources has been criticized as interpretatively cavalier (Bagger 1999, 3 and Pappas 1994 879-90), which provides another reason for moving away from evaluating religious experiences as if they are perception-like. The account of evidence I offer in Chapter 2 minimizes the significance of experiences’ phenomenology so that inaccurate interpretations of historical examples will not damage the efficacy of the evaluation procedure I develop.

<sup>23</sup> See *PG*, 9-67 and Alston 2005b (200-4) for eclectic collections of reports of religious experience and a thorough discussion of why they should be interpreted as presentational or perceptual.

<sup>24</sup> Wynn (2013a, 325) notes this shift in emphasis in contemporary natural theology understood as an apologetic project.

<sup>25</sup> An early exposition of the notion of proper basicity influential on its adoption by religious epistemologists is Plantinga’s 1981. See Levine 1989 and Franks Davis 1989, 86-92 for early interpretations of Plantinga’s reformed epistemology as a vindication of the evidential force of religious experiences. See Bagger 1993 and Grube 1995 for critical assessments of the role of doxastic foundationalism in contemporary epistemology of religious experience.

<sup>26</sup> Early and explicit instances of this analogy can be found in Broad 1935 and 1953, 168-169, Trueblood 1957, 155, Martin 1959, Hick 1971, 116, Wainwright 1973, 258-9, and Atfield 1975.

<sup>27</sup> Hick 2001, 25 puts forward a stronger claim – that the justificatory powers of religious experience provide the best way of defending religious belief. Alston (2005b, 198) echoes Ewing (1973, 122) and James (1997, 74-5) in claiming that this source of justification was in fact the norm for most of history, over against natural-theological inferences.

### 1.2.1 The Doxastic Practice Approach

Alston's *Perceiving God* is a paradigmatic and influential articulation of the view sketched above: so I'll describe it by drawing on his articulation in that work. His argument can be simplified in the following way.

Many religious experiences have their phenomenal content reported in a way which lends them to being treated as a kind of perceptual experience: they are about an object (God) appearing to have some feature(s) or other(s) to a subject.<sup>28</sup> It looks as if they support some of their subject's theological beliefs: the believer holds the belief because of the experience in a way which is indicative of the belief's truth to the believer.<sup>29</sup> Now, although we cannot show that sense-perceptions are truth-conducive 'from the outside', that is, without taking for granted some sense-perceptual beliefs, we do regard some sense-perceptual beliefs as justified by some sense-perceptions.<sup>30</sup> So, for some religious experiences to rightly support some theological beliefs, the believer ought not need to have evidence for the reliability of religious experiences which excludes religious-experience-based beliefs from its premises.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, sensory perception is fallible and we do not think that all sense-perceptual beliefs are justified. So the comparison won't get infallibility for religious experience, nor deliver the result that any and every religious-experience-based belief is justified.<sup>32</sup> The epistemologist must say something about what differentiates justified from unjustified beliefs given the assumed connection between justification and truth, and given the fallibility of the two sources of justification being compared.

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<sup>28</sup> *PG* 11-2329-32. Similar analyses of typical reports can be found in Gellman (2005, 138-9).

<sup>29</sup> *PG* 74.

<sup>30</sup> See *PG*, 102-145 and Alston 1993.

<sup>31</sup> *PG*, 102-143.

<sup>32</sup> Some early objections (e.g. MacIntyre 1959, 72 and Flew 1966, 129) to the evidential force of religious experiential evidence suggest that the potential for religious experiences to be mistaken is a sufficient reason for scepticism, in response to the claims of their infallibility made by some theologians.

Beliefs are justified, he argues, from within a “doxastic practice”,<sup>33</sup> a method (which may be used passively)<sup>34</sup> of belief formation and assessment appropriate to the relevant kinds of grounds and beliefs.<sup>35</sup> A doxastic practice takes doxastic or nondoxastic grounds as inputs, and produces beliefs as outputs. A belief generated by a doxastic practice is only *prima facie* justified until assessed by that practice’s “overrider system”<sup>36</sup> of background beliefs and subordinate mechanisms – which we can think of as prior beliefs generated by that or other practices, and rules determining which of these rebut or undercut the candidate belief. If the assessment is ‘passed’ without being defeated, the belief is justified.

Given an externalist model of justification like Alston’s,<sup>37</sup> this justification strictly speaking occurs only if the practice is, as a matter of potentially inaccessible fact, reliable with respect to truth.<sup>38</sup> Since we are not in a position to assess the reliability of many of our doxastic practices,<sup>39</sup> what we are typically worried about is whether a practice tends to positively assess many beliefs which are inconsistent with those generated by other practices more important to us – “external inconsistency” – or tends to positively assess many beliefs generated within that practice, but which are incompatible with each

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<sup>33</sup> See Alston 1995 for an explanation of the connection between doxastic practices and Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’.

<sup>34</sup> Gellman (2001, 20) emphasizes that in many cases we will have *ultima facie* justification without the relevant experience having been tested at all.

<sup>35</sup> The doxastic practice approach is described in detail at *PG* 146-181.

<sup>36</sup> *PG*, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Alston’s account of justification in *PG* both draws on internalist precursors (see Pollock 1974) and clearly indicates what an agent ought to do given what they can access, making internalist adaptations of his position straightforward. Other advocates of the perception analogy, such as Gutting (1982, 147-9), Franks Davis (1989, 96), Yandell (1993, 233), Gellman (2001, 18) and Mawson (2005a, 164-5) take a leaner route than an externalist doxastic practice approach like Alston’s by endorsing Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity (which I will discuss in Chapter 2) and defending its applicability to religious experiences. For an evaluative comparison of approaching experiential evidence via the Principle of Credulity or doxastic practices, see Wall 1995, 12-22.

<sup>38</sup> That the kind of justification Alston claims, and successfully defends, for outputs of practices is properly ‘epistemic’, and not ‘tout-court’, ‘deontological’ or ‘practical’ is controversial (see Kretzmann 1994, 70-6, 87-90, McLeod 1993, 79 and Gale 1994a 141-5). Some articulations of his position suggest the former (e.g. Alston 1994a and 1995).

<sup>39</sup> For emphasis on the importance of this point, see Alston 1994a, 173, in response to Gale’s argument that we should not trust a practice’s products if we cannot ascertain its reliability (Gale 1994a, 141-2).

other – “internal inconsistency”.<sup>40</sup> These features count against the reliability of a doxastic practice, making it irrational to trust its outputs. Additionally, a doxastic practice should be regarded as reliable insofar as it enjoys “significant self-support”,<sup>41</sup> that is, if it generates and positively assesses beliefs which predict future successful productions and assessments within the practice. Self-support allows us to “control the course of events” by relying on the practice’s predictions; it also consists in our holding beliefs which testify to, and explain in more detail, the practice’s reliability.<sup>42</sup> Finally, a precondition for a doxastic practice’s being of interest for our evaluation is its being practically rational for us to engage in it. The easiest grounds for that rationality will be if we need<sup>43</sup> to know about the object which its outputs concern. If we can’t tell ‘from the outside’ that it does indeed inform us about that object, practical rationality will instead be a question of social establishment,<sup>44</sup> which is also a long-running diachronic test for external and internal consistency.

### 1.2.2 Describing and Defending the “Christian Mystical Practice”

Alston argues that not all religious experiences need or should be treated homogeneously as one kind of evidence, supporting beliefs within one doxastic practice. On the one hand we can think of one “mystical perceptual doxastic practice”<sup>45</sup> which is a family of more fine-grained practices in a similar way to the relationship between sense-perception *tout court* and the practice associated with each of the five senses. Since Alston is interested in experiences consisting of putative appearances of God,

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<sup>40</sup> Kai-Man Kwaan (2006, 654-5) offers a thought-experiment showing that it would be practically rational to trust a practice with high levels of internal inconsistency, suggesting that a practice could meet this demand by passing a rather low bar if it were the only practice available for navigating that epistemic realm. With similar implications, Adams (1994, 866-8) argues that there are doxastic practices, like ethics and philosophy, in which rife disagreement is not taken to imply unreliability.

<sup>41</sup> *PG* 173-5.

<sup>42</sup> *PG* 173.

<sup>43</sup> This condition can be read more or less strongly: Kretzmann (1994, 87- 90), for example, takes ‘need’ here to be one of psychological inescapability, such that CMPs fare poorly in comparison to SP because it is psychologically possible for their practitioners to abandon them.

<sup>44</sup> *PG*, 163. The social establishment criterion allows Alston’s argument to trade on any ‘democratic’ or ‘naturalist’ intuitions we might have about how to do epistemology (e.g. Thomas Reid’s view, as defended at *PG*, 151). Gutting (1982, 2-3) also argues that the burden of proof lies on philosophers who deny the epistemic adequacy of long-running, popular practices.

<sup>45</sup> *PG* 185.

he takes this to be the generic feature across more finely individuated mystical practices; but he points out that our philosophical interests may lead us to ‘slice the pie’ of practices in other ways, such as if we believe there are some phenomenological and affective common features between theistic and non-theistic ‘mystical experiences’.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, however, he accepts that divergence in characterizations of God (or, for instance, the ‘Ultimate’<sup>47</sup>) between different traditions might be wide enough to so significantly change the overrider systems used by adherents that it is appropriate to speak of many distinct ‘mystical practices’ (MPs).<sup>48</sup> So we might speak of Christian as opposed to Islamic, Catholic as opposed to Pentecostal, or even Jesuit as opposed to Carmelite, mystical practices. This is not a straightforward disanalogy between sense- and mystical-perceptual doxastic practices. We use sense-perception in many different ways and contexts, and different background beliefs and purposes will modify the overrider systems we use: a plurality of sense-perceptual practices operate at different levels of ‘specificity’ and interact with each other in complex ways. The idea of a ‘Christian mystical practice’ (CMP), however, helps us to pick out specific mystical practices for epistemic evaluation – it also narrows the target relevant to those mainly interested in evaluating Christian belief.

It looks as though there are many socially well-established MPs, so that for many people, participating in (one of) the mystical practice(s) available to them will be practically rational. Some of them seem to offer significant self-support, as when, for example, a religious believer engages in a spiritual practice in which they experience God interacting with them emotionally and guiding their spiritual growth over time; or, alternatively, when the religious experiences of spiritual leaders are appealed to when fleshing out the details of a practice’s overrider system, and that practice consequently seems

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<sup>46</sup> *PG* 185-6 and Alston 1994a, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Schellenberg 2016.

<sup>48</sup> *PG*, 191. Critics of Alston sometimes take this diversity to be a strike against his analogy (e.g. Fales 1996a, Tilley 1994), misreading his writing about one mystical doxastic practice as a claim about inter-religious homogeneity rather than an expositional simplification.

to perform well in putting people in touch with God. Importantly, MPs are like sense-perceptual practices in that they tend to involve, generate and ‘pass’ beliefs which explain why the experiences they appeal to as evidence would be truth-conducive: the mystical experiences are supposed to be caused by God either as the object of a perception-relation, or as the producer of experiences which accurately represent His nature.<sup>49</sup> Some of them have overrider systems which discriminate so that the practice’s outputs are internally consistent. Finally, some of them produce (and positively assess) beliefs which do not conflict with the outputs of other doxastic practices in good standing, so that they are externally consistent.<sup>50</sup>

This last condition, however, raises a vexed question which we will be addressing on other terms in due course: the extent to which an MP should be deemed unreliable if it produces theological beliefs which are incompatible with those produced by other mystical practices. Setting this aside, however, it looks as though the comparison between ‘mystical practices’ and sense-perceptual practices delivers the result that there are probably some extant MPs which meet the criteria for being regarded as reliable, for at least some observers and practitioners.

### 1.3 Objections to the Alstonian Approach

There are important differences between mystical and sense-perceptual doxastic practices, and some of these have been thought to damage the evidential force of religious experiences. Typically, religious experiences are neither enjoyed, nor trusted within a practice, until their subject already holds some

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<sup>49</sup> That is, considering veridical religious experiences not as perceptions, but as mental events with propositional or proposition-supporting contents produced by God, can still leave them veridical. Consider the Cartesian thought experiment that considers our sense experiences as never being perceptual, but always produced by a malign genius, intending to give us false beliefs thereby. If this were the case it would undercut our perceptual beliefs. But considering God *qua* producer of non-perceptual religious experiences would be a ‘benign genius’, such that if our religious experiences were non-perceptual yet produced by Him, they could still be taken to be good sources of evidence for the beliefs they support.

<sup>50</sup> An early criticism (e.g. MacIntyre 1955, 257-60, Martin 1959, 85, Schmidt 1961, 120-4, and Flew 1966, 126-33) of religious experiences’ evidential force insisted that MPs’ outputs need not only be consistent with, but also confirmed by, other practices’ outputs.

theological beliefs, some of which may bear a significant role in the subject's understanding of what is present in their 'mystical perceptual field', even before they base a belief on the experience and apply the overrider system involving those theological beliefs. Sense perception, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have the same feature at such a deep level: infants form concepts about objects in the physical world before they acquire any controversial beliefs about those objects, so there might be a level of 'pre-theoretical' interpretation of experiences in sense-perceptual practices.<sup>51</sup> Does this feature of mystical practices mean that religious experiences don't determine which specific beliefs are based on them, any more than the prior theological beliefs held by their subjects, so that they can't be treated as an independent source of evidence? Call an affirmative answer to this question the 'Interpretation Objection'.

Secondly, assuming that the most important criterion of veridicality for religious and perceptual experiences is whether they were appropriately caused by God or the relevant physical objects, the following difference arises between the mystical and sense-perceptual. We understand a lot about causal relations between physical objects, and so can give detailed, successfully predictive descriptions of "stimulus conditions" for veridical sensory experiences. But equivalent descriptions of "stimulus conditions"<sup>52</sup> for veridical religious experiences would seem in short supply, perhaps in too short supply to ensure the overrider systems for mystical practices sort between true and false beliefs. Call this the 'Bad Tests Objection'.

Finally, notice that the Interpretation Objection attacked mystical practices on the grounds that prior theological beliefs played too great a role in a subject's understanding of what their experience was 'of'. But prior theological beliefs also play, for the mystical practices we have, a great role in the

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<sup>51</sup> See Franks Davis (1989, 145-155) for discussion of experimental investigation of concept-formation and application.

<sup>52</sup> Fales 1996a, 35. Wainwright (2010, 32) points out that stimulus conditions might be easily described, based on practice, independently of any understanding of causal processes.

overrider systems. Unfortunately, many of those prior beliefs are supported only by the practice in which they play this role, or by another equally controversial – they are in turn wholly or partially D-beliefs or derived theological beliefs. This would mean that, if they're false, the practice won't be reliable. Would it mean that, if they are not justified from outside the practice, then engagement in the practice will not be rational, or not produce justified beliefs? Call an affirmative answer to this question the 'Circularity Objection'.

### 1.3.1 The Interpretation Objection, Sidestepped

Trends in the twentieth-century study of religion lent support to the idea that most or many 'religious' or 'mystical' experiences had a common phenomenal 'core', a view which came to be called 'perennialism'.<sup>53</sup> Given perennialism, the basing of diverse, incompatible religious beliefs on these experiences looks surprising. An attractive explanation for the surprise is that the controversial claims originate from a non-experiential source, such as testimony. Those influenced<sup>54</sup> by one set of such claims would then 'filter' the contents of the 'core' of their experiences through that set, since the claims would influence the conceptual scheme<sup>55</sup> their believers brought to religious experiences.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> A paradigmatic instance of perennialist interpretations of Christian mystical practices is Underhill 1945 (see especially 83-138). Walter Stace champions a version of the view in his 1960 and 1961, and Smart in his 1965. Zaehner (1961, 106-128) complicates perennialism with a harmonization of mystical reports into two alternative phenomenal cores, and Wainwright (1981, 1-12) derives four. We should be careful to differentiate our limited 'perennialist' thesis, about the 'true' content of religious experiences, from wider ideas about the shared content of religious traditions. Whatever truth there is in the latter will come under scrutiny in Chapter 6 when I examine the necessary conditions for genuine theological disagreement.

<sup>54</sup> Note that the subjects wouldn't have to 'believe' these claims: they could have a range of doxastic attitudes short of belief which would be sufficient, in the absence of awareness of other sets of claims, or in the presence of non-doxastic influences, and still use that one set of claims to interpret the 'core' phenomenal contents.

<sup>55</sup> See Yandell 1993, 199-203 for a contextually relevant articulation of the view that conceptual schema relate to beliefs in this way.

<sup>56</sup> Stace 1961, 31-36 and Katz 1978, 26 are early exemplars of this form of argument, disagreeing about the 'stage' at which this influence occurs. One way of articulating this view is to think of the phenomenal contents of the experience as constructed with the subject's application of their prior concepts – so that the view about mystical or religious experiences underpinning this Objection has been called "constructivism" (see Gellman 2005, 148-151 and Bush 2012 for a recent retrospective overview of constructivism). As early as his 1935 (159-60), Broad points out that whether prior theological beliefs and concepts enter in at the level of 'construction' or 'interpretation' of the experience's contents, we will face the same concerns about unreliability or circularity discussed below.

This possibility raises the worry that, even if the pre-interpreted 'core' content accurately represented some aspect of reality, that content would not determine the diverse contents of controversial D-beliefs based on it, and hence the reality the 'core' represents would not determine the beliefs' contents either.<sup>57</sup> Instead, the D-beliefs' contents would be mainly determined by these non-experiential sources. Whatever the epistemic status of those sources, that status would determine the proper status of the beliefs, rather than the status of the experience.

But this worry doesn't necessarily depend on the truth of perennialism: for all we know, for some given religious experience, it could be the case that there's some pre-interpretative phenomenal 'core' which radically underdetermines the beliefs based on the experience.<sup>58</sup> The content of those beliefs would then be determined by the priors brought to interpretation, and not by the experience 'itself'.<sup>59</sup> For religious experiences this is a particular worry since often those priors are themselves based on a previous, or another's, religious experience, threatening a regress of deficiency in support.

There are then two ways of posing the Interpretation Objection.

One rests on an empirically supported claim, the perennialist view about the common phenomenal core 'underneath' diverse religious experiences.<sup>60</sup> Let's set aside criticisms of the strength of this

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Stace 1961, 32, Nielsen 1971, 48-54, Mackie 1982, 187, Hick 1989, 158-165, Forgie 1984, 1986, 1994 and 1998, and Wynn 2013a, 329.

<sup>58</sup> Yandell (1993, 199-203) puts the Objection in these terms.

<sup>59</sup> Dumsday (2011, 323) follows Mackie (1982, 187) in supposing, against the implications of Alston's model, that this concern should lead us to assign greater evidential force to religious experiences whose reported contexts are culturally unfamiliar to the subject. Stoeber (1992, 111) regards the occurrence of such experiences as good evidence against the claim that they contribute no "new information" besides that implied by prior beliefs.

<sup>60</sup> One objection to perennialism has been that prior concepts play too fundamental a role in perceptual belief-formation for us to impute a common core across religious traditions (see, for example, Katz 1978). Such objections can be re-presented as making the claim that perennialists can't hope to find the common core they are looking for. These claims about the importance of prior concepts can still be taken to undermine the evidential force of religious experiences, so that the Interpretation Objection stands independently of the truth of perennialism. Katz (1983) insists that there is no common core across traditions, but still takes comparisons of mystics' reports, and the reports of their teachers' experiences, to indicate that the contents of mystical experiences are heavily 'theory-laden' in a way which implies that each experience would not provide much if any evidence for beliefs it supports.

empirical support,<sup>61</sup> and take it for granted that there is a high enough likelihood that there is a common 'core' to religious experiences to make the Interpretation Objection a strong one. Then, the Objection must argue, implicitly or explicitly, that the sources of the concepts in terms of which the common core is interpreted are unreliable.<sup>62</sup> It would be tempting to respond to the Interpretation Objection as supported by perennialism by simply carving religious experiences and mystical practices into two categories for the purposes of evaluation. Perennialists typically restrict their interest to 'mystical' traditions picked out by a more narrow sense of that term than the sense in which Alston uses it.<sup>63</sup> In those traditions, the produced D-beliefs are vague enough that they could plausibly be supported by core, rather than by misleading doctrinal 'embellishments'.<sup>64</sup> But in the other case, of practices which are 'mystical' only in Alston's weaker sense, it will be much harder to argue that their religious experiences have the common phenomenal core which motivates the Interpretation Objection.

In practice, though, this 'divide and rule' approach will lead us to repeat the empirical objections to perennialism: when we want to evaluate any D-belief using the framework I offer, we would first have to answer the thorny textual question of whether it is supported by a religious experience belonging to a 'mystical' tradition in the perennialists' sense, or to a more mundane Alstonian mystical doxastic practice. So it would be helpful to have a response which undermines the link between the evidence

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<sup>61</sup> See Katz 1978 for an early, and Forman 1990 and Yandell 1993, 21-32 for more recent and succinct, criticisms of the treatment of the primary texts by early perennialists. A principled criticism of claims about common phenomenal cores (e.g. Payne 1990, 93) is that it is too easy to circumscribe one's sample experiences in a way that biases that sample in favour of one's generalizations (as occurs in, e.g., Stace 1961, 47-55 and Smart 1965, 75-6).

<sup>62</sup> Wynn (2013a, 327-8) implies that culture might be regarded as such a source; early critics (e.g. Flew 1966, 126-7) assert that diversity of D-beliefs track cultural and geographical separation in a suspicious way.

<sup>63</sup> *PG*, 24-5.

<sup>64</sup> Wynn suggests such a strategy (2013a, 329), and Smart (1965) seems to endorse it. Swinburne (2004, 316-8) and Gellman (2001, 37) advocate a related strategy: that we effectively act as if there is just one mystical practice across traditions, and taking detailed and controversial D-beliefs to disconfirm each other whilst taking vague and oft-affirmed D-beliefs to support each other within it. This is effectively how Hick arrives at his (1989) perennialist view about what all religions are 'really' about – compare with Hick 1997, 278-9. Franks Davis (1989, 190-2) likewise treats religious experiences as evidence for the existence of something common to their reported contents. Gellman (1997, 102) and Heim (2000) emphasise that many D-beliefs are diverse in content without being incompatible.

for perennialism and the Interpretation Objection in a conceptual rather than empirical way. My response to the second version of the Interpretation Objection is of this kind.

The second version of the Interpretation Objection rests on a possibility claim. Possibly, the 'real' phenomenal contents of a religious experience couldn't offer good support to the beliefs based on it, since they don't match the propositional contents of those beliefs in the required way until they are interpreted with the help of the priors. Phrased in this way, however, the Interpretation Objection appears based on a sceptical hypothesis which could be adapted to any class of beliefs, experiences, and practices. For all we know, the 'real' phenomenal contents of sensory experiences couldn't offer good support to sense-perceptual beliefs, since they don't match the propositional contents of those beliefs in the right way until they are interpreted with the help of prior beliefs. We can therefore deploy the same strategies on behalf of religious experiences and D-beliefs against the Interpretation Objection as have been deployed on behalf of sensory experiences and beliefs about the external world against this Kant-esque<sup>65</sup> form of radical scepticism. Just as 'for all we know' our prior beliefs mislead us when we interpret experiences, for all we know, they don't; if they don't, the practices are reliable, and hence the beliefs they produce justified in the absence of known defeaters.<sup>66</sup>

The Interpretation Objection must then rely on a stronger claim: that we do not have good reasons to distrust our prior beliefs and interpretations in the sense-experiential case, but we do have good reasons to distrust priors and interpretation in the mystical case.<sup>67</sup> If perennialism is true, we can see those reasons nearby: if theological priors are misleading embellishments, then the combination of mystical traditions' having a common phenomenal core, but D-beliefs being diverse and incompatible,

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<sup>65</sup> Forgie (1985), Hick (1989, 133, 240-9), Stoeber (1992, 109-111), Yandell (1993, 194-6) and Harper (2014, 102-3) make this connection explicit.

<sup>66</sup> Knudson (1937, 27-31), Katz (1988, 755), Franks Davis (1989, 148), Payne (1990, 147), Yandell (1993, 184-9 and 2010, 407), Kwaan (2006, 645), Gellman (2005, 148-151), and Brown (2015, 500) defend religious experiences from the Interpretation Objection in this way.

<sup>67</sup> Martin (1989, 161) argues that our concepts are 'guilty until proven innocent', and we do not have exoneration in the mystical case.

is to be expected. Alternatively, if some theological priors are not misleading in this way, then that diversity and incompatibility remains surprising. One might expect religious experiences to give rise to very similar beliefs across cultures, leading to much less religious diversity. Any discernible common phenomenal 'core', and ubiquitous theological diversity, seem to jointly confirm suspicion of the theological background beliefs and conceptual schemes.

But the suspicion raised by these considerations will not affect equally all the prior theological beliefs we use to interpret religious experiences. Any prior theological beliefs which subjects have reasons to believe independently of their religious experiences, such as natural, derived and testimonial basic theological beliefs, will escape the suspicion raised to some extent. For instance, if someone had a natural theological belief that "anything on which I seem absolutely dependent, must be an eternal creator", then they would be able to legitimately interpret an experience of something on which they seemed absolutely dependent as an experience of an eternal creator, despite others' interpreting such experiences in a very different way. Derived and testimony-based theological beliefs will be infected by these suspicions insofar as they are inferred from, or are testifications to, D-beliefs and religious experiences so infected.

This still leaves the Interpretation Objection successfully casting doubt on a wide swathe of D-beliefs, so demanding a further response from the defender of religious experiences' evidential force.

Responding requires us to consider why religious diversity seems surprising, given the putative similarity of the phenomenal contents of religious experiences. We might think that religious experiences are perception-like in that their phenomenal contents ideally match the nature of their object, and justify perceptually in that the propositional contents of a well-supported D-belief would match the phenomenal contents and hence the object's nature. The Interpretation Objection can be taken to say that since all religious experiences are of the same object, they all ought to have the same

phenomenal contents, and that variations are best explained by interpretative embellishment. The defender can challenge this line of thought in two interrelated ways.

Firstly, each set of mutually exclusive theological priors taken to be misleading can be examined to see whether an explanation is available in terms of that set's being true and the others' being false, an explanation which is equally as good as the perennialist's debunking genealogy for religious diversity.<sup>68</sup> Then, if two or more such sets provide for equally good such explanations, we will have to decide between them on the basis of which set is otherwise most likely to be true: doing so will allow us to know which theological priors are likely to mislead, and which not.<sup>69</sup> Members of those sets which are natural theological beliefs can be evaluated without assuming that any religious experiences are good evidence.<sup>70</sup> Members of those sets which are D-beliefs, or basic theological beliefs rooted in others' D-beliefs via testimony, or derived theological beliefs, can only be evaluated by taking some religious experiences to be good evidence: and here circularity looms. Below I will discuss the Circularity Objection to see whether this is a problem, what kind it is, and how we should address it.

Secondly, they can argue that the subject of the propositional contents of the D-beliefs need not be considered as the object of a perception-like experience. Then the phenomenal contents will not need to match its nature even in the ideal case. God could bring about religious experiences in different practices, and the phenomenal contents of these could be determined by purposes other than accurately representing Himself. Then the presence of a common phenomenal core with the 'wrong

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<sup>68</sup> Here is an example for clarification: a set of Christian theological priors might include the claim that God wants people to form true beliefs about Him within the context of church-like institutions which are necessarily historically, geographically and culturally local and contingent, so that those beliefs interact with believers' affects and habits in the right way. But that set might also include the claim that God wants all persons everywhere to have some degree of cognitive access to Him. So religious diversity would occur even if the same God were phenomenally present, but obscure, in different cultures; but only in particular cultures would that obscurity be removed. See Baker-Hytch 2016 for a contemporary application of such a set of claims to respond to religious scepticism.

<sup>69</sup> This rejoinder to Interpretation Objection which points out that the role of interpretation will be benign whenever the relevant interpretative framework is reliable is common to Alstonian approaches: see Franks Davis 1989, 163) and Dumsday 2011, 327.

<sup>70</sup> Swinburne appeals to this strategy in his 2004 (316-7, 324-5).

contents before interpretation' would not indicate that, when particular theological beliefs are based on these experiences, they are less likely to be true.

This line of response puts the defender in the position of articulating what these purposes of God's might be. This is not a disadvantage: it means that when we are evaluating D-beliefs, we now ask ourselves a different set of questions. The Interpretation Objection assumes that the relevant questions for evaluation are whether the D-belief's contents adequately match up to the experience's contents, and whether those contents considered 'before interpretation' will match those of D-beliefs. Now, however, the relevant questions are what purposes God would serve by giving the believer this religious experience, to support this D-belief – and whether the believer's holding it as a D-belief does in fact serve those purposes. Once this is the central issue at stake in evaluating D-beliefs, the phenomenal contents of the experiences they are based on take a back seat.

There will still be cases where the contents of a reported religious experience seem to mismatch, in a suspicious way, the contents of the D-belief(s) it supports.<sup>71</sup> Once we are considering the D-belief and religious experiences as mental events or states which God has brought about for His ends, however, this suspicion seems inappropriate. It would be appropriate were the truth of the belief guaranteed by a perceptual relation between God and the believer, but now the truth is guaranteed by the fact of God's having brought that belief about in order to teach its contents to the subject. He might do that using a religious experience with phenomenal contents that don't match the belief's propositional contents as well as we might like.

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<sup>71</sup> Dombrowski (2001) argues that this situation is worse, not better, when religious experiences are less direct than in the perceptual case – as with visions and voices. Pike (1986, 19-21) raises the difficulty with St John's mystical practice: St John regards the explicit content of a voice as a literary device God uses to communicate implicit content which the mystic must discern. A related objection is that religious experiences are too phenomenally coarse-grained to be a good source of information, which casts doubt by implying that accurate reports of their content will not map onto the beliefs they support (Stace 1961, 60 and Pappas 1994, 881-2). Alston's own response is to lament this, regarding it as a consequence of God's freedom and hence the relative difficulty of practicing an MP (Alston 1994b, 894b), while comparing it favorably to modes of sense perception like smell (2005b, 209).

Note well that, once we have ceased to treat religious experiences as veridical because perceptual, we defuse objections concerning whether or not it would be possible, in principle, to pick out an incorporeal, eternal being like God in one's mystical 'field of vision'.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps because, say, no-one could identify something as God without being able to experience infinite power or goodness,<sup>73</sup> anyone who thought they had 'seen' God would be mistaken. On the treatment I suppose, it would not be relevant whether they had 'really' 'seen' God.<sup>74</sup> God could simply have deliberately produced a true belief by using a theophany which has phenomenal contents the sceptic deems 'improper'.

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<sup>72</sup> e.g. Matson 1965, 33, Lyttkens 1979, Forgie 1984, Martin 1989, 181, Gale 1991, 327-42 and 1994, 871-2, Kenny 1992, 41-2, McLeod 1993, 157-61, Fales 1996a, 24, and Byrne 2000, 78-9. A popular response (see Oakes 1981, Brackenhielm 1985, 45, *PG*, 47, Pike 1992, 136-45, Alston 1994b, 993, Corcoran 1996 and Schoen 1998, 442) is that the criteria for perceptual recognition are so manifold, diverse and messy across contexts that they can't be specified in a general, a priori way. Pike (1992, 120) also argues that identification of a percipient can be part of an experience's phenomenal contents. White (1996, 145) argues that Gale's criteria for recognizing something are really only criteria for persuading another one has recognized it.

<sup>73</sup> e.g. MacIntyre 1955, 256, Hick 1960, 28, Yandell 1974, 174 and Zangwill 2004, 9-19.

<sup>74</sup> Gellman (2005, 152-3) offers a response like mine: God can bring it about that we think we have identified Him as such-and-such even if some general rules about possible perceptual contents are true. Gellman also argues (2001, 43-52) that our use of our mystical practice's checks and tests will in the end amount to a way of identifying God. An alternative response is to point out that we can identify imperceptible properties by perceptible tokens we understand as such - as an ocean's edge lets us see the whole (as in Becker 1971, 67, Brackenhielm 1985, 45 and Brown 2015, 500). Gutting (1982, 154), Payne (1990, 166) and Alston (*PG*, 47) argue that we cannot determine *a priori* what properties may be perceivable by some perceptual mode, but must engage in the relevant perceptual practice to discover such limits. Related debates concern experiences regarded as poor evidence because their reports ascribe to them problematic features other than the divine attributes. In traditions studied under the auspices of "mysticism", there are reports of experiences of union or identity with the experience's object (see Gellman 2005, 143-2 for references to some examples), or of everything in unity, experiences with respect to which "the experience, the object of the experience, or both are supposed to be ineffable" (Gellman 2005, 143) after William James' claim that this is a paradigmatic feature of mystical experience (James 1997 299-300), experiences which are self-authenticating and experiences which have no conceptual content. See Stace 1969, 48, Pike 1992, 87-115, Forgie 1994, Oakes 1996 and Wainwright 2010, 53-4 for discussions of difficulties with experiences of union with God. See MacKinnon 1978 for examples and a critical discussion of experiences of 'holistic' union with everything. See Smart 1958 (69-71) and 1978 (17-8), Gale 1960, Yandell 1975 and 1993 (61-115), Katz 1978, 54-6, Plantinga 1980 (23-25) and Proudfoot 1985, 125-34 for criticism of the importance of ineffability claims. See Oakes 1972, 1976 and 1979 for arguments that self-authenticating phenomenal contents are possible in an externalist sense: an experience can in principle be such that it's necessarily veridical, and modal conditions on knowledge could even be such that it can be known to be veridical and known to be necessarily so. See Yandell 1974, 1977 and 1993, 163-182 for extended arguments that experiences cannot be 'self-authenticating' in an epistemically interesting way, and Flew 1966, 132-3 for an early, concise alternative. See Wainwright 2010, 54-57 for an overview of difficulties arising from reports of concept-free experiences, and Proudfoot 1985 for an extended discussion.

Acknowledging this possibility allows us to sidestep all debates concerning the possible phenomenal contents of experiences, whether those phenomena are reported in accurate ways, and whether (either as reported or as ‘really occurred’) those phenomena adequately ‘map onto’ the propositional contents of the D-beliefs the experiences support. Practically speaking, I recommend that we simply interpret reports religious experiences’ contents as ‘charitably’ as possible, by representing its content in one of the formal ways I go on to describe in Chapters 2 and 4. Replacing questions of fit between the phenomenal contents of religious experiences and D-beliefs with questions concerning God’s purposes in producing the D-belief can meet the Interpretation Objection.

### 1.3.2 The Bad Tests Objection, Transformed

When pressed as to what checks and tests are appropriate for religious experiences,<sup>75</sup> which in Alstonian terms becomes the question of what sources mystical practices’ overrider systems draw defeaters from, one response which has been given by defenders of the Alstonian approach has been to consider actual such practices and describe their overrider systems.<sup>76</sup> This response invites the objection that the overrider systems described are inadequate in some way. Weak versions of the objection portray SP as a gold, or only acceptable, standard of granularity, reliability, and ease of use for doxastic practices, to disparage MPs by comparison.<sup>77</sup> Defenders have responded that this is a form of arbitrary “epistemic imperialism”,<sup>78</sup> that the unreliability of mystical practices does not follow from

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<sup>75</sup> C. B. Martin (1955, 79, 88), Flew (1966, 133-9) and Rowe (1982, 91) have argued that defeaters for D-beliefs are not only unsuitable, but non-existent.

<sup>76</sup> Wainwright gives simplified overviews of checks and tests typical to extant MPs across various traditions – see, for example, Wainwright 2010, 30-31.

<sup>77</sup> Criticisms made by Gale (1960, 479-80), Matson (1965, 14-17), Conway (1971, 169-70), Donovan (1979, 51-3), O’Hear (1984, 48) and Kenny (1992, 40) can be understood as operating in this way, either explicitly or by listing a set of adequate checks and tests which are exclusive to sense perception, defended by appeal to its reliability.

<sup>78</sup> *PG*, 199. For a discussion in this context of how what Alston calls “epistemic imperialism” emerges from 20<sup>th</sup> Century foundationalism, see Levine 1989. See Wainwright 1981, 94-5 and Payne 1990, 158-65 for other examples of this reply. See Trueblood 1957, 153 for an early instance.

merely relative deficiencies,<sup>79</sup> and that serious consideration of sense-perception reveals deficiencies which do not typically occur to us.<sup>80</sup>

Establishing the implications of the strongest versions of this objection requires us to consider some of the overrider systems proffered by defenders of the Alstonian approach. Alston takes a telescopic view that ranges over a multitude of Christian mystical practices, offering a very general description of CMP's overrider systems: "CMP takes the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the undivided church, Christian experience through the ages, Christian thought, and more generally the Christian tradition as normative sources of its tradition".<sup>81</sup> Which claims from these sources play what role will depend on details particular to the sources and the iteration of CMP in question.<sup>82</sup> Alston fleshes this out by implication: "if [two different traditions] have different stories as to what God's plan for human salvation is, what God has done and is doing to implement this, and what God's requirements on us are, then [these stories] will function differently [from one tradition's practices to the other's] as a corrective to reports as to what God told someone about these matters"<sup>83</sup>; "in the Catholic mystical tradition great stress is laid on the consequences of one's experience for one's moral and spiritual development".<sup>84</sup> Like others,<sup>85</sup> Alston cites the overrider system suggested by Teresa of Avila<sup>86</sup> as a representative candidate for an overrider system in a for-all-we-know-reliable iteration of CMP. Simplifying considerably, in Teresa's practice D-beliefs will be undercut, their experiences regarded as

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<sup>79</sup> E.g. Wainwright 1981, 108-109, Alston 1994a, 175 and 1994b, 893-897 and Gellman 2001, 27.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Knudson 1937, 56-61, Schoen 1998, 435-7, Alston 2005b, 211-2 and 2010, 80, Wainwright 2010, 51, and Brown 2015, 500.

<sup>81</sup> PG 193.

<sup>82</sup> PG 189-191.

<sup>83</sup> PG 191.

<sup>84</sup> PG 191.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Wainwright 1973, Pike 1978, Losin 1987, and Franks Davis 1989, 72-4. The paradigmatic role of St Theresa is more evidence of the influence of James' *Varieties*: see James 1997, 321-6.

<sup>86</sup> PG 201.

illusory,<sup>87</sup> if the experience (seems) to have been produced by one's own mental efforts,<sup>88</sup> if it leads to "disquiet",<sup>89</sup> or if it fails to produce all of the following: sufficient humility, readiness (presumably psychological) in the subject for certain other "effects" associated with a divine origin, "light to the understanding [and] strength to the will",<sup>90</sup> righteous actions, and "tenderness".<sup>91</sup> An experience is also deemed illusory if it supports a candidate D-belief contrary to Biblical or Church teaching.<sup>92</sup> A range of examples<sup>93</sup> are similar to Teresa's overrider system, and authors have appealed to the production of spiritual and moral fruits as a test for authenticity independently of Teresa's authority.<sup>94</sup> Alternatively, the Abrahamic traditions might draw checks from the persistent character they attribute to God, so that experiences could be evaluated in terms of whether the circumstances of their occurrence and their content fit with our expectations of that character.<sup>95</sup> More ambitiously, David Brown and Mark Wynn have suggested that certain rituals, holy places, or aesthetic engagements can provide reliable stimulus conditions.<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless, actual overrider systems have been criticized in various ways.

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<sup>87</sup> This is not to imply that Teresa was mainly or even at all interested in the status of D-beliefs supported by her mystical experiences, when discussing how to tell if a mystical experience was genuinely produced by God. See Bagger 1999 and Coakley 2009 for criticism of the use of St Theresa's thought as paradigmatic for analytic religious epistemology.

<sup>88</sup> Teresa 1957, 175.

<sup>89</sup> Teresa 1957, 108.

<sup>90</sup> Teresa 1957, 108.

<sup>91</sup> Teresa 1957, 175.

<sup>92</sup> Teresa 1957, 239. Whether this defeat operates by undercutting the candidate D-belief via indicating the experience is not genuine, or by rebutting the D-belief, is unclear from the text's face value, but see Wainwright's discussion presently.

<sup>93</sup> See Wainwright 1981 (especially 84-110). Pike 1986 outlines St John of the Cross' rather sceptical suggestions. Payne (1990, 16-44) explains how the propriety of St John's checks and tests follow from Sanjuanist natural theology and philosophy of mind – so that although St John's MP will survive concerns about circularity and truth-aptness raised below, they will still fall prey to disagreement with his metaphysics and to concerns about coarse granularity.

<sup>94</sup> E.g. Trueblood 1957, 158, Gellman 2001, 30-3, and Wainwright 1981, 97-8 and 2010, 30-1.

<sup>95</sup> E.g. Brakenhielm 1985, 141-2, and Daniels 1989, 489. Gellman (2001, 49-50) describes traditions according to which God stipulates 'stimulus conditions' Himself.

<sup>96</sup> See Brown 2015, 498-9, and Wynn 2009, 157.

### 1.3.2.1 Extant Override Systems are Too Coarse-Grained

If moral and spiritual fruits tests like Theresa's are described too vaguely, different practices will appear to have the same tests and so collapse into the same, massively internally consistent, practice.<sup>97</sup> These tests are also likely to be coarse-grained in practice, generating a mismatch between the binary 'pass or fail' judgments they deliver on the veridicality of mystical experiences, and our awareness of the complexity and uncertainty involved in making those judgments.<sup>98</sup> The Alstonian approach invites binary practices of evaluation where an experience fails a test and the D-belief is defeated, or it passes the test and the D-belief has some very high status. In a context like that in which CMP is typically practiced, what matters most about whether a religious experience passes or fails the tests is the moral and spiritual development of the individual. In such circumstances a binary attitude to the experience might be appropriate. Suppose, however, that the context is wider theological inquiry: in a situation of theological uncertainty and disagreement, we want to know how much we should learn from that religious experience, how much weight it bears in relation to experiences supporting incompatible D-beliefs. We want to quantify the degree of support it offers to some theological proposition, rather than awarding it a binary 'pass' or 'fail'.

Evan Fales' criticisms of Alston's indirect analogy appeal to Duhem's Thesis<sup>99</sup> to articulate this objection in its sharpest form, and develop it into the complaint that mystical practices' override systems do not allow for sufficient defeasibility of old claims by new evidence.<sup>100</sup> His concern is that

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<sup>97</sup> Payne (1990, 156) understands this to be the fundamental objection from religious disagreement.

<sup>98</sup> Consider, for example, the questions one might ask one's confessor to determine at what stage of the spiritual journey one is in if one is a Carmelite friar following a Sanjuanist 'override system' (see Payne 1990 50-85). We have a binary question which will allow for only binary judgments as to the veridicality of religious experiences corresponding to that stage.

<sup>99</sup> See Fales 1996a, 27-29 and 2004, 147-8.

<sup>100</sup> See Zackariasson 2006 for a similar argument. Zackariasson attempts to argue that SP allows for complete rebuttal even of the most foundational beliefs of its override system, unlike any mystical practices, whose override systems typically involve a core of doctrinal claims that cannot be rebutted by new experiential evidence. This objection breaks down since even though sense perceptual experiences might teach us that there are no physical objects now, or anymore (334), it cannot teach us that there never has been an external world – and so it reduces to a concern, like Fales, about the low degree of flexibility and granularity of extant mystical practices' override systems. Compare with simpler forms of this argument (e.g. in Yandell 1993, 34-5 and 205-212) which regard religious experience as being at fault for rendering D-beliefs insufficiently falsifiable.

SP's overrider system enables us, when we come across new experiential evidence which might rebut an old belief, to very easily float, then test, claims which would shore up that prior. SP's reliability, for Fales, is not granted on the basis of social establishment and broad consistency, but because it allows for the easy, fast-paced, typically unconscious framing and testing of auxiliary hypotheses.<sup>101</sup> Formally expressed, this testing grants significant probabilistic support to prior beliefs which play foundational roles in SP's overrider system, as auxiliaries persist in the face of new evidence which could easily, have rebutted them. In extant MPs' overrider systems, there is insufficient provision for analogous priors to be revised in principle, and hence much less self-support.

I suggest that, for Fales, the sufficient condition for presuming a practice reliable is not that its overrider system's provisions for self-correction be speedy and efficient. Since he defends the reliability of sense-perception by appealing to its similarities with the testing of core and auxiliary hypotheses in experimental science, presumably he regards those doxastic practices as reliable, despite their sloth and inefficiency relative to everyday SP. What really matters is that a doxastic practice has clear rules which express how new evidence is to interact with prior beliefs, and that those rules be expressible in a way which makes it transparent why those interactions would tend towards truth. Traditional MPs lack this insofar as their checks and tests conflate practical advice for spiritual growth, with epistemic advice for assessing veridicality; and insofar as their tests operate in a binary fashion and render a wide swathe of prior beliefs infeasible.<sup>102</sup>

Even if we are not convinced by Fales' argument that this level of granularity and reflective vulnerability is a necessary condition for a practice's *prima facie* reliability, we might be persuaded

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<sup>101</sup> Fales 2005, 148. Stace (1961, 140-6) gives an early precursor of an argument like Fales', by making "order...regularity of succession, repetition of pattern" (140), of the kind instantiated in nature, a necessary condition for a type of experiences' "objectivity" (141).

<sup>102</sup> Alston's response (2004, 158-161) is to understand Fales' account of adequate overrider systems to be driven by the desire to be able to isolate experiences' causes; but, he argues, overrider systems do not always do this, and would not always accurately test for veridicality even if they did.

that these features would be desirable – especially since many of the religious beliefs we want religious experiences to be able to support play a role in our lives more like wide-ranging scientific beliefs than everyday visual or auditory beliefs. So, to satisfy the motivations behind this criticism, we want descriptions of fine-grained tests, which make clear how they can be used to give nuanced evaluations of D-beliefs, and hence encourage nuanced theological conclusions. We should bear this desideratum in mind when we consider what ‘overrider system’ might cope best with the concerns motivating the Circularity Objection.

### 1.3.2.2 Extant Overrider Systems don’t Check for Truth-Apt Causal Chains

Perhaps these kinds of tests are also problematic because passing them does not indicate that the experiences were caused by God<sup>103</sup> in the appropriate way.<sup>104</sup> Moral and spiritual fruits, and feelings of certainty or clarity or calm, are known to admit of natural causes, so that their occurrence with a religious experience does not guarantee that God caused it.<sup>105</sup> Against the rejoinder that God ‘counts’

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<sup>103</sup> A frequent objection to trusting religious experiences comes in the form of naturalistic ‘debunking’ arguments which seek to show that there is some better, explanation available for the occurrence of religious experiences than special divine actions, or God’s creation of a ‘mystical faculty’ or *sensus divinitatis*. See, for example, Fales 1996b and 1996c. See Gellman 2005, 159-60 for an overview of some relevant work in the cognitive science of religion. The simplest way of launching this objection, as the claim that naturalistic explanations for religious experiences render God explanatorily redundant (see, e.g. Bagger 1999, 21-57), risks missing the point that, on the Alstonian model, religious experiences are not evidence for claims about God by way of inference to best explanation. Responses to naturalistic debunking genealogies sometimes consist in pointing out the theoretical profligacy or under-determination of those devised in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Ewing 1973, 118-21, Gutting 1982, 160-4, *PG*, 230 and *WCB*, 1924- and 367-8, Gellman 2001, 92-3, and Harper 2014, 65-7), sometimes by pointing out that God’s relationship to created causal processes means that no natural process can be known to be an alternative to divine testimonial action independently of evidence for atheism (e.g. Wainwright 1973, 100-1, and 1984, Attfield 1975, 339-40, Payne 1990, 152 Gellman 2001, 72-3, Ratcliffe 2003, Swinburne 2004, 320, Alston 2010, 79) and sometimes by pointing out that all belief-formations are the results of causal processes which can be described in terms of an unreliable process-type (e.g. Broad 1935, 165-6, *PG*, 249-51 and Yandell 1993, 119-160). Gellman (2001, 33) even argues that if neuroscience suggested that mystical experiences correlated with patterns of brain activity which were not used for anything else, this would constitute evidence that we had a distinct mystical faculty; and Mawson (2005a, 168) points out that it couldn’t constitute evidence against religious experiences’ veracity any more than the distinctness of our eyes counts against visual experiences’. Debunking arguments can be made on the premise that physical causal closure is known to be true, as in Zangwill 2004; but this of course presupposes the falsity of theism.

<sup>104</sup> Alston argues that the kind of causal connection which is appropriate can only be worked out via the practice of an MP, just as we only learn about apt causal chains for vision through exercising vision (Alston 2005b, 214 and *PG*, 64-5).

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Martin 1989, 160. Brakenhielm 1985, 136 offers an alternative argument against the propriety of moral and spiritual fruits tests. Suppose that we want to know whether religious experiences justifying a certain set of beliefs, or including a certain set of phenomenal contents, are reliable (and hence those

as the cause of any experience, just since He is its creator,<sup>106</sup> it seems that God is in the habit of creating religious experiences which support both true and false beliefs, so that His causing them in this way will not guarantee their veridicality. He must cause them in the right kind of way<sup>107</sup> if they are to be veridical because caused by Him. Additionally, the reliability of sense-perception seems to have a great deal to do with the complexity and regularity of causal connections in the physical world.<sup>108</sup> In the mystical case, however, God's omnipotence means that He does not need to intervene in creation via any mediate changes among creatures that we could discern and 'manipulate' as we can with light beams or sound waves. His incorporeality means that His direct actions in creation will not easily be identifiable as His. This may make it impossible to discern the theological equivalent of stimulus conditions.<sup>109</sup>

Finally, some defenders of the perception analogy have argued that, given God's freedom, the absence of a religious experience cannot count against the evidential force of other experiences even in circumstances where a practitioner's prior beliefs would lead them to expect one.<sup>110</sup> This claim leaves them particularly vulnerable to this version of the Bad Tests Objection, since if God's freedom is such

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beliefs true, or those contents representative of reality). Unfortunately, religious experiences similar in these respects are dissimilar with respect to their moral or spiritual fruits. But all Brakenhielm's evidence tells us is that token religious experiences cannot be presumed veridical on the basis of their type, where types are distinguished by doxastic product or phenomenal content. They might be veridical as tokens of other types – most pertinently, the type which produces moral or spiritual fruits.

<sup>106</sup> Wainwright (1984, 90-2), Brakenhielm (1985, 100), Gellman (2001, 72), Swinburne (2004, 320), and Alston (*PG*, 232), all defend the view that since God is the cause of every experience, veridical or otherwise, the relevant checks and tests need not have to do with whether God caused the experience in some particular way, as in sensory perception.

<sup>107</sup> See MacIntyre 1955, 257, Gale 1991, 314-5 and Zangwill 2004, 4. A weak version of this objection can run on the claim that veridical experiences must be tokens of process types which consist of physical causal chains; but as Yandell (1993, 258) and Wainwright (2010, 36-7) point out, that claim prejudices the case against experiences of any non-physical object, such as God. Mawson (2003 and 2005b) points out a range of ways God could bring about a true belief via a religious experience without meeting the counterfactual conditions often associated with knowledge.

<sup>108</sup> As per Fales' (1996, 36-8 and 2004, 155) criticisms described above.

<sup>109</sup> An early statement of an argument like this can be discerned in MacIntyre's claim that we could only trust a religious experience if we could see God causing it using sense experience (1959, 72).

<sup>110</sup> E.g. Mavrodes 1970, 78-80, Rowe 1982, 90, Brakenhielm 1985, 144-4, *PG*, 49, Gellman 1997, 62-4 and 2001, 31, Kwaan 2006, 651, Wainwright 1973, 268, 1981, 94 and 2010, 36-7.

that we cannot 'hold Him to account' in this way, differences between creaturely states of affairs are not going to reliably indicate the presence or absence of special divine actions.<sup>111</sup>

### 1.3.2.3 Extant Overrider Systems are Circular

An alternative line of attack concedes that mystical practices might have overrider systems which appeal to regularities in God's behaviour such that passing the tests indicates God's appropriate causal involvement in a religious experience. But perhaps the Bad Tests Objection returns if those regularities in God's behaviour assume certain prior beliefs about God's nature or intentions.<sup>112</sup> Then, we might allege, those beliefs about God's nature and intentions must be either D-beliefs, beliefs supported by testimony regarding religious experiences, or derived theological beliefs, themselves in turn supported by D-beliefs or testimonies to religious experiences.<sup>113</sup>

For example, if we believe that God wants information about Him to be communicated by pious community leaders, then a subject's piety and leadership might testify to the veridicality of her religious experiences. But, it might be alleged, these beliefs about what God wants are ultimately based on some other religious experiences. Alternatively, it might be objected that our judgments about what natural activities or events would count as more or less morally or spiritually fruitful depend on beliefs whose support terminates in other religious experiences in a similar fashion.<sup>114</sup> And until we know that those experiences reliably inform us about God's behaviour, the tests based on them cannot be assumed to be relevant to what God would do, and whether a later religious experience was really caused by Him in the right way.

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<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Conway 1971, 163-4 and Gale 1994b, 873. Conversely, Wainwright (2010, 34) considers a weakness of MPs arising from their potential for treating experiential evidence as good when none of the stimulus conditions stipulated by the practice have been satisfied.

<sup>112</sup> E.g. MacIntyre 1955, 256.

<sup>113</sup> Losin (1987, 65) points out this feature of MPs in response to an iteration of the Bad Tests Objection in Rowe 1982, regarding it as analogous to SP's circularity and hence benign. Daniels, on the other hand, treats appeals to established doctrine as appeals to authority of a vicious kind (1989, 496).

<sup>114</sup> E.g. Smart 1965, 87 and 1979, 117, Losin 1987, 67 and Franks Davis 1989, 74.

This criticism of ‘fruits’ tests is related to concerns that mystical practices’ overrider systems give an inappropriate role to ‘orthodoxy’. That is, certain prior beliefs constitutive of the religious tradition give rise to undercutting defeaters which operate so that no new evidence could ever lead to their rebuttal: an experience’s ‘heterodox’ content serves to disqualify it as illusory. If these prior beliefs can only be evaluated using the candidate practice, then we have what Alston calls “epistemic circularity”.<sup>115</sup> Epistemic circularity will similarly obtain if we can only evaluate a mystical practice using other, but closely associated and equally controversial, practices. When and why would this be a problem? As we will see below, not anywhere, and not because epistemic circularity is inherently vicious.

Below we’ll examine what advocates of the Circularity Objection have said in defence of the special relevance of epistemic circularity in the religious experience case. But we can begin to illustrate the concern by considering responses to two last sets of tests advocated by defenders of the perception analogy: tests which will not raise the circularity issues Alston’s MPs struggle with.

Swinburne’s presentation of the analogy<sup>116</sup> focusses not on overrider systems unique to mystical practices, but on the overrider system which applies to trusting others’ testimonies about their experience. The main tests D-beliefs need to pass, in this presentation, concern the honesty and sobriety of the subject of the experience. The issue with these tests is that a vast number of incompatible D-beliefs will pass them. Given the binary nature of the judgments involved in assessing

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<sup>115</sup> MacIntyre (1955) and Martin (1989, 160) object to orthodoxy tests on this ground. See Alston 1986 for a discussion of the kind of circularity at issue here. See Pike (1978, 224-229) for an interpretation of MacIntyre’s objection which mis-describes them in such a way that they would involve uncontroversially vicious circularity.

<sup>116</sup> Swinburne 2004, 303-322. Swinburne’s appeal to general testimony-trusting practices is more common in the earlier literature – as in, for example, Trueblood 1957 (156-8) and Mavrodes 1970 (81). Wall (1995, 265-294) articulates an overrider system for a generic ‘universal religious doxastic practice’ which functions effectively like Swinburne’s, with the same results.

a subject in these terms, we will be left at a loss when adjudicating which claims about God, when given as D-beliefs, are most likely to be true.<sup>117</sup>

Alternatively, we could try and reduce the specificity of our checks and tests so that they are rooted only in uncontroversial, perhaps only in natural, theological beliefs.<sup>118</sup> This will have the same consequences as using a paired down, ‘universal’ practice like Swinburne’s.

### 1.3.3 The Circularity Objection, Unmasked

It seems, then, that the most promising ways to make the above Interpretation and Bad Tests Objections are to draw attention to the circularity involved in treating religious experiences as evidence for D-beliefs. The kind of circularity here cannot be a matter of begging the question. D-beliefs are not based on any other beliefs, so cannot be based on themselves. The worry instead is that prior beliefs including (implying, or entailing) the same propositional content as new D-beliefs govern the practices within which those belief are justified.

As we have seen, this can occur in two ways. It can enter in at the point of *prima facie* justification, where the prior belief is necessary for interpreting the experience so that it supports the D-belief – this is the version of the Interpretation Objection left standing by our discussion.<sup>119</sup> Or, the prior belief can enter in at the point of absolute justification, where the prior belief is required by the overrider system ‘passing’ the D-belief and ‘failing’ incompatible rivals – this is the standing version of the Bad Tests Objection.

Epistemic circularity, which occurs when a prior belief provides for the justification of a new belief by providing for a rule in the system in which the new belief was justified, seems intuitively worrying. If

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<sup>117</sup> E.g. Mawson 2005a, 169.

<sup>118</sup> As Wainwright (2010, 39) suggests.

<sup>119</sup> Hence, Franks Davis (1989) calls the “Vicious Circle Objection” what I have called the Interpretation Objection.

we are evaluating a belief, we are typically agnostic as to the truth of its propositional contents. So if it turns out that we can't evaluate the belief without assuming the truth of its contents elsewhere in our noetic structure, it looks as though we can't evaluate the belief, full stop.

This kind of circularity occurs in our most familiar and uncontroversial practices, however. Alston's example is sense-perception: we can't evaluate our sense-perceptual beliefs about the external world without taking for granted the truth of some of our sense-perceptual beliefs, such as the reality of the external world.<sup>120</sup> Given the inescapability of epistemic circularity, we need an explanation of why it should be an issue in the case of religious experience.

The best place to look for this explanation is in the writing of those who have most explicitly posed the Circularity Objection, and posed it in acknowledgement of the common sense response central to the perception analogy. What we find in nearby responses to *Perceiving God*, explicitly acknowledging the 'common sense' response to the Circularity Objection, is a recurring theme:

"The critic's response [to the argument that sense-perception is equally infected by epistemic circularity and hence epistemic circularity cannot be considered suspect] is that MP is disanalogous to SP in ways that render it less worthy of epistemic respect, *the most important of which is that, whereas there is a multiplicity of established rival MPs having incompatible overrides and creeds which are epistemically on all fours, there is a single SP...*[Then, the Alstonian might defend the rationality of remaining in the mystical practice one is familiar with rather than using another, in the knowledge that they are 'on all fours', by adverting to the practical rationality of doing so. Unfortunately...] Pragmatic

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<sup>120</sup> PG 249. Similar responses are made by Swinburne (2004, 303-9) and others (e.g. Trueblood 1957, 155, Mavrodes 1970, 75-6; Losin 1987, 69).

arguments...have the peculiarity that it is possible that there is a pair of incompatible propositions...such that sound pragmatic arguments can be given for each of two differently situated persons believing...a different member of this pair...*A Hindu, like anyone else, can consistently give two sound pragmatic arguments, one justifying his participation in the Hindu MP on the grounds of its good consequences and the other justifying a Muslim engaging in the Muslim MP on similar grounds.*" (Gale 1994a, 145-148, my emphasis.)

Richard Gale is worried about epistemic circularity in assessing religious experiences because he is worried about how to judge, with respect to truth, between rival theological claims.<sup>121</sup> And, it would, seem, the same concern motivates Terrence Tilley:

*"vivo*, many are confronted with religious choices in our pluralistic age, and Alston's epistemology has no clear place for dealing with that fact...His epistemic naturalism is a step in the right direction, but not one which has reached the promised land of providing a practical epistemology for justifying religious belief in the context of evidently irreducible pluralism in religious practices." (Tilley 1994, 166-7.)

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<sup>121</sup> See also Gale 1991, 322 and 1994b, 874, where Gale regards mystical practices as unreliable by treating all religions as using the same practice and thereby generating massive internal inconsistency as well as using an incoherent overrider system. This makes sense only if we are interested in religious experiences as evidence in some generic, non-confessional theological enterprise – the interest in religious experiences which, I argue here, underlies the Circularity Objection. Wall (1995, 25-29) defends treating all mystical practices as subordinate to one "universal religious doxastic practice" (25), however, on the grounds that a conciliationist argument from epistemic parity between practitioners of rival mystical practices of the kind I discuss in Chapter 3 renders religious experiences trivially weak sources of evidence (28). He notes that his 'URP' alternative to a plurality of mystical practices, which functions in a similar way to Swinburne's 'common sense' checks and tests (see above), will also positively evaluate many inconsistent religious experiences in a coarse-grained way. Both are missing the granularity we want for carrying out responsible theological investigation using religious experiences.

A little interpretative legwork is required to see what Tilley is concerned about.<sup>122</sup> Tilley's attack here on *Perceiving God* does not offer a criticism of Alston's theory of justification which suggests that, because it is false, religious believers are not justified in their D-beliefs even if they satisfy Alston's conditions on justification. Nor does he offer a criticism of Alston's perception analogy which shows that religious believers do not satisfy Alston's conditions on justification. So we must read "justify" here in some other sense than Alston's. If we read Tilley's "justifying" here as internalist, then Tilley's complaint seems to be that the Alstonian approach leaves the religious believer with little to no advice concerning how best ensure their D-beliefs are true when faced with religious disagreement.

Consider also Wainwright's consideration of the non-believer who wants to know whether he can trust a testifier to a D-belief, because that testifier is justified by their mystical practice, despite the fact that the non-believer does not engage in that practice:

"[Alston] concludes that I (who do not engage in CMP) can have good [*tout court*, not epistemic] reasons for accepting these perceivers' testimony and hence believing their claims...[but] I am not sure this will do. For I have similar reasons for believing that Buddhist mystical practice (BMP) or Hindu mystical practice (HMP) "endows its products with prima facie justification," and so on..."  
(Wainwright 2000, 220.)

Wainwright goes on to argue that the fact that the curious non-believer could only decide who to trust in terms of the coherence between their N-beliefs and A-beliefs, and the contrasting D-beliefs of the Christian, Buddhist and Hindu.<sup>123</sup> The implication is that the mystical practices, and so religious experiences, are redundant.<sup>124</sup> This redundancy, from the perspective of the neutral investigator of theological truth, is then supposed to fold back onto her religious interlocutors' epistemic status.

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<sup>122</sup> Tilley 1994.

<sup>123</sup> Wainwright 2000, 220-1.

<sup>124</sup> Wainwright 2000, 224.

Wainwright brings about that reduction by an appeal to conciliationist principles concerning peer disagreement, which I will discuss in Chapter 3. Without those principles, however, the issue here is the investigator's inability to make theological progress using religious experiences, if all they have to go on is these rival mystical practices and their mutually isolated overrider systems.

Otherwise, what we find in objections from circularity is a concern about the epistemic status of D-beliefs undergirded, rhetorically or dialectically, by a concern about the practical difficulty of deciding what to believe about God, given that others have different religious experiences. Externalist epistemologies may guarantee positive epistemic status, of at least some of the kinds defenders and critics are both interested in, for some D-beliefs. But the traditional methods for evaluating D-beliefs do not, in the last analysis, allow individuals to make well-considered theological judgments outside of a narrow practical or confessional context.<sup>125</sup>

#### 1.4 Conclusion: Circularity, Granularity, and Veridicality

The concern here has moved from the epistemological to the theological. We can continue to express these worries in epistemic terms: we want, ideally, a confession-neutral method for deciding when to change our beliefs about God, and by how much if we are able to regulate our beliefs so carefully. And, more realistically, even if an entirely neutral method is unavailable, we want one which tells us how much to change our beliefs about God in virtue of our or other's religious experiences. But we can also express the concern more directly: what we want is to discover more about God, given those religious experiences. We want a method for evaluating how much, and in what ways, our own and others' religious experiences contribute to our total evidence available for and against interesting

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<sup>125</sup> See, for example, Peter Losin's (1987, 66-8) criticism of Wainwright's 1981. Alston accepts that theological uncertainty of the kind raised here is something his account cannot handle, but regards grappling with it as a minority situation in comparison to the "normal science" (Alston 1994a, 177) of operating within a CMP where one is certain about the truth of one's own confession. The Kuhnian analogy seems strained here: one would think that theology which takes account of multiple theistic traditions constitutes the "normal science" and working only within one confession constitutes research regarding a particularly significant auxiliary hypothesis.

theological claims. And such a method will be even more useful if it can be used by anyone, no matter how deeply committed they are to any prior theological beliefs.

In order to outline what such a method would be like, I need to introduce the way I advocate representing evidence in general. These assumptions or recommendations need to pave the way for a method which admits of the fine granularity which critics claim is absent from the 'overrider systems' of actual mystical practices. That is the task of the next chapter. Chapter 3 seeks to move readers not yet persuaded of the value of the method I will develop, by responding to an argument that, so long as our epistemically circular mystical practices leave us rational in the face of religious diversity, we will do best simply to trust whichever we are engaged in.

Even if we can outline a method which satisfies the theological desires which motivate the Circularity Objection, we will still face two versions of the Bad Tests Objections. Although neither establishes that religious experiences do not have evidential force, both show that the mystical practices we currently have fail to satisfy important desiderata for a theological method incorporating religious experiences. The first stems from the dissatisfaction we might have with the binary judgments involved in traditional moral and spiritual fruits tests; and also with our inability to root the reliability those tests in an idealized model which shows that they allow for precise reflective equilibrium. To satisfy this desideratum, we want our new method to provide much higher sensitivity and granularity, and for us to be able to precisely state how new evidence accumulates to revise rational belief. The second desideratum stems from the concern that God's transcendence and freedom renders traditional checks and tests irrelevant to establishing whether the religious experience was caused in a way that guarantees the truth of the belief it supports. To satisfy this desideratum, we will want our new method to involve checks and tests which clearly bear on whether or not God caused the experience *qua* honest testimony. Chapters 4 and 5 develop a way of representing and assessing religious-experiential evidence which satisfy these desiderata as well as avoiding local epistemic circularity.



## 2. Ideas from Evidentialism

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers an alternative way of thinking about the role religious experiences can play in justifying theological beliefs. As opposed to Alston's externalist-inspired approach, which defends the rationality of D-beliefs in light of the inescapability of relying on some doxastic practices, and the putative equivalence between mystical doxastic practices and others we take for granted, Richard Swinburne's defends the rationality of D-beliefs on the basis that religious experiences are a kind of experiential evidence just like any other, given a broad internalist understanding of evidence. So, I describe Swinburne's account of "evidentialism" about justification or rationality, and how he incorporates religious experience into this, present how we can think about the probabilistic support relationships between beliefs and evidence, and hence between D-beliefs and religious experiences, and so introduce "probabilism" about evidential fit. In doing so, I introduce two views about the nature of experiential evidence as "report-propositions", such as "it seems that there is a tree in the courtyard" and "content-propositions", such as "there is a tree in the courtyard", and describe how religious experiences might contribute evidence *qua* content- or report-propositions. I suggest how Swinburne's approach, suitably modified, can potentially address our desire to have a more fine-grained approach to the evaluation of religious experiences.

Without the apparatus I introduce in later chapters, Swinburne's approach leaves us with one way of quantifying the evidence constituted by religious experience: specifically, the amount that someone's religious experience contributes to their total evidence becomes equivalent to the strength of any D-belief they wholly base on it. But we might think that this equivalence does not respect the potential disconnection between belief and reality which prompts us to measure evidence for and against a belief in the first place; and so we might be driven to elaborate on Swinburne's approach. I propose

that if we are interested in assessing the truth of beliefs' propositional contents, we can still use the framework and insights of probabilism about evidential fit and evidentialism about justification or rationality, even if we are not interested in assessing whether someone is justified or rational in some belief. This chapter serves the purpose of introducing some concepts concerning probability and evidence which will be important throughout the remainder of my thesis.

In the next chapter, I consider another concern lying behind the Circularity Objection to Alston's approach: the idea that epistemic circularity of the kind employed in evaluating religious experiences within a tradition deprives believers of justification when faced with those in other traditions because of principles regarding the rational response to what philosophers have called "peer disagreement". I argue there that responses to peer disagreement generate counter-intuitive results, or do not say enough, when applied to the context of using religious experiences as evidence in theology – and that the lacunae they leave can be filled in by my framework. How this is so will be clearer if we already have to hand a way of describing and quantifying the evidential force of religious experiences which is alternative to Swinburne's. So, at the end of this chapter, I suggest an alternative way of representing the evidence religious experiences provide, as "event-propositions" rather than "content-" or "report-propositions".

## 2.2 Evidentialism

Evidentialism differs from the doxastic practice approach to justification in two important ways. Firstly, it is internalist, claiming that an agent can satisfy the conditions for justification via what they can introspectively access – their belief does not have to have been produced, or be sustained, by a process which is in fact reliable or functioning properly. Secondly, it is synchronic: while externalist accounts like Alston's can make justification depend on how a belief was formed in the past, evidentialism purports only to give an account of whatever positive epistemic status accrues to a belief

in virtue of how it is supported at the moment of assessment.<sup>126</sup> These two features might mean that evidentialism picks out a notion of ‘justification’ too narrow, and ‘evidence’ too broad, to deliver the right results with all common cases of knowledge- or rationality-attribution:<sup>127</sup> if so, an evidentialist account of how religious experience might justify or provide for knowledge of theological beliefs might be vulnerable to counter-examples where someone’s religious belief seems clearly unreasonable, or epistemically valuable, but evidentialism would regard it as justified in the former case or unjustified in the latter.

So my use of evidentialism comes with the proviso that I am using it as a representative device: on the one hand for the arguments for scepticism about religious experience explored in the next chapter, and on the other for the evidential role religious experiences should play for an ‘ideal’ theologian in their reasoning about God. Having departed from the question of whether or not agents are ‘justified’ or ‘rational’ in their *D*-beliefs, to take up the question of how to evaluate those beliefs for ourselves, purported counterexamples to evidentialism as a theory of justification will not pose a threat.

A straightforward statement of evidentialism as advocated by Richard Feldman and Earl Conee is as follows:

“EJ. Doxastic attitude *D* toward proposition *p* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* if and only if having *D* towards *p* fits the evidence *S* has at *t*.”<sup>128</sup>

“Doxastic attitude” is used rather than belief here so that this definition allows different credences to be justified to different degrees depending on how closely some particular credence fits the evidence.

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<sup>126</sup> See Swinburne 2001, 3 and Conee and Feldman 2011, 313 for an explanation of how purely synchronic accounts isolate a specific sort of value which can be added to by the satisfaction of diachronic features that make a belief more likely to be true; compare with Feldman 2004b.

<sup>127</sup> For arguments to this effect see Baehr 2011 and Rysiew 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Feldman and Conee 2004, 83.

Stronger evidence will justify higher credences. “Doxastic attitude”, in this usage, only means different strengths of beliefs (as opposed to, for example, acceptances, or acting-as-if). But what is it for a belief to fit evidence? And what does evidence consist in?

### 2.2.1 Unpacking Evidentialism

Feldman and Conee’s definition above takes all the evidence available to an agent and regards that, and only that, as contributing to their justification for their attitude to  $p$ . The evidence available is the evidence the agent can access by mental introspection.<sup>129</sup> Then, when characterizing what evidence consists in, we have several options. We can think of evidence as consisting of experiences, and beliefs only as derivative “intermediate” evidence,<sup>130</sup> since if an agent were to ‘lay out’ all their evidence for or against one belief  $p$ , any other beliefs would not make  $p$  more or less likely to be true independently of the experiences which made those other beliefs likely to be true or not. Or, we can think of evidence as consisting entirely of beliefs and credences, regarding basic beliefs and credences as the route via which experiences make  $p$  more or less likely to be true.<sup>131</sup>

Either option will seem more or less attractive depending on how it handles the fact that evidential fit operates in terms of probability relations, since probability relations obtain only between propositions.<sup>132</sup> Choosing an option is a matter of book-keeping so long as we recognize that both must render evidence propositions, and both will lead to precise understandings of the term ‘evidence’ which do not map on to all the ways we use it in natural English.<sup>133</sup> I propose that we think of both beliefs and experiences as evidence, so long as we think of experiences as contributing evidence only in virtue of their propositional content, however we want to think of them as having

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<sup>129</sup> Conee and Feldman 2004, 53, 55-7. This means that memories only count as evidence if they are retrievable: see Conee and Feldman 2008, 89.

<sup>130</sup> See Conee and Feldman 2008, 87.

<sup>131</sup> See Swinburne 2001, 25 for a defence of this view.

<sup>132</sup> See Williamson 2000, 194-200 for a defence of propositionalism about evidence along these lines, and Conee and Feldman 2008, 87-88 and Dougherty 2011 for a discussion.

<sup>133</sup> See Dougherty 2011, 230 for a defence of using ‘evidence’ as a term of art in this way.

content, and so long as we keep in mind that a basic belief cannot contribute ‘extra evidence’ in addition to the experiences which make it probably true.

Then we need to answer the question of what is meant by a belief’s ‘fitting’ some evidence. Since Feldman and Conee leave the notion of fittingness relatively undefined in order to avoid counterintuitive consequences arising from committing to a particular account,<sup>134</sup> I will use Swinburne’s.<sup>135</sup> In binary terms, a belief fits some evidence if (and only if) that evidence makes probable the contents of the belief. More precisely, if some evidence makes some proposition probable to some degree, then only a doxastic attitude, towards that proposition, of the appropriate degree will perfectly fit that evidence. This makes it natural to think of doxastic attitudes of different degrees as corresponding to different beliefs, each belief that the proposition is more or less probable to each different degreed doxastic attitude. We can (but need not) then identify as “beliefs” in the full, binary sense of the term, beliefs that propositions are more probable than not (more than 0.5), following Swinburne.<sup>136</sup> It seems intuitive that if we can have weaker or stronger ‘beliefs’, a stronger belief will only be justified insofar as the evidence makes the contents of the belief more probable, and a weaker belief will only be justified insofar as the evidence makes its contents less so. Fittingness can then, itself, come in degrees: the further our credence in  $p$  is from reflecting the probability of  $p$  on our evidence, the less justified we are in that credence.

This unpacking of the notion of evidential fit leaves one major gap: what account of probability we are using here. Swinburne distinguishes between “inductive” and “epistemic” probability. The latter picks

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<sup>134</sup> See Feldman 2004a, 113-114.

<sup>135</sup> In order to keep my terminology consistent, my presentation of Swinburne’s account is an interpretation into mine. Notably, he sometimes uses the term “support” in an evaluative sense whereby evidence supports a belief that fits it (e.g. Swinburne 2004, 64, 67); in order to retain my non-evaluative use of this terms I will simply write of evidence “making (more or less) probable” beliefs, where the probability in question is inductive probability in the way I go on to define it here. He also uses “inclinations to believe” and “semi-beliefs” to refer to credences below 0.5 (Swinburne 2004, 140), but I simplify by speaking of weak beliefs or low credences.

<sup>136</sup> See Swinburne 2001, 35-6. See Christensen 2004, 12-32, for a brief overview of the debate concerning how (or whether) to represent in terms of credences any binary notion of belief we have.

out the “probability of a hypothesis...relative not merely to evidence but to the logical competence of the investigator”.<sup>137</sup> This second relativity, however, renders justification too far disconnected from truth in the following way.<sup>138</sup> On the one hand, the basic beliefs, or experiences, which make up our epistemic foundations are fallible. The ‘distribution’ of our trust across propositions and their denials, represented as credences, does not perfectly reflect any intrinsic probabilities those propositions might have – so a belief’s inductive, and its content’s intrinsic, probabilities come apart. On the other, we can hold ourselves and each other to account for what we infer or derive from those fallible foundations, particularly when the bases for some controversial beliefs are foundations we share. In terms of investigating what the truth is in some domain, we can only start from our foundations, but we can build on them in a more or less truth-apt way.<sup>139</sup>

What, then, is inductive probability? It is parasitic on the notion of “logical probability”: “that measure of inductive support that would be reached by a logically omniscient being...who knows what are all the relevant logical possibilities and knows what they entail, and has correct inductive criteria”.<sup>140</sup> Suppose that there is a set of correct criteria for valid, truth-preserving inductive inferences.<sup>141</sup> The most basic elements among these criteria, which concern probabilistic support, should be treated as truth-tracking insofar as we believe that logical deduction is truth-tracking since, in Christensen’s words, the probability calculus is “a way of applying standard logic to beliefs, when beliefs are seen as graded. The constraints that probabilistic coherence puts on degrees of belief flow directly from the

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<sup>137</sup> Swinburne 2001, 67.

<sup>138</sup> Epistemic probability in Swinburne’s sense also, *qua* target of epistemic evaluation, flattens out interesting distinctions between different kinds of evidence or defeater which can guide our evaluation of beliefs and search for the truth, as Christensen explains in his 2010, 205.

<sup>139</sup> Christensen (2010, 205) points out that taking epistemic probability as the primary target of epistemic evaluation flattens out distinctions between different kinds of evidence or defeater which we rely on in normal investigation.

<sup>140</sup> Swinburne 2001, 64.

<sup>141</sup> Swinburne presents an optional set of such criteria, and defends them, in Swinburne 2001, 74-128. Many of them do not enable easy determination of the probability of one proposition given that of another and the way in which the latter makes the former more probable; but the inferences I will carry out with respect to religious experiences and D-beliefs in the following chapters do, if only thanks to the artificiality of the framework in which they’re made.

standard logical properties of the believed claims.”<sup>142</sup> Suppose also that all propositions have intrinsic probabilities: 1 for necessarily true propositions, 0 for necessarily false propositions, and some value in between for every contingent proposition. Whatever the metaphysics behind these intrinsic probabilities, the point is that they are not relative to what is accessible to any non-logically-omniscient agent. The logical probability of any contingent proposition  $p$  on  $q$  will be the probability it has, assuming the truth of  $q$  and using these correct inductive criteria.

But, of course, we do not have access to these intrinsic probabilities: we only have access to our beliefs and experiences. So even where we use the correct inductive criteria to determine the probability of one proposition  $p$  on another  $q$ , we will not be determining the logical probability of  $p$  on  $q$ . We will be determining the probability of  $p$  given that we have a certain credence in  $q$ : and this credence may be different from  $q$ 's intrinsic probability. The inductive probability of  $p$  on  $q$ , for any given agent, will then differ from its logical probability with respect to how probable  $q$  is for that agent. But it still sets a standard for rationality and justification which connects rationality and justification to truth, since the correct inductive criteria are still what determines that inductive probability.

Unpacked, Swinburne's evidentialism says that a belief is justified insofar as its propositional contents are made inductively probably true by the believer's evidence. With this view about how evidential fit works, we can call this view about evidential fit “probabilism” and extend that term to describe the connected view about rationality or justification. As we lay out a framework for establishing what inductive probabilities theologians should assign to D-beliefs given religious experiences, I will typically use “probability” alone, since there is no question of discerning their logical probabilities and it would make no sense to recommend a framework for discerning their epistemic probabilities (in Swinburne's sense of the term) since epistemic, rather than inductive probabilities would come about exactly when an ideal framework has been misused or not used.

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<sup>142</sup> Christensen 2004, 15.

Note that on probabilism there is no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ evidence. This might seem counterintuitive, since an agent’s evidence for a belief consists in their other beliefs and experiences, and these can be false, too strong or weak, or misleading. Since the evidential contributions made by other beliefs turn out to be reducible or convertible to the contributions made by experiences, the possibility of misleading experiences is the real issue here. So long as we give an appropriate account of how experiences contribute to evidence, however, the possibility of basing beliefs on misleading experiences and yet being justified is less counterintuitive, since misleading experiences might contribute less evidence than is required to justify a belief. I will discuss how experiences contribute to evidence in more detail in section 2.3.3 below.

### 2.2.2 Total v Relevant Evidence

Conee’s and Feldman’s evidentialism is vulnerable to a class of counterexamples<sup>143</sup> which trade on the way in which someone might possess enough evidence to make their belief probable, but their belief is in fact based on a subset of their evidence which (unbeknownst to the believer) does not make it probable. Their response is to insist that the positive epistemic status picked out by “justification” according to evidentialism does not respect which portion of their evidence in fact supports the belief: “we [assess an agent’s] believing [some proposition] relative to the evidence he actually has...[even though we might alternatively] assess belief in a proposition relative to the evidence one actually considers...[or] assess the belief relative to all the evidence the person has, [or] assess the belief relative to the evidence the person should have....we find the selection of our alternative from this list – the total actual evidence – not to be arbitrary, when ‘ought to believe’ is understood so that it is closely connected to epistemic justification”.<sup>144</sup> Since how best to unpack the concept of ‘epistemic justification’ is what is at stake, an appeal to the concept cannot provide a defence for their

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<sup>143</sup> See DeRose 2011, 138-141, 143-145 for some examples, and Tucker 2011, 54.

<sup>144</sup> Conee and Feldman 2011, 287.

evidentialism here. Rather, Conee's and Feldman's decision to assess a belief in terms of all the evidence the believer has available, neither more nor less, follows from their internalism. They do not want to consider inaccessible psychological facts about which pieces of a subject's total evidence a belief is actually based on, any more than they want to consider inaccessible historical facts about which pieces of evidence they might have acquired in the past, but didn't.

Nevertheless, it does seem worthwhile in certain contexts to evaluate beliefs in terms of the evidence a believer, or their assessor, thinks those beliefs are based on, rather than the total evidence accessible by the believer. An agent might not be able to tell which of his beliefs and experiences in fact support, in my sense of causally sustaining, some particular belief.<sup>145</sup> Swinburne therefore offers an internalist theory of basing which, though, I will not endorse it, allows us to delineate the subset of evidence which we can use to evaluate beliefs in these contexts: "for a subject's belief that  $q$  to be 'based' on his belief that  $r$ , the subject (in so far as he thinks about it) should believe that  $r$  makes  $q$  logically probable".<sup>146</sup> We are often interested in assessing beliefs in terms of the fit only with the evidence on which they are 'based' in Swinburne's sense.

What are the contexts in which it is worthwhile to evaluate a belief, say  $q$ , in terms only of their fit with this particular subset of their total evidence, that is, in terms only of experiences and other beliefs, which the believer consciously takes to make his belief probable? Here is a suggestion: when  $q$  is controversial and we (or the subject) want to assess its likelihood of truth. We need to pick out which evidence to start assessing to see whether the belief really fits it. Now, strictly speaking, since the total evidence referred to by evidentialism is all available evidence, one might think we don't need to pick out this subset, since even in these contexts of controversy and uncertainty we will have access to all the available evidence, given the internalist way evidence has been defined. But much of that

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<sup>145</sup> See Evans 2013, 2946 for a paradigmatic case of "unconscious basing".

<sup>146</sup> Swinburne 2001, 129.

evidence will not be relevant, making  $q$  neither more nor less probable. Some of it will be relevant, but the agent does not initially think so. In these contexts the fact that we can still access his total evidence means that we can see if it includes evidence which is relevant to  $q$ , but which he has not noticed is so, and bring it before him to include among the evidence he considers to make  $q$  probable. Then this expanded subset can be examined to see whether it really does make  $q$  probable after all. For every belief, there is a subset of the believer's total evidence which that believer takes to be relevant to the probability of that belief; more evidence can be added to this subset, from the total, when we want to evaluate that belief. Call this subset the "relevant evidence", with respect to the belief under evaluation.<sup>147</sup>

### 2.2.3 Experiences as Evidence

In illustrating what defenders of probabilism mean by "logical probability" and "inductive criteria", examples from gambling and scientific experimentation can be very helpful – and so helpful in unpacking the role these play in evidential fit relationships. For example, given that (1) "there is a physical probability of 0.9 that a photon emitted [in these conditions] will pass through [this] slit", and (2) "this [particle] is a photon emitted [in these conditions]", by applying the Principal Principle, it is 0.9 probable that (3) "this [particle] will pass through [this] slit".<sup>148</sup> In epistemic terms, if I am justified in a credence of 1 that (1), and likewise in fully believing (2), and the Principal Principle is part of the correct inductive criteria, then evidentialism will render me justified in a full belief that (3') "it is 0.9 probable that this particle will pass through this slit", or justified in a credence of 0.9 that (3). Correspondingly, if I were only justified in a credence of 0.9 that (1) and only justified in a credence of 0.9 that (2) and the Principal Principle were correct, then I will be justified only in the full belief that (3'') "it is 0.72 probable that this particle will pass through this slit" or in a credence of 0.72 that (3). Similarly, if I have a justified full belief that (4) "It is 0.99 probable that the first sentence of my pamphlet

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<sup>147</sup> The term is taken from Yandell 1993, 234.

<sup>148</sup> This example is taken from Swinburne 2001, 78.

is true” and justified in similar beliefs about the probability of truth of other ninety-eight sentences of my pamphlet, then I will be justified in the belief that (5) “It is .37 probable that there are no false sentences in my pamphlet”. Likewise for considering the evidential force of near-certain beliefs when combined: if I’ve a 0.99 credence that each of the sentences in my pamphlet is true, I’ll be justified in a .37 credence that all of the sentences are.<sup>149</sup>

Unfortunately, however, we don’t often need to evaluate beliefs about coin-tosses, and can’t get to justified, full belief in propositions like (1) without having to consider relations of evidential support less amenable to expression in probabilistic terms. Indeed, many if not most of our beliefs are supported directly by experiences, or by beliefs about experiences, which aren’t easy to represent in this way. And, of course, those beliefs like (1), (2) and (4), whatever their strengths, will ultimately be justified by, and hence justify other beliefs in virtue of, their being made probable by experiences. My relevant evidence for my belief that (5) “there is a laptop before me” is, plausibly, a sensory experience of a laptop before me, perhaps combined with a doxastic experience, either simply that there is a laptop before me, or that the sensory experience presents a laptop to me. How are these experiences supposed to make (5) probable? And how probable is (5), just in virtue of my having the experience?

#### 2.2.3.1 Strengths of Experience and Quantities of Evidence

Earlier, I considered the possibility of treating all evidence as beliefs, with basic beliefs or credences providing all our foundations. Basic beliefs or credences that could play this role could be of two kinds. They could report an experience: “I seem to see a laptop before me” or “It seems (visually) that there is a laptop before me”, for perceptual experiences; “It seems (mnemonically) to me that yesterday I went to the doctor’s” to report a doxastic (memory) experience supporting beliefs about the past; “It seems (intuitively) true to me that  $2+3=5$ ” to report a doxastic (logical intuition) experience, and so

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<sup>149</sup> These examples assume, for simplicity, that the supporting beliefs are logically independent.

on. Call these 'report-beliefs'. Then if these report-beliefs were justified, they would justify corresponding beliefs like "there is a laptop before me", "yesterday I went to the doctor's", and "2+3=5", in the absence of defeaters. Call these 'content-beliefs'. If some credence below full belief were justified in the report- beliefs, then they would justify a corresponding credence in those content-beliefs about the external world, the past, and mathematics.

It might seem strange, however, to assume that a belief that some proposition only seems true, or the world seems to be a certain way, could justify a belief that the world is that way, particularly in light of the following. These report-beliefs, which just report our inner mental life, to which we have privileged access, are incorrigible: we can't rationally doubt their truth. But if they were to justify a content-belief of equal strength, particularly one concerning contingent states of affairs, certainty about how things are independently of our minds seems to come rather cheaply. This strangeness can be absolved in two complementary ways. The first is that not all 'seemings' are necessarily equally strong, so the rational certainty that arises from their incorrigibility does not have to translate into certainty about contingent mind-independent goings-on: a 'weak' experience would be reported by a report-belief which incorporated that weakness, so that it would then only justify a correspondingly weak content-belief. Secondly, with respect to contingent, mind-independent states of affairs, we would expect to have many other beliefs, basic and otherwise, in our total, and indeed relevant, evidence, some of which would make the content-belief less probable. So even if we are *prima facie* justified in a content-belief of a strength directly proportional to the strength of the seeming reported in the report-belief, we will not always be justified in a belief of that strength once we have taken account of the rest of our relevant evidence.

Our other option is to 'cut out the middleman' of report-beliefs and think of those content-beliefs, which just describe how things are and omit the seeming-preface, as our basic beliefs.<sup>150</sup> Their

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<sup>150</sup> See Swinburne 2001, 137 for more detail concerning this distinction.

propositional contents then won't be guaranteed to be true in virtue of their being incorrigible. But if any other beliefs are to be justified by them, the propositional contents of those non-basic beliefs must be more probable, given the basic beliefs' contents, than independently of those basic beliefs' contents. This is initially a straightforward matter: suppose that beliefs (1) and (2) above are (somehow) basic beliefs for me, and basic beliefs are content-beliefs. Their contents make (3) 0.9 probable, so justify me in a 0.9 credence that (3). But this is only so if I have full belief – a credence of 1 – that (1) and (2), and am justified in having that credence. But it seems counter-intuitive that I could be justified in this kind of certainty, with respect to some contingent proposition, purely on the basis of an experience, given that many experiences do not inspire certainty even in the absence of defeaters. If we treat basic beliefs as content-beliefs, then we should suppose them to often fall short of this kind of certainty, and the strength of our content-beliefs to be determined, and justified, by the strength of the experience they represent. If they were not justified in this way, then no justification would 'trickle up' to non-basic beliefs.

In other words, we should expect many of our content-beliefs to be credences lower than 1; whatever value they have, if these credences are to justify other beliefs, those credences must be justified by the experience – and the only aspect of the experience appropriate for justifying content-beliefs to different degrees of strength is the strength of the experience, the extent to which it convicts us of the world being that way. Content-beliefs' propositions do not have a clause which allows them to disinterestedly report on the strength of an experience; rather, the strength of the experience is expressed in the credence we have in those propositions.<sup>151</sup> If, again, it seems counter-intuitive that the strength of an experience could justify the strength of a belief and hence justify our nonbasic beliefs, recall that our justification in the non-basic beliefs will depend not just on how much the basic belief makes it probable, but also how much other relevant beliefs make it probable.

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<sup>151</sup> This way of thinking about experiential justification is central to Swinburne's evidentialism (see Swinburne 2001, 140-1) and a binary version of this account of experiential justification is crucial to his treatment specifically of religious experiences (see Swinburne 2004, 303).

The above suggestion is a way for basic beliefs to operate as a proxy for experiences in our foundations. Note, however, that both options have the effect of connecting the evidential force of a basic belief to the psychological strength of that basic belief. On the report-belief picture, there is a set of beliefs which are relevant evidence for (and against) some belief about the way the world is – and among the beliefs constituting that evidence is the report-belief. The weight that report-belief bears in relation to the other beliefs in the relevant evidence will be determined by the ‘strength’ of the experience reported by the belief. On the content-belief picture, a similar situation arises whenever we are considering a set of relevant evidence, for a non-basic belief, which includes the content-belief. This time, the weight of the content-belief among those other beliefs is determined by its strength. Since whatever strength it has is justified by the strength of the experience, the evidential force of an experience, prior to considerations of coherence, is equivalent to the strength of the content-belief it justifies; or, it is equivalent to the figure implicit in the clause of the report-belief which expresses how strongly the experience makes it seem that the propositional contents are true.

Note that both of these doxastic ‘gatekeepers’ for experiential evidence translate the phenomenal contents of experiences into the propositional contents of beliefs in a way that might seem, in some contexts, highly charitable. If someone reports their basic, experientially-supported beliefs or credences, and we take the evidential force of the experiences to be fully represented in those basic beliefs, then we side-line the issue of whether someone’s basic credences ‘fit’ their experiences in the non-probabilistic way in which a description of a picture can be more or less accurate. This is a feature of the view: without windows into others’ perceptual- or doxastic-experiential phenomena, critical judgments that others’ basic credences do not ‘fit’ their experiences in this way are going to be irresolvably controversial – as we saw when considering the Interpretation Objection.

### 2.2.3.2 Two Propositional Accounts of Experiential Evidence

Just as we were able to cut out the middleman of beliefs which report on experiences in favour of beliefs which just have the same contents as the experience, yet give a similar account of how, and how much, experiences provide evidence and hence justify, we can preserve this same account whilst cutting out beliefs from the picture altogether. This will be attractive if we want to keep both experiences and beliefs among our foundations, or if we want to regard basic beliefs as providing evidence only derivatively, regarding experiences as our only 'ultimate' evidence. Above, a report-belief turned a particular experience into evidence by representing its contents propositionally. A belief like "it seems that there is a laptop before me" will only be accurately reporting my experience of my laptop if that experience has contents which are propositional.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, a belief like "there is a laptop before me", which is supposed to represent my experience of my laptop in belief form, will only represent that particular experience if the same condition holds: if my experience has propositional contents.

If experiences have propositional contents, however, we might think they can affect the inductive probability of other propositions themselves, and hence provide evidence for beliefs in a more direct manner than countenanced by Swinburne's approach as represented in the above subsection. How much evidence an experience provides will be determined in a similar manner. We can represent the experience as a proposition which includes details about the convicting force of the experience, such as "it seems very clearly that there is a laptop here", or "it seems 0.8 probable that there is a laptop here". Call propositional representations of experiences of this kind 'report-propositions'. If we suppose that if something seems so then, absent defeaters, it is so, the "very clearly" or the "0.8 probable" will be what determines how probable the experience makes beliefs, such as beliefs about the presence of laptops, before we factor in our other evidence.

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<sup>152</sup> Or, at least, contents which can be helpfully represented as a proposition. Assume this qualification wherever I write of experiences having propositional content. See Crane 2009 for an alternative, non-propositional, account of experiential contents which nevertheless allows them to play this role.

Alternatively, we can represent the experience without those details about its force for the subject, with propositions like “there is a laptop here”, which reflect the contents of the experience but not its convicting strength. Call these ‘content-propositions’. Experiences as content-propositions can affect the justification of other beliefs insofar as their truth makes probable other propositions. As with content-beliefs, however, we need to ensure that experiences do not always justify only certainty: that in situations where there is no evidence against the beliefs they support, those beliefs can be weaker than certainty and still be justified. A straightforward way to do this is to suppose that content-propositions can have some probability lower than 1, prior to considering their coherence with other beliefs and experiences. We can then think of the strength of the experience as determining the prior probability of its content-proposition. In this way experiences can provide more or less evidential force by justifying different assignments of prior probabilities to basic beliefs – where these probabilities are prior to whatever other evidence we go on to consider relevant to those basic beliefs.

### 2.2.3.3 Religious Experiences as Evidence

Like Alston’s, Swinburne’s epistemology of religious experience, as presented in his *The Existence of God*, focusses on those experiences which the subject takes to be of God – or, unlike Alston’s, “some other supernatural thing”.<sup>153</sup> On the one hand, he suggests they are perceptual and have a supernatural putative object, and delineates three kinds of religious experience as ‘private’, but with a perceptual character, according to whether they are accompanied by describable, difficult to describe, or no discernible sensations. On the other, his treatment encompasses those where the object is a public, perhaps ‘natural’ phenomenon, even if the qualities it is perceived as having are controversial, such as when “someone may look at the night sky, and suddenly ‘see it as’...something God is bringing about”.<sup>154</sup> The breadth here suggests that what really unites these experiences is their

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<sup>153</sup> Swinburne 2004, 295.

<sup>154</sup> Swinburne 2004, 299.

function in supporting beliefs about God or other supernatural beings. So, if we exclude from our consideration those experiences supporting beliefs about things other than God, we can take Swinburne's analysis of religious experience's justificatory force as a specification of his more general account of experiential justification appropriate to our context.<sup>155</sup>

In the context of *Existence*, Swinburne proposes to treat religious experiences as contributing evidence *qua* report-propositions, defending the justificatory role of experiences treated in this way via a version of phenomenal conservatism<sup>156</sup> he calls the "Principle of Credulity":<sup>157</sup> "How things seem to be...are good grounds for a belief about how things are or were. The more forceful the experience, the stronger the memory, the more probable it is that what we seem to perceive or remember is true – other things being equal."<sup>158</sup> Notice that the Principle of Credulity makes the move I described above, where the strength or weakness of the seeming reported in the "it seems that..." clause of the report-proposition is what allows an experience to make more or less probable a corresponding belief. This means that, on Swinburne's model, the justified probability of a D-belief, prior to considering evidence other than the religious experience it is based on (or, excluding other evidence among its bases), is determined by how "forceful" the experience is.

This is not, of course, the whole account: other experiences and other beliefs can make a difference to the justified probability of the D-belief, by making it more or less probable. Swinburne speaks of

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<sup>155</sup> The account of experiential justification in *The Existence of God* is concise and not explicit about how it would fit in to his view in *Epistemic Justification*, but the latest edition of the former (see Swinburne 2004, 303 fn 9) licenses the interpretation I give here.

<sup>156</sup> See Huemer 2001, 98-108 for an explicit articulation and defence of this iteration of evidentialism. See Tucker 2011 for an account of the role it has played in religious epistemology.

<sup>157</sup> Swinburne 2004, 303. Swinburne's defence of the Principle of Credulity differs from 'particularist' defences of phenomenal conservatism which advert to its deliverance of the right intuitive judgments (about whether characters in thought experiments are justified) in the following way. He argues (306) that "unless most experiences and the stronger memories count (in the absence of counter-considerations) as [making beliefs] probably true, we would have very little of the ordinary knowledge of the world that we think we have." (Swinburne 2004, 306.) This can be read as an argument from the denial of radical scepticism, or as another particularist argument, or both, depending on how we read "the ordinary knowledge of the world that we think we have".

<sup>158</sup> Swinburne 2004, 303.

the Principle of Credulity as being “limited” by “special considerations”,<sup>159</sup> internally accessible beliefs (or experiences) which “when added to the report of the experience, prevent it from making it probable that  $x$  was present”, or that  $x$  was the way  $x$  was presented by the experience.<sup>160</sup> In other words, Swinburne’s evidentialism incorporates what for Alston would be undercutters by regarding them as propositional addenda to the experience *qua* report-belief (or report-propositional experience). Then we ask how much the report-proposition, combined with the proposition representing the undercutter, confirm the belief based on the experience, to determine what credence would be justified by the experience along with the undercutter. For example: suppose we want to know how much the religious experience with report-propositional content “it seems 0.8 forcefully that God is  $F$ ” justifies Nick in having credence 0.8 that “God is  $F$ ”. Prior to any special considerations, and given the Principle of Credulity, Nick would be fully justified in a belief this strong. The way the Principle of Credulity works, on the above model, is to determine that  $\Pr(\text{“God is } F\text{”} | (\text{“It seems 0.8 forcefully that God is } F\text{”})) = 0.8$ . But suppose Nick discovers a special consideration which casts into doubt the veridicality of his experience, an ‘undercutter’ in Alston’s terms, representable as the proposition  $p$ . Then we would determine the value of  $\Pr(\text{“God is } F\text{”} | (\text{“It seems 0.8 forcefully that God is } F\text{”} \& p))$ : if the contents of  $p$ , and the logical relationships between those contents and “It seems 0.8 forcefully that God is  $F$ ” and “God is  $F$ ” are such that the probability value of this expression is lower than 0.8, then Nick’s credence of 0.8 that “God is  $F$ ” will be less justified the further the value is from 0.8.

One advantage of thinking about undercutters in this way is that they can be represented in exactly the same way as rebutters. It could be the case that, instead of discovering the undercutter  $p$ , Nick has, or arrives at, some other belief  $q$ , which conflicts with “God is  $F$ ” by being incompatible or in some way inconsistent with “God is  $F$ ”; then he can establish how strong a belief that “God is  $F$ ” would be

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<sup>159</sup> Swinburne 2004, 310.

<sup>160</sup> Swinburne 2004, 310.

rational for him, given  $q$  and his religious experience, by putting it in the same place as  $p$  occupied in the above expression. If he has less than full belief that  $q$ , this can be expressed by lowering the value of  $p$  in the expression before considering its logical relationship to the two other propositions. Another advantage is that it is easy to express how beliefs could be irrational for being too weak as well as too strong: if the report-proposition and the undercutter or rebutter justify a credence higher than the one the subject has, the subject is not fully justified in their credence because it is too low; given their evidence, their belief should have been stronger.

The undercutters Swinburne considers are, firstly, beliefs that the circumstances of the experience are a token of a type of circumstance which is known to correlate with misleading experiences of that experience-type, or with respect to that subject matter. Secondly, an undercutting belief might suggest that experiences of this phenomenal quality have often turned out to be unreliable with respect to that subject matter in the past. Thirdly, a belief might indicate that it was improbable that the object of the experience was really present.<sup>161</sup> Fourthly, a belief might indicate that it was probable that, even if the object of the experience happened to be present, it didn't cause the experience in a way which would make the experience veridical.<sup>162</sup> The first two of these undercutters have implicit quantitative elements in them even before we account for any uncertainty about the undercutter: the strength of the correlations between the circumstance-type or experience-type and false beliefs. But those quantities don't play a clear role in the expression given in the paragraph before last. Suppose that we held fixed the strength of the seeming in the report-proposition, and stipulated that any experience justified full belief in any experience-based belief, before considering undercutters of the first or second kind. Then in the first case we could add in a proposition into the brackets ("It seems that God is  $F$ "& $p$ ) such as "this experience has occurred in circumstance  $c$  which is  $0.n$  reliable with respect to theological predications" and presumably that would alter the justified credence in "God is

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<sup>161</sup> Swinburne 2004, 311.

<sup>162</sup> Swinburne 2004, 312.

F" from 1 to 0.*n*. In the second case we could do the same with a proposition such as "this experience is of phenomenal type *t* which is 0.*n* reliable with respect to theological predications", with the same presumptive result. How, though, would these propositions interact with seeming-strengths of varying degrees? We will discover similar problems when it comes to treating peer disagreement as a putative undercutter. There seems to be no logical relationship between the undercutter and the force of the experience which would determine the justified probability of the D-belief in a way which respects the experience's force.

Swinburne's response to this issue is to insist that the force of the experience makes a difference, without providing advice on how to balance different degrees of experiential force against undercutters that cast doubt in degrees: "some experiences are very clear...and leave a very strong impression...In so far as an experience has such a character, clearly it needs more in the way of a challenge to defeat it."<sup>163</sup> There is another feature of this account: Swinburne accepts that undercutters for beliefs based on experiences often have to do with whether the experience was produced by its object in a way which guarantee, or make more likely, that the experience accurately represents that object. But, one would think, the 'forcefulness' of an experience is a phenomenal quality which does not even *prima facie* track whether or not the experience was veridical in this sense.

### 2.3 The Propositional Content of Religious Experiences as an Event

Swinburne addresses arguments for the general unreliability of religious experiences from the general availability of undercutters of the first and second kind: there is no general reason to suppose the circumstances religious experiences are formed in are those in which false beliefs are typically formed, and no general reason to suppose that experiences are non-veridical when they have the phenomenal

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<sup>163</sup> Swinburne 2004, 315.

qualities of the kind which religious experiences as I define them – that is, just those experiences which support D-beliefs.<sup>164</sup> The argument here is familiar to Alston’s argument that, since there are mystical practices which do not generate massive internal or external inconsistency, we should not suppose mystical practices unreliable as such. Then, Swinburne argues that the third kind is supposed to be inapplicable in the theistic case since God is present everywhere.<sup>165</sup> The fourth kind is complicated by the fact that, if God is the creator, all religious experiences will ultimately be caused by Him.<sup>166</sup> Charges of the wrong kind of causal relationship will undermine the evidential force of religious experiences when they are not considered as perception, however, but as a special divine action designed to communicate some truth to the subject – as I have defined them. It is not enough for God simply to be the cause of a religious experience *qua* creator of that mental event. He must also be considered the cause of a religious experience *qua* honest communicator of the D-belief in question. This means that “there may be arguments to show that it is very, very improbable that, if there is a God, he would have said or done what the subject claims to have experienced him saying or doing. This would be normally because saying or doing those things would be (very probably) incompatible with the perfect goodness of God. Claims that God told subjects to lie, rape, or torture will be immensely improbable.”<sup>167</sup> If Swinburne is right here, this opens the door to another way of assessing the evidential force of a religious experience which is independent of the strength of belief based on it. More importantly, it opens the door to a way of assessing the evidential force of a religious experience which is independent of the overrider systems of different religions’ mutually controversial, isolated mystical practices. By representing these overrider systems as collections of prior D-beliefs, testimonial beliefs ultimately grounded in D-beliefs, and derived theological beliefs, we can develop a way of assessing religious experiences independently of segregated mystical doxastic practices by

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<sup>164</sup> Swinburne 2004, 315-318.

<sup>165</sup> Swinburne 2004, 319.

<sup>166</sup> Swinburne 2004, 320.

<sup>167</sup> Swinburne 2004, 324.

appealing only to N-beliefs and A-beliefs shared by parties to otherwise intractable theological disagreements of the kind which have motivated the various forms of the Circularity Objection.

The relevance of whether or not God caused a religious experience in the right kind of way should remind us of the fact that experiences are sources of *prima facie* justification because they presumptively reflect accurately the way things are; they do so because they depend on how those things are; and the most natural way of thinking about that dependence is in terms of causation.<sup>168</sup>

Defences of the justificatory power, or minimal evidential force, of experiences require this presumption if justification has to do with truth; the presumption explains why if a belief is based on an experience it is more likely to be true than a belief without a ground, or with a ground known to be misleading regarding the subject matter of the belief. Given the Principle of Credulity, report- and content-propositions will justify perceptual beliefs. But there is another way of attributing propositional contents to experiences such that they will make beliefs more likely to be true – such that the probability of those propositional contents will pass on to probablify the belief's propositional contents and so justify it according to evidentialism.

Swinburne writes:

“An experience...may be described in such a way as to entail the existence of some particular thing apart from the subject...Thus, ‘hearing the coach outside the window’ is not unnaturally described as an experience; but if I have such an experience, and I really do hear the coach outside the window, then it follows that there is a coach outside the window...[a description like this one he calls] an external description. Now when people talk about religious experiences, they often give external descriptions of them...[such as] ‘I talked to God last night’...The

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<sup>168</sup> Naturally this will become controversial when we are considering doxastic experiences of the kind which we rely on to justify our beliefs in necessary truths.

trouble with taking any external description as the premiss of an argument from religious experience is that there is going to be considerable doubt about the truth of the premiss; but, once you accept the premiss, you are quite obviously most, if not all, the way to your conclusion.”<sup>169</sup>

Swinburne’s point here can be expressed in evidentialist, probabilist terms in the following way. The proposition “I talked to God last night” (where ‘talked’ is understood to involve a two-way conversation) entails that God exists and was talking to me last night. So however probable it is, the proposition “God exists” will inherit at least that much probability. The same will be the case for “external descriptions” of religious experiences which support some belief about the way God is, such as “I talked to God last night and He told me that He became incarnate in Christ”: this will, of course, entail that “God exists”, but will also entail, assuming that God is honest, “God became incarnate in Christ”. So whatever probability the external description has, “God became incarnate in Christ” must be at least that probable. The relationship between the event of God’s saying that  $p$  and  $p$ ’s actually being the case is the right kind to guarantee the veridicality of the experience. This will also be the case for external descriptions of other experiences. Take Swinburne’s example of hearing the coach. Perhaps the ambiguity of “heard” between an epistemic sense, which picks out some mental qualia, and a sense which picks out a causal process the occurrence of which requires the object to be as it was heard, makes it unclear that “hearing the coach outside the window” entails that “there is a coach outside the window” – but we can clear up this ambiguity and secure that entailment by reading “hearing” in the latter sense. Then, whatever the probability of the ‘external’ proposition “Nick heard a coach outside the window”, the probability that there is a coach outside the relevant window will be at least as great.

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<sup>169</sup> Swinburne 2004, 294.

These relationships between external descriptions of experiences which guarantee their veridicality, and the propositional contents of the beliefs they support, mean that there is another, albeit less natural, way of describing the propositional contents of experiences: as what I will call “event-proposition”. The event-propositional content of an experience is the proposition which describes what would have to be the case about the experience’s origin in order to guarantee the truth of the belief it supports. Religious experiences will therefore have event-propositional contents which include some clause beside whatever is in their content-propositions, not reporting the phenomenal or epistemic dimension of the experience, but instead describing its theistic provenance, in a way which guarantees its truth. For example, a religious experience of God’s being F would have the content-propositional content “God is F”, the report-propositional content “it seems that God is F”, “God appeared to be F”, “it seems that God is telling me He is F”, or whatever; but an event-propositional content “God presented Himself to the subject as F” or “God disclosed His being F to the subject”. Since an event-propositional representation of a religious experience will guarantee the truth of the D-belief just so long as God discloses the D-belief, and since event-propositions must have this guarantee, I will henceforth simplify matters by always using “God disclosed to the subject that *p*” as the report-propositional representation of any religious experience supporting a D-belief that *p*.

This way of representing religious experiences propositionally renders religious experiences an ‘agent-neutral’ form of evidence. This does not fit easily with the evidentialist view about justification above, which is focussed on what an individual ought to believe given their own experiences; and there are persuasive arguments that justification, or other considerations of epistemic normativity, are fundamentally an agent-centric matter.<sup>170</sup> We should remember, however, that our ultimate goal is not to give an account of when an individual is justified or rational in, or entitled to, their own D-beliefs, but rather to develop as sensitive as possible a method for using religious experiences as evidence in the theological enterprise, considered independently of individuals’ epistemic and

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<sup>170</sup> See, for example, Huemer 2011.

practical situations. The purpose of my discussion of evidentialism was only to introduce an account of evidential fit which we can then apply (as well as to lend clarity to my discussion of peer disagreement in the next chapter) in the theological context. This means that the propriety of representing religious experiences in an event-propositional way will be determined by the usefulness of doing so in developing such a method.

Having said this, my defence of event-propositionalism about the evidential role of religious experiences will mainly consist in showing the merits and desirability of the method of which this event-propositional representation is a component. The last chapter argued that sceptics about religious experience are fundamentally concerned by the lack of a method for handling religious experiences as evidence in intra-confessional theology. The next chapter will press that need by showing how approaches to peer disagreement are inadequate, considered as alternative methods to my own. As we will see, however, treating religious experiences as event-propositions enables us to develop such a method in the following way. Parties to theological disagreements which remain intractable when it is just a question of clashing mystical doxastic practices are likely to share a large range of non-theological beliefs without any religious experiences (or testimonies thereto) among their support – in my terminology, N-beliefs – and, as I will contend, can extrapolate from these a large range of natural theological beliefs, or A-beliefs. Those N- and A-beliefs can be used by parties to theological controversies to determine the probabilities of event-propositions which support their D-beliefs. How so? By considering the moral probity of the actions ascribed to God in the event-propositions representing religious experiences. Such considerations will, I show in later chapters, be highly sensitive to a great deal of uncontroversial information shared by parties across traditions – that is, using mutually isolated mystical practices.

# 3. Deeper Resolutions to Religious Disagreements

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter completes our consideration of how recent epistemology has handled the evidential role religious experiences might play in theology. Again, the goal is to reveal how recent approaches do not deliver an adequate way to evaluate religious experiences and D-beliefs. I begin by returning to the end of Chapter 1 to consider another concern lying behind the Circularity Objection: that the epistemic circularity involved in evaluating religious experiences within a tradition deprives believers of justification because of principles regarding the rational response to “peer disagreement”. So, after I have explained the role this chapter plays in motivating the constructive work of the subsequent chapters, I explain how Schellenberg’s and Hick’s scepticism about religious experiences can be understood as applications of controversial principles concerning the right response to peer disagreement.

To prepare the way for a detailed but controversial account of how to assess religious experiences, the chapter responds to an imagined argument on the part of those who might regard that account as otiose. I suggest that, if we are concerned primarily with theological truth rather than epistemic evaluation, we need a method which avoids the epistemic circularity associated with our current methods of evaluating religious experiences. So an argument against that method will be an argument that current methods are adequate. The argument for this view, which I will call the “Old Methods Argument” can usefully be presented semi-formally so that we can see how I will respond to it:

*The Old Methods Argument:*

(OM1) Rationality, warrant and/or justification is (are) a sufficient condition(s) for a belief's being knowledge (along with truth).

(OM2) A necessary condition for a belief's rationality, warrant or justification is that the evidence on which it is based, or process by which it was formed, makes beliefs so based or so formed probably true. [Implicit in (OM1).]

(OM3) Therefore, insofar as S is rational, warranted and/or justified in some D-belief, that D-belief is likely to be true. [From (OM1) and (OM2).]

(OM4) S will be rational, warranted and/or justified in some D-belief insofar as she has appropriately formed, or she supports, or she regulates, that belief using her "Old Method".

(OM5) Therefore, S's D-belief will probably be true insofar as she has appropriately formed (etc.) that belief using her "Old Method". [From (OM3) and (OM4).]

From (OM5), we can see that a "new method" such as the one I go on to develop will be unnecessary for S's determining the truth of her D-belief. The argument can be transformed slightly and made in terms of the evidential force of the religious experience which supports that belief, just so long as evidence is supposed to track the truth – which it will if an evidentialist account of rationality, warrant or justification is combined with (OM1). It can also be transformed to run for externalist accounts of rationality, warrant or justification whilst being made in terms of the evidential force of the religious experience rather than the likelihood of truth of the D-belief.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Here is the second transformation, for comparison:

(1') Rationality, warrant and/or justification is (are) a sufficient condition(s) for a belief's being knowledge, along with truth.

(2') Veridicality of the experience supporting the belief is a necessary condition for rationality, warrant or justification with respect to that belief.

(3') Therefore, insofar as S is rational, warranted and/or justified in some D-belief, the experience supporting that D-belief is veridical.

(4') S can be rational, warranted and/or justified in some belief based on a religious experience insofar as she has appropriately and positively evaluated that experience using her "Old Method".

(5') Therefore, S's religious experience will be veridical insofar as she has appropriately evaluated it using her "Old Method".

Since I am not concerned with whether any D-beliefs are also “known” by their believers, we should be careful to read the first premise as a vague attempt to express the intuitions underlying rival accounts of the rational response to peer disagreement offered by philosophers.<sup>172</sup> When philosophers disagree about whether a strategy for responding to one’s peers in a disagreement counts as a rational strategy – or whether one’s beliefs remain or become rational, justified or warranted if one responds in that way – they must be disagreeing about something more significant than what the ‘polite’ thing to do is. Since I am not, ultimately, concerned with whether any, or how much particular, beliefs are “justified”, “rational”, or “warranted”, I do not want to defend any particular account of these terms, nor any account of what the “rational” response to peer disagreement is. Rather, my strategy will be to cast enough doubt on (OM4) that readers will be moved to desire a deeper approach to evaluating religious experiences and D-beliefs. To do this, I will assess three families of approaches to peer disagreement which instruct peers to “Conciliate”, “Reflect” and “Stand Fast”. Each of these can be described in a way which, when combined with probabilism, might provide for nuanced and sophisticated responses to getting caught in a peer disagreement. In terms of the Old Methods Argument, each approach proposes an “Old Method” where some epistemic rules of thumb governing evaluation of one’s own experience are combined with some additional rule of thumb about how to change (or not) one’s controversial belief in the face of parity. Each approach advocates an alternative option for that auxiliary ‘rule of thumb’.

I argue that the Conciliate strategy has the undesirable outcome that the facts about who believes what bear too much on the truth of a belief, compared to the facts about what evidence each has. The “New Method”, which consists in determining religious experiences’ evidential force by asking

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<sup>172</sup> Hawthorne and Srinivasan (2013, 9, 14-17) argue that the absence of what Williamson (2000, 93-113) calls “luminosity” about our knowledge states effectively unhitches the epistemic goods (rationality, warrant, justification) associated with an appropriate response to peer disagreement from the truth, so throwing into doubt either premise (1), or the step from (1) to (2), insofar as we are talking about the ‘rational’ (etc.) response to disagreement specifically. Worse, Fumerton (2011) argues that the step from (1) to (2) is in trouble in general due to demon-world worries about externalism (179-80) and difficulties with epistemic probabilities infecting internalism (187-8).

how probable their event-proposition is made by the parties' shared non-theological and natural theological beliefs, can be seen as a preferable alternative way of sharing the evidence of private religious experiences, since it does not reduce those experiences to mere representatives of each party's confidence in their D-belief.

I argue that the Reflect strategy does better than Conciliate insofar as it tells us to incorporate the beliefs of others into our total evidence, and then reconsider our beliefs in light of that new total evidence. Yet it leaves open how to weigh the evidence arising from disagreement against the first-order evidence which supported our beliefs going into the disagreement. It is thereby only adequate in domains for which we already have widely agreed-upon, intersubjective ways of quantifying first-order evidence. In order to make it helpful with respect to theology, religious experience and controversial D-beliefs, we must articulate a way of quantifying this first-order evidence which both (or all) parties to the disagreement can use. The "New Method" provides us with just such a way.

Finally, I consider the Stand Fast strategy, which insists that nothing more need be done after engaging in one's mystical practice. Defences of the Stand Fast strategy typically operate by appealing to that evidence which a peer cannot share because it is a private experience, which is supposed to outweigh the considerations arising from parity and disagreement. I show that such defences leave Stand Fast equivalent to the Conciliate or Reflect strategies. But if we follow the "New Method", we can ascertain in a less arbitrary manner how much weight that previously private evidence should have.

### 3.2 The Peer Disagreement Analogy

At the end of Chapter 1 we saw that some advocates of the Circularity Objection regarded the religious case to be different from mundane cases of epistemic circularity due to religious diversity. An alternative strategy in pressing the Circularity Objection is to appeal to a necessary condition for

justification, one present in the mundane, but absent in the religious, case. This necessary condition is the absence of peer disagreement.

John Schellenberg's criticism<sup>173</sup> of Alston is a good example. He suggests that rationally treating one's own MP as reliable, in the face of religious diversity, would require rationally believing that others' alternative MPs are unreliable. But since one cannot be rational in the latter belief, one cannot be rational in trusting one's own practice. We do not have any reasons for thinking ourselves in a privileged position compared to those using other practices.<sup>174</sup> The claim that the parallel operation of incompatible mystical practices removes justification for all sets of practitioners thereby underpins the claims about vicious circularity. In this form it constitutes a central plank in criticisms of the Alstonian approach made by John Hick in advocacy of scepticism about particular theological claims.<sup>175</sup>

The situation had in mind by Schellenberg and Hick can be described in the following way in the terms used in the previous chapter and introduction. For reference we'll call the following idealized case the *Parallel Practice Case*.

*The Parallel Practice Case:* Alice believes that  $p$  solely on the basis of her religious experience E1, which has been classed as veridical by the mystical practice, MP1, which Alice uses to assess her religious experiences. MP1 satisfies, for Alice, all the conditions which normally make it rational for someone to engage in, and trust, a mystical practice. According to the Alstonian approach, she's justified in her belief that  $p$ . She then meets Ben, who believes that  $q$ , which is inconsistent with  $p$ . Ben believes that  $q$  solely on the basis of his religious experience E2, which his mystical practice MP2 has classed as veridical. For Ben, MP2 satisfies all the same rational engagement conditions that MP1 satisfied for Alice. So in Alstonian terms, Ben is

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<sup>173</sup> Schellenberg 1994.

<sup>174</sup> Schellenberg 1994, 157.

<sup>175</sup> See Hick 2001, 25-27.

justified in his D-belief that  $q$ . MP1's override system tells Alice that E2 cannot have been veridical, and MP2's system likewise tells Ben that E1 cannot have been veridical. Alice and Ben are both justified in believing that the above scenario obtains: they are aware of each other's justification according to the Alstonian approach.

If  $p$  and  $q$  are inconsistent, then E1 and E2 cannot both be veridical. Worse, insofar as MP1's and MP2's assessments of E1 and E2 were paradigmatic, MP1 and MP2 cannot both be reliable. Do Alice and Ben thereby lose their justification for their D-beliefs? If so, by how much? If not, how is the connection between justification and truth preserved? Shouldn't it trouble an epistemically responsible person, if another has taken structurally identical steps, but arrived at a contradictory conclusion?

On a global level, the facts about religious diversity mean that many individuals are in situations like Alice's and Ben's. Whole communities can be taken to be in a position like Alice's, with respect to other communities in a position like Ben's. Hick and Schellenberg suggest that justification is lost in the face of such disagreement and diversity, at least with respect to the particular, controversial religious beliefs which religious experiences often support.<sup>176</sup> In terms of theological investigation, religious diversity thus tells against considering true those theological claims which would be supported by religious experiences. Religious experience is ruled out as useful theological evidence.

Notably, Alston conceded that religious disagreement of this kind, and hence diversity of the extent facing a cosmopolitan religious believer, does reduce believers' justification in D-beliefs. But he insisted that it would not reduce justification as far as Hick and Schellenberg insist: "the facts of religious pluralism<sup>177</sup> do not establish that it is *irrational* for one to engage in C[M]P...But...religious pluralism should diminish the confidence one has in the reliability of C[M]P." Unfortunately, he

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<sup>176</sup> Compare their cases with those discussed in Silver 2001 and Baldwin and Thune 2008.

<sup>177</sup> I.e. that there are many religions, and each has mystical practices which meet Alston's standards for rational engagement, and each of these produce beliefs incompatible with each others'.

continues, “How far is the resulting degree of justification from each of the extremes of full justification and complete lack of justification? I don’t see any basis for answering such questions...I will have to content myself with saying that the degree of justification that remains is such as to make it not irrational for one to...hold the beliefs so formed.”<sup>178</sup>

This does not seem satisfactory: if we do not have a basis for determining how much justification is lost, then we do not have a basis for supposing that we have not lost too much. Consider Alston’s response in terms of the goal of getting true theological beliefs. In the Old Methods Argument, degrees of justification are supposed to operate as a proxy for probability of truth. But if, given the facts of religious diversity, we have no basis for determining one’s degree of justification in some D-belief, then we have no basis for determining how likely to be true that D-belief is.

A response the externalist can make is to deny that these features of mystical practices and religious disagreement affect justification. Rather, she can insist that there simply is a matter of fact about which party’s mystical practice is reliable, if either is, and so a matter of fact about which of them is indeed justified or rational in sticking to their D-belief.<sup>179</sup> But this response jeopardizes the plausibility of her externalism if there is intuitively something “epistemically unattractive”<sup>180</sup> about the situation described here. A cheaper way for a doxastic practice externalist to meet this worry would be to suppose that there is a doxastic practice related to intractable religious disagreement of this kind, which both of the participants use, which takes D-beliefs as inputs, and which has an overrider system that regulates what we should do with D-beliefs in circumstances of the sort represented by Parallel Practice.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Alston 2000, 205. See King 2008, 847 for a discussion of how this line fits into the debate between Plantinga and Feldman discussed below.

<sup>179</sup> This is effectively the response taken by Plantinga (1995, 212-215).

<sup>180</sup> De Ridder 2011, 456.

<sup>181</sup> Note that this is not the same suggestion as that there is one overarching mystical practice for all religions, which would be massively internally inconsistent – but this would ignore their isolation from one another in terms of their distinct overrider systems (see *PG*, 270-3).

Since the inputs, potential overrides and supports, and rules, for that doxastic practice will all be cognitively accessible to its users, I propose to give an internalist description of situations like those Schellenberg has in mind. Fortunately, we have near to hand an internalist discussion of what religious believers ought to do in the face of disagreements like this. In a dispute<sup>182</sup> concerning the rationality of religious exclusivism in the face of religious diversity, Plantinga and Feldman have described a stand-off like the Parallel Practice Case in internalist terms; call it the *Unshared Evidence Case* for reference. I have adapted their conditions to localize the issue to one of incompatible D-beliefs, whereas their discussion concerns religious disagreement including basic theological beliefs which might be supported in other ways.

*The Unshared Evidence Case:* Charlie believes that  $p$ ; his belief that  $p$  is supported by his religious experience E1, and without that religious experience, he would not hold it. It is coherent with his other beliefs and experiences. They contain no (rebutting) defeaters for  $p$ , and no defeaters which would undercut the extent to which E1's strength makes  $p$  probable. The strength of Charlie's belief in  $p$  is appropriate to the degree to which E1 makes  $p$  probable, given its strength. Charlie is aware of all the above. According to an evidentialist approach, Charlie is justified in his belief that  $p$ . He then meets Daisy. Daisy believes that  $q$ , which is inconsistent with  $p$ . Her belief that  $q$  is supported by her religious experience E2 (without which she wouldn't hold it). She has no beliefs and experiences which would rebut  $q$  and none which undercut the extent to which E2 makes  $q$  probable in virtue of its strength. Her strength of belief that  $q$  is appropriate to the extent to which E2's strength makes  $q$  probable. Daisy is aware of the condition she is in.<sup>183</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>182</sup> Namely, Plantinga 1995 and 2000, 454-456, Silver 2001, Feldman 2003, and subsequently Baldwin and Thune 2008 and de Ridder 2011 – see also Feldman 2007.

<sup>183</sup> These conditions are intended to represent those Plantinga stipulates on behalf of the sceptic at 203 of Plantinga 1995, as those conditions which might lead to the loss of justification for two parties in a religious disagreement, but adapted to concern beliefs based on religious experiences.

Charlie has no beliefs or experiences, independent of  $p$  and its supports which, were Daisy to have them, would defeat  $q$  for Daisy; and Daisy has no beliefs or experiences, independent of  $q$  and its supports which, were Charlie to have them, would defeat  $p$  for Charlie. Finally, Charlie and Daisy believe the above conditions obtain and are justified in believing so.

The sentence beginning “Additionally...” expresses the idea that, in order for this situation to threaten Charlie or Daisy’s rationality in holding their incompatible beliefs, neither of them may have a “reason to discount [the other’s] reasons and favour their own”;<sup>184</sup> and, furthermore, that these reasons can’t simply consist in their belief that the other’s belief is false, with its implication that the other’s reasoning must be flawed or their evidence misleading – hence the clauses beginning “independent”. Without this condition, there would be cases in which parties satisfied all the other conditions and were clearly both rational – they could each be aware of an “external” defeater for their opponent’s view to which they, but not the opponent, have access.<sup>185</sup> Were it not for the clauses beginning “independent”, this condition would also allow each party to use their evidence for their own controversial belief as evidence against the other’s; but doing so would be precisely to privilege themselves in the arbitrary way that Schellenberg and Feldman are concerned with. The idea that peers cannot remain rational in their controversial views by taking their evidence for their own view, or their judgment that the shared evidence supports their view, as a reason for thinking their opponent unreliable, is typically called the Independence Principle.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Feldman 2003, 88.

<sup>185</sup> See Feldman 2003, 87-88.

<sup>186</sup> See Wedgwood 2007, 260-3, Kelly 2013 and de Ridder 2011, 456-458 for arguments against Independence. Kelly’s is in service of his “Total Evidence View”, the implications of which I discuss below. Wedgwood’s and de Ridder’s I subsume into their arguments against belief revision in the face of apparent parity, which are based on the omnipresent failure of agents to satisfy the condition of evidence sharing (since evidence sharing is taken to be a necessary condition for the Uniqueness Thesis [see below] to mandate belief revision).

One important caveat about how to read the conditions in Unshared Evidence: it is supposed to represent, in internalist terms, the same situations which motivated the Circularity Objection to Alston's epistemology. That is, it is supposed to represent situations where both parties' D-beliefs are justified on the basis of beliefs and experiences held by those enjoying and trusting religious experiences in the same tradition, or religion, or mystical practice. To this end, mentions of "beliefs", "experiences" and "defeaters" in the various clauses must be restricted to other beliefs which are intra-traditional in the relevant way: namely, derived theological beliefs, testimonial basic theological beliefs, other D-beliefs, religious experiences, and non-theological beliefs with these included among their grounds.

As in Parallel Practice, the inconsistency of  $q$  and  $p$  means that one or both agents has gone wrong: since probabilism treats all beliefs and experiences as 'veridical', and assesses beliefs in terms of whether that evidence, considered along with defeaters, makes the beliefs probably true to the degree they are believed in, there are two possibilities. Either one or both have interpreted their evidence poorly. Or, one of them just doesn't have access to the evidence the other does, and if she did, she would believe in the same way: for example, if Daisy had the religious experience Charlie did, then E1 would make  $p$  probable enough for Daisy that it defeats  $q$ ; and, perhaps, if Charlie had Daisy's religious experience, Charlie would not thereby reason that  $q$ , since E2 and E1 together do not make  $q$  as probable as they make  $p$ . In such a circumstance, Charlie would be in an evidentially privileged position. But they can't share these experiences. Neither Charlie nor Daisy can access the fact that they are in a privileged position, so they can't appeal to such a position to prevent any loss of justification. The set of questions arising from the Parallel Practice Case seem to arise again here. Feldman contends that so long as these conditions are satisfied, neither party can be rational unless they desist in their controversial beliefs.<sup>187</sup> If he is right, then, as with Parallel Practice, religious experience is not a viable form of evidence for theology.

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<sup>187</sup> Feldman 2003, 89.

Those discussing religious disagreements, whether in the context of the evidential force of ‘mystical perception’ like Schellenberg, or the propriety of religious exclusivism in the face of diversity like Feldman, write of parties to these disagreements as being “on a par”<sup>188</sup> epistemically speaking, or of “epistemic parity”<sup>189</sup> holding between the parties. The central idea behind these criticisms of religious experience as evidence, or the rationality of religious exclusivism, is that the rational thing to do in the face of epistemic parity, with someone who disagrees with one, is to lose confidence in one’s controversial belief. Maintaining the same level of confidence would thereby become irrational, or, in other words, one would lose some, or all, justification for the belief, depending on the circumstances.

Notably, in the above cases, the criticisms of religious experience and exclusivism operate by firstly describing a situation where two believers are “on a par” epistemically; then, they intuit that believers in disagreements with their epistemic peers lose justification for their initial beliefs. But is that intuition about the rational response to disagreements between epistemic peers – “peer disagreements” – correct? More pertinently to our concerns: the claim that peers lose justification in their initial beliefs is equivalent to the claim that maintaining rationality means revising their beliefs in some way. But, if peers revise their beliefs in the way so advocated, will the resulting credences be more accurate?

We can evaluate the various intuitions about the rational response to disagreements between religious believers in situations of “epistemic parity” by evaluating these intuitions as responses to peer disagreement in general. In defending their responses to religious disagreement and diversity, Alston, Schellenberg, Plantinga, and Feldman all present their intuitive responses as plausible by comparing the religious disagreement with a nearby non-religious case and arguing by analogy or

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<sup>188</sup> Feldman 2003, 89; Plantinga 1995, 181.

<sup>189</sup> Schellenberg 1994, 152; Plantinga 1995, 181.

disanalogy with such cases.<sup>190</sup> This tells us that the principles at stake here are general principles about the rational response to peer disagreement. We should evaluate them by evaluating responses to the problem of peer disagreement in general, and see how fruitful these are in cases involving religious experiences and D-beliefs. We should keep in mind that our purpose is to ask how far these accounts can plausibly be said to preserve the link between justification, or rationality, and the truth of the controversial beliefs.

This approach might be resisted on the grounds that Parallel Practice and Unshared Evidence are not, strictly speaking, instances of the situation of epistemic parity which has become the canonical focus of discussion in the epistemology of peer disagreement.<sup>191</sup> The distinct ‘piece’ of evidence which justifies each party’s controversial belief in Parallel Practice and Unshared Evidence is not accessible by the other party: a practice-ratified religious experience which supports the D-belief in Parallel Practice, and a religious experience which makes the D-belief probable and is undefeated in Unshared Evidence. Yet recent discussions of peer disagreement regard parties to disagreements as epistemic peers only if “the peers literally share all evidence and are equal with respect to their abilities and dispositions relevant to interpreting that evidence”.<sup>192</sup> But “even if it [were] true that [parties to disagreements] have private evidence, this [would not] get us out of the problem. Each may have his or her own special insight...But each knows about the other’s insight. Each knows that this insight has evidential force...Knowing that the other has an insight provides each of them with evidence” for the other’s belief.<sup>193</sup> The condition of shared evidence is added to imply that private evidence becomes inadmissible when the other conditions are met, given the seemingly objectionable arbitrariness of assuming that one’s own private evidence would settle the matter in one’s favour, were only the other

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<sup>190</sup> See *PG*, 270-1, 273-4; Schellenberg 1994, 157-8; Plantinga 1995, 182; Feldman 2003, 87.

<sup>191</sup> This is effectively the strategy Alston deploys when he insists on the disanalogy between the Parallel Practice case and a car accident case which satisfies the canonical conditions: see *PG*, 270-1.

<sup>192</sup> Feldman and Warfield 2010, 2.

<sup>193</sup> Feldman 2007, 207. Compare with van Inwagen 2010, 24-26. Conee (2010, 70) also argues that the problems of parity can still arise when not all evidence is shared, so long as both peers know about each other’s unshared evidence.

party to appreciate it, rather than vice-versa. So “literally” shared evidence is not clearly a necessary condition for parity, but rather a canonical stipulation to simplify discussion. ‘Private’ evidence will always be shared in the sense that both parties are aware of each others’, and must make some judgment about its weight. Parallel Practice and Unshared Evidence meet the conditions necessary to bring about the kind of doubt or unease which discussions of canonical parity are intended to address.

### 3.3 Rational Responses to Peer Disagreement

Remaining criticisms of the evidential force of religious experience thus argue that religious diversity means that those who base their religious beliefs on their religious experiences routinely run into situations of epistemic parity, situations which threaten to make those beliefs irrational. If this is so, religious experience will be the kind of evidence which routinely supports irrational beliefs: bad evidence. More weakly, staying rational in the face of religious experience might be thought to require the downward revision of one’s D-beliefs. That downward revision must be supposed to lead to greater theological accuracy, if it is the rational thing to do, and rationality has to do with truth. But does a principle that tells us simply to revise our controversial beliefs downward, in the face of peer disagreement, help us reach more accurate credences? To answer these questions we need to evaluate the response to peer disagreement which tells us to Conciliate with the other party. If Conciliating is a good strategy for getting to the truth of the matter in the face of peer disagreement, then Schellenberg’s, Hick’s and Feldman’s criticisms of religious experience epistemology might hold water, insofar as the justification or rationality they regard as lost indicates access to truth. Religious diversity, and the comparable intelligence and sensitivity of members of many incompatible religions, would result in so much downward revision that confidence in large swathes of theological claims – most if not all D-beliefs – would be unacceptable.

But perhaps Conciliating would be the rational, or truth-apt, response without having this implication: perhaps it is just a way for us to incorporate others’ religious experiences into the relevant evidence

for our D-beliefs. Then we will want to know how much weight these others' experiences will bear when they are so incorporated. I argue that Conciliate incorporates previously private religious experiences into shared evidence in a way which measures their weight in an easily misleading manner.

I will argue that an alternative to Conciliate, Reflect, allows us to incorporate others' religious experiences into our theological evidence in a way which is more sensitive to the potential disconnect between the conviction an agent has in their theological claims, and the truth of those claims. As it is, however, it might continue to measure the amount of evidence provided by anyone's religious experience in terms of their conviction. Or, it defers to some other more suitable, mutually agreeable method for peers to measure the evidential significance of each other's experiences: but it is left to us to supply this method.

Then, I argue that our third potential response to parity, Stand Fast, leads to the same consequences as Reflect. It might suggest that religious peer disagreements arise and persist, and peers rationally persist in disagreeing, because there is no way of sharing the evidence which justifies the incompatible beliefs. Standing Fast is just the best we can do given the privacy of the crucial evidence. But if we can provide such a way, this will no longer be true.

### 3.3.1 Conciliate

The most straightforward version of "conciliationism" as a view about peer disagreement is that, when two peers disagree with respect to  $p$ , the believer and disbeliever should both lose confidence in their position, if they are to remain rational or justified in their attitudes: "each thinker should give at least some weight to her peer's attitude".<sup>194</sup> Unfortunately, this suggestion covers a range of possibilities, so when I speak of the Conciliate strategy for responding to religious peer disagreement, I will use the

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<sup>194</sup> Ballantyne and Coffman 2012, 657.

term in a narrower sense. One version of the Conciliate strategy tells parties to religious disagreements to suspend judgment regarding their controversial theological claims; a more plausible version tells both parties to give each other's attitude or evidence equal weight to their own so as to "split the difference" between their credences.

I discuss the first alternative because it is Feldman's solution to religious disagreements of the kind expressed in Parallel Practice<sup>195</sup> and Unshared Evidence,<sup>196</sup> as well as those where somehow the parties are able to share their evidence for their controversial theological beliefs, but parity remains.<sup>197</sup>

Feldman defends the view that both parties should go from belief and disbelief to suspending judgment by appealing to the "Uniqueness Thesis":<sup>198</sup> that, in Feldman's words, "a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions...and that it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition".<sup>199</sup> Uniqueness gains plausibility from probabilism: since there are objective principles governing how propositions make each other probable, and the evidence is all propositions, it is an objective matter which competing proposition is made most probable, and how probable it is made by the evidence, once the evidence is fixed. It can be applied to Parallel Practice since, according to Feldman, even if people have different "starting points" or principles by which they "weigh the evidential factors differently", as they presumably would if they were using different isolated doxastic practices, this difference "just pushes the question back a step", to which principles would be uniquely supported by the evidence once they have got these principles, and their reasons for them, on the table.<sup>200</sup> Feldman argues that Uniqueness can be applied in Unshared Evidence because one party's private evidence becomes effectively public if the other party

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<sup>195</sup> Feldman 2007, 205-6.

<sup>196</sup> Feldman 2007, 206-8.

<sup>197</sup> Feldman 2007, 204-5.

<sup>198</sup> The Uniqueness Thesis has been regarded as the main motivator for conciliationism in the broad sense – see, for example, White 2005 – but see Ballantyne and Coffman 2012 for a criticism of the connection.

<sup>199</sup> Feldman 2007, 205.

<sup>200</sup> Feldman 2007, 206. See Conee 2010 for an argument that the permissibility of differing interpretative perspectives explains the implausibility of uniqueness.

recognizes they are not entitled to privilege their own private evidence above the others'.<sup>201</sup> Feldman argues that each party must believe that one or both of them has made a mistake in interpreting the evidence in favour of their belief or disbelief, but neither party has a reason for thinking it is the other who has made that mistake; so they should suspend judgment on the truth or falsehood of the controversial claim.<sup>202</sup>

Suspension of judgment is, however, a specific attitude to a proposition, one supposed to be 'halfway' between belief and disbelief. But not every case of peer disagreement will be such that suspension of judgment is the halfway-point between the attitudes of the two peers. For instance, one peer might be certain that  $p$ , but the other suspend her judgment about  $p$ ; then if both peers followed Feldman, it would seem that the peer who began suspending judgment has not recognized her fallibility in the light of the parity in disagreement. We can handle such cases by regarding Feldman's version of Conciliate as an instance of a more general view, the "Equal Weight View",<sup>203</sup> specific to a context where belief is treated as a binary matter.<sup>204</sup>

The alternative I will consider, as a degreed version of Conciliate, is that we should "split the difference" between our and our peer's credences, revising our belief to match the average. This seems like a natural way to capture the idea that each peer should regard the other's judgment as having an equal weight with one's own. Suppose that Nick and Ellen disagree about  $p$ : Nick's credence in  $p$  is 0.8 and Ellen's is 0.4, and both are justified in these credences by the evidence each had before arriving at the disagreement. This would mean that Nick's evidence was a set of propositions which made  $p$  0.8 probable, whereas Ellen's made  $p$  only 0.4 probable. Suppose that we understand the sharing of evidence to mean that every proposition available as evidence to any peer is so available to

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<sup>201</sup> Feldman 2007, 208.

<sup>202</sup> Feldman 2007, 212-3.

<sup>203</sup> The term is owed to Adam Elga (2007, 484-4). See Cohen 2013 for criticism of the connection between the Equal Weight View and the Uniqueness Thesis.

<sup>204</sup> See Kelly 2010, 117 for a discussion of this problem, and Kelly 2005, 168-70 for comments on the historical pedigree of the judgment that both peers should, specifically, suspend judgment.

both peers. Then, that new collection of shared evidence, which is the same for both of them, will make probable  $p$  to the same extent for both Nick and Ellen.<sup>205</sup> Given the logical relationships their unshared evidence must have had to  $p$  to make it 0.8 and 0.4 probable, once shared it must make  $p$  0.6 probable.<sup>206</sup>

Splitting the difference in this way is a precise instruction about what one should do in the face of parity, in order to maintain rationality.<sup>207</sup> Now suppose that splitting the difference is the version of Conciliate which we want to use as the adjunct to relying on our mystical practice, as part of an “Old Method” for using religious experience as evidence about how God is. Given that very precision, it shows the counter-intuitive consequences associated with representing experiential evidence as content-propositions with a probability equal to, or report-propositions with a seeming-strength equal to, the supported belief’s strength.

In both Alston’s and Swinburne’s account, a central assumption is that what makes experiences sources of good evidence is that they accurately represent the world. In Chapter 1 we saw how, once interpretative issues have been set aside, whether a religious experience accurately represents the world depends on whether it has been caused by God in a truth-conducive way. So we would think that the evidential significance of two rival religious experiences in disputed cases would be determined by both parties’ consideration of which is likelier to be caused by God in this way. If the

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<sup>205</sup> For formal proofs of this (see Lehrer 1976 and Aumann 1976), assuming Bayesian conditionalization are included among the correct inductive criteria by which propositions make each other probable.

<sup>206</sup> Here is a simple example to illustrate this:  $p$  is the hypothesis that the next ball drawn from one’s bag will be red; Nick and Ellen were both told that their bag was packed in the same way, with an unknown number of white balls and an unknown number of red balls. Nick has drawn ten balls and eight have been red; Ellen has drawn ten and four have been red. So Nick has credence 0.8 that  $p$  and is justified in this because his experiences make it 0.8 probable that  $p$ , and likewise for Ellen and her credence 0.4 that  $p$ . When Nick hears Ellen’s results, giving equal weight to her view is like supposing that what’s happened to her represents what will happen to him when he draws the next ten balls, and vice-versa. So, once they share their evidence, it’s as if they have both drawn twelve red balls out of twenty. So now their shared experiences will justify credence 0.6 that  $p$ .

<sup>207</sup> The rationale for splitting the difference is not limited to its use as a way of treating each others’ sets of evidence as having equal weight because we are peers, but can also represent regarding a peer’s dissent as measurable evidence of one’s own fallibility. That is, a degreed picture of Feldman’s point about having a reason for thinking one of us has made a mistake, but not having a reason for thinking it is my peer and not I (for an example of which see Christensen 2010, 186), can still result in something like splitting the difference.

parties followed Conciliate, however, they would not be considering whose experience was more likely to be veridical, and taking the result of that consideration to determine how much evidential force each other's experiences should have for both of them alike. Rather, they attend only to what Kelly calls the "psychological evidence":<sup>208</sup> the strengths of each other's controversial, but independently justified, D-beliefs. And those strengths of belief are determined by the compelling force of the religious experiences, not some factor which represents the likelihood the experiences are veridical.<sup>209</sup>

Parallel Practice is designed to represent a situation where parties to theological disagreements cannot go further in using their own mystical doxastic practices to investigate whether  $p$  or  $q$  is true. So, according to Conciliate, the best they can do in that investigation is to use a 'second order' doxastic practice which tells them to split the difference in such situations. What makes products of doxastic practices more likely to be true is the practices' reliability. Conciliate can only be considered a reliable doxastic practice for processing peer disagreements at the coarsest possible level, where we have flattened out all distinctions between different topics of belief and sources of evidence. If there is any alternative 'practice', for any particular domain, which attends to that domain's peculiarities, we should prefer it.

In Unshared Evidence, splitting the difference between Charlie's prior credence in  $p$  and Daisy's prior credence in  $p$ 's negation  $q$  has identical consequences to sharing the formerly private pieces of evidence E1 and E2 in the following way. Prior to the disagreement, Charlie's experience E1 gave him

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<sup>208</sup> See Kelly (2010, 128), where he contrasts this information about each other's credences with "non-psychological evidence", the evidence each bases his credence on before facing the disagreement.

<sup>209</sup> A third possible version of Conciliate, suggested to me by David Leal, would be for the parties to decide by lottery which view both should move to completely. I mention it here since it is a strategy which is plausibly motivated by the same concerns Feldman has, about not having any reason to think oneself more or less likely to be mistaken than one's peer; but it is clearly not a strategy that will get both parties more accurate beliefs. Using a lottery is, of course, one case of a wider strategy Leal suggests: rather than suspend judgment or split the differences, make a choice, somehow, to both adopt someone's initial position. But when we appeal to a non-random way of making such a choice, we are effectively appealing to some as yet unrecognized evidence, and so advocating a New Method.

enough evidence to make  $p$  probable to the same degree as his strength of belief in  $p$ : let's suppose his credence that  $p$  is 0.8, and hence his credence that  $q$  is less than or equal to 0.2, since  $p$  entails  $\neg q$ . Prior to the disagreement, on the other hand, Daisy's experience E2 gave her enough evidence to make  $q$  (let's say) 0.6 probable and so justifying her credence. If Daisy's credences are likewise distributed in a coherent fashion, then prior to the disagreement she'll have a credence that  $p$  which is less than 0.4. After splitting the difference, Charlie and Daisy will now both have a credence of 0.6 that  $p$  and a credence of 0.4 that  $q$ . The same result would be reached, were E1 and E2 capable of being shared between them, only if the evidential force of Charlie's experience E1 has now become enough and only enough to make  $p$  0.6 probable and only if Daisy's E2 were forceful and only forceful enough to make  $q$  0.4 probable. For the conciliationist, splitting the difference is supposed to play the role of sharing, or making public, these private experiences. But splitting the difference also determines how much evidential strength private experiences have when they go public, revising the strength each experience has for each peer to a new value each experience has for both peers together. Splitting the difference determines and revises the *de facto* evidential strength of both experiences for both peers. But this determination and revision has nothing to do with receipt of any new information relevant to the veridicality of the experiences.<sup>210</sup> Instead, the new evidential salience of the experiences is determined entirely by features of each other's psychology, namely their internally justified credences and the phenomenal qualities of the experiences. As Kelly puts it, the evidence each peer had before going into the disagreement "gets completely swamped by purely psychological facts about what [each peer] believe[s]."<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Holley and King raise this objection in terms of the disparity between shared experiences as reports, and private experiences: "We can share descriptions of our experiences [and hence the credences they justify for us], but that falls short of sharing the experiences themselves, and it is not evident how such sharing results in agreement about the evidential significance of experiences that are described", or at least it is not evident what this agreement would have to do with the truth about the world rather than the truth about our psychology (Holley 2013, 37); "the phenomenology of religious experience typically includes, but goes beyond what is communicable...[such that] it may be quite difficult to gain good grounds for thinking that someone else's internally accessible evidence is on a par with one's own" (King 2008, 844).

<sup>211</sup> Kelly 2010, 124.

The seeming arbitrariness of the new weight each experience has, and those weights' independence of either old or new facts which might bear on those experiences' veridicality, should give us pause. If only it were possible for the parties to access information of this non-psychological kind, if only they had some other way of quantifying the evidential force of their religious experiences when they 'go public', and so adopt some other strategy than Conciliate, it would seem desirable for them to do so.

Conciliate effectively tells us to assign evidential weight to the competing religious experiences based on the credences they justify before the disagreement; and then assign a new evidential weight to them after the disagreement which is a function of those two credences. As an adjunct to engaging in our mystical doxastic practice, it does not give us advice which we have reason to think will get us closer to the theological truth. Suppose, on the other hand, that both parties evaluate their own and the other's religious experiences considered as event-propositions. For simplicity's sake, suppose they carry out this process after arriving at the disagreement, when they realise that the mutual isolation of their mystical practices prevents these practices from delivering a non-question-begging verdict on each others' experiences. Then, instead of reaching a new position which depends on psychological evidence, they will reach one which depends on information which both agree on – their non-theological and natural theological beliefs – and which bears on which religious experience is more likely to be veridical. This is the advantage of the "New Method" I present in subsequent chapters. The "Old Method" which includes Conciliate, on the other hand, tells theological investigators to check religious experiences for coherence with their intra-confessional prior theological beliefs first, determining how probable their D-belief is given just those priors – and then to simply split the difference between the strength of that D-belief and the strength with which their peer disagrees with them. Even if the Old Method does not lead to widespread theological scepticism in the way that Schellenberg, Hick and Feldman suggest it should, it seems to advise theological investigation to reach conclusions in the light of how many apparent peers hold what D-beliefs with what degree of confidence. The "New Method" tells us to expand what we considered to be our relevant evidence

with respect to the controversial D-beliefs: and after this expansion it might turn out that the larger evidence set makes one belief more probable.

### 3.3.2 Reflect

A family of alternatives is available to treating a peer's judgment, or private evidence, as having equal weight to one's own, but still taking it into account. Like the New Method, it gains motivation from the counter-intuitive consequences of splitting the difference raised above.<sup>212</sup> Recall that Feldman's argument for mutual suspension of judgment was that, given Uniqueness and either the sharing of evidence or the refusal to treat one's own evidence as privileged, both parties must conclude they have made some mistake they cannot identify – and they cannot identify which of them made the mistake. In the religious case, the mistake will be treating one's mystical practice as reliable. One way of thinking about the evidential significance of parity, then, is to suppose that it provides a kind of all-things-considered undercutter,<sup>213</sup> a form of "higher-order"<sup>214</sup> or "second-order"<sup>215</sup> evidence.<sup>216</sup> Conciliate can then be understood as saying that the amount of counter-evidence such undercutters supply is just the right amount to make the controversial belief 0.5 probable (on Feldman's suspension of judgment version),<sup>217</sup> or just the right amount to make the controversial belief probable to an average of the peers' prior credences (on the split-the-difference version).<sup>218</sup> On this reading, it is the insensitivity of Conciliate to the idiosyncrasies of the evidence cited in any particular controversy which makes it implausible as a way of getting more accurate beliefs. But perhaps an alternative

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<sup>212</sup> See Cohen 2013 and Christensen 2010 for defences of splitting the difference in response to stronger versions, raised by Kelly and others (See Kelly 2010, 125-132 and Weatherson 2013, 61-2), of the complaint I make here, that the psychological evidence inappropriately dominates evidence which we might intuitively think has a better chance of accurately representing the world. Christensen's defence assumes that the new evidence provided by facing parity is always evidence of a peer's cognitive malfunction (2010, 180-191). Cohen's defence argues that if the split difference position is mistaken, we can preserve rationality (and hence, in our context, accuracy), by abandoning the prior credence which determined the value of that split difference position (2013, 110). But this defence does not provide us with any guidance as to what our new position should be. So, just like Kelly's recommendation, it will leave us wanting a new method for completing the theological task at hand.

<sup>213</sup> See, e.g., Kvanvig 2011, 43.

<sup>214</sup> Kelly 2005.

<sup>215</sup> Feldman 2005, 100.

<sup>216</sup> See, for example, Christensen 2010, 185, Goldberg 2013, 172 and de Ridder 2011, 450.

<sup>217</sup> Kelly 2010, 117.

<sup>218</sup> E.g. Christensen 2007, 193.

strategy to Conciliate could account for the undercutting force of parity without stipulating a force which remains consistent whatever the non-psychological evidence is: let's call this "Reflect",<sup>219</sup> because we are reflecting on our old evidence, and whatever difference parity is supposed to make, without any topic-neutral presumptions as to what difference the latter should make in relation to the former.

Thomas Kelly attempts to develop such an alternative, which he calls the Total Evidence View, in contrast to the Equal Weight View. The idea is to make the precise rational response to facing parity depend upon the nature of the evidence available before facing parity. In our context, the Reflect strategy must offer an instruction for revising belief which will make the post-parity belief more likely to be true given the nature of that pre-parity evidence. Kelly's Total Evidence View is represented in 2005 as the claim that "in general, what one is and is not justified [in believing] on the basis of [confronting parity] will depend a great deal on the character of the first-order evidence",<sup>220</sup> in 2010 as the claim that "in some cases, the first-order evidence might be extremely substantial compared to the higher-order evidence; in such cases, the latter tends to swamp the former...[or] the first order evidence might be quite insubstantial compared to the higher order evidence [constituted by one's peer's different position]; in such cases, the latter tends to swamp the former",<sup>221</sup> and in 2013 that "how one is rationally required to respond to a disagreement is not typically something that is fixed independently of substantive normative facts about how well-supported one's original view is...how confident one is rationally permitted to be that some proposition is true upon discovering that a peer thinks otherwise might vary significantly from case to case."<sup>222</sup> But what, exactly, about the character of the first-order evidence determines the doxastic attitude I ought to form? In which cases and to what extent would the first-order evidence swamp the higher-order evidence, or vice versa? What are

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<sup>219</sup> After John Kvanvig – see Kvanvig 2011.

<sup>220</sup> Kelly 2005, 190.

<sup>221</sup> Kelly 2010, 142.

<sup>222</sup> Kelly 2013, 51.

these substantive normative facts about support, and what features of different cases govern these variations?<sup>223</sup>

In support of his Total Evidence View, and with respect to non-specified kinds of evidence, Kelly offers us illustrative cases so that we might see how the Total differs from the Equal view. One class deals with cases where massive agreement is (Kelly argues) caused by sociological factors such that the psychological evidence should have diminished bearing.<sup>224</sup> Another deals with cases where an opponent's answer is so absurd that one could not be justified in thinking them one's peer;<sup>225</sup> another deals with cases simple enough that splitting the difference delivers intuitively appropriate results;<sup>226</sup> and a final class deals with cases of the kind which do not satisfy Feldman's parity condition<sup>227</sup> that neither party has access to some information which, if the other party had it would lead them to easily change their view.<sup>228</sup>

These examples generate answers to the above questions which may well be helpful in cases of disagreement accurately characterized in a topic-neutral way: "Don't be swayed by the crowd", "Discount testimony about financial problems from people who are terrible at arithmetic", and so on. But alter those questions to make them specific to the theological domain – what features of Charlie's religious experience should determine what credence in his D-belief? And what features of Daisy's

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<sup>223</sup> Compare these suggestions of Kelly's with Kvanvig's (2011, 43) suggestion that we might treat the testimony of a peer about their (opposing) judgment as evidence of counter-evidence to our belief – but doing so means that we must "add to this model some account...of the conditions under which the move from 'there is evidence that there is evidence for  $p$ ' to 'there is evidence for  $p$ ' is epistemically appropriate." The move from content- or report-propositional, to event-propositional, experiential evidence allows us to give such an account in the theological case.

<sup>224</sup> Kelly 2010, 146-148.

<sup>225</sup> Kelly 2010, 149-150.

<sup>226</sup> Kelly 2010, 151-153. The point of these is to undermine the support such cases are supposed to lend to the Equal Weight View.

<sup>227</sup> See Feldman 2003, 88

<sup>228</sup> Kelly 2013, 40-42.

religious experience should lead Charlie to adjust his credence, and to what? – and answers like these, which are all Kelly’s Total Evidence View offers, are not helpful.<sup>229</sup>

### 3.3.3 Stand Fast

Our final family of responses to peer disagreement is, in its simplest and clearest form, the claim that since both peers are justified or rational before facing parity, neither should revise their beliefs at all. In terms of the Old Method Argument, this response amounts to a third strategy for the theologian faced with the kind of circumstances which motivate the Circularity Objection: Stand Fast in one’s D-beliefs, and any theological positions requiring those D-beliefs among their grounds, even though one’s opponents appear to have equally good access to the theological truth.

The typical way to defend this response against alternatives is to argue that even if Uniqueness is true, and Uniqueness means that peer disagreements demand belief revision, they – only do so in the ideal circumstances where all evidence is shared – but these circumstances rarely if ever hold, so that most interesting cases are only apparently peer disagreements of the canonical kind. Cases in which there is unshared evidence are cases in which both parties can appeal to their unshared evidence to rationally retain their prior doxastic attitude.<sup>230</sup> And, it is argued, cases like Parallel Practice and

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<sup>229</sup> It’s worth noting here how many thought-experimental cases of disagreement which are supposed to raise parity puzzles, such as judging who won a race or who owes what portion of a restaurant bill, require in their setup some implicit or explicit ‘excuse’ as to why the parties cannot use the obviously available option of consulting a better source of information, such as high-speed photography, or a calculator. We might think that parties who refuse to do so without such an excuse are behaving irrationally in a broad sense; that they can only behave rationally by applying Conciliate, Reflect or Stand Fast if they have no photographs or calculators available. In the theological case, we can think of any framework like that I develop as relevantly like photographs of the finish line, or a calculator. Applying some general parity strategy which appeals only to psychological evidence should be obviously objectionable if this analogy holds.

<sup>230</sup> Conee (2010), van Inwagen (2010, 24-6) and Bogardus (2009) make this argument with a general application. Sometimes this argument is made less directly (such as in de Ridder 2011, 456-8 and Wedgwood 2007, 263), by attacking Independence on the grounds that it might rule out beliefs justified by private evidence, and that we have justified beliefs of this kind (philosophical for de Ridder, moral for Wedgwood) is better known than Independence.

Unshared Evidence are instances of these cases: Uniqueness does not apply and both parties can rationally retain their belief.<sup>231</sup>

This response still leaves open the question of whether someone who Stands Fast has taken account of the evidence they have gained by confronting someone they regard as a peer, who disagrees with them. If not for the Independence Principle, Charlie could take Daisy's disagreement as evidence Daisy is unreliable, or her religious experience non-veridical, because Daisy believes something which contradicts Charlie's well-founded judgment – and vice versa. Given Independence, however, one's peer's justified judgment suggests their private evidence, which conflicts with one's own belief, must have some weight. This returns us to the question of how much weight the opponent's private evidence has in comparison to the weight of our own private evidence. Each peer could simply rely on the fact that their private evidence has compulsive force, for them, psychologically, whereas their opponent's does not. But the mere compulsive force of a religious experience does not seem a good indicator of what God is like; and even if it were, the testimony of someone regarded as a peer would still make probable, to some extent, their opposing D-belief, and thus make less probable, to some extent, one's own, and we would be left wanting to know how probable our own experience made our D-belief, given that it had just that much compulsive force, versus the extent to which their experience made it less probable. So long as we had an answer to that question, and to the question of how much less probable the peer's reported experience or judgment made our D-belief, we couldn't simply Stand Fast, since incorporating the peer's report into our evidence would reduce the overall justified probability of our D-belief. And if our answers involved following Swinburne by matching up the extent to which a religious experience makes a D-belief probable – its evidential force – with the increased strength of the D-belief, we would be implementing Conciliate after all.

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<sup>231</sup> See Bogardus 2013, Holley 2013, 37 and King 2008, 844-8 for explicit applications of this argument in the religious context.

The other alternative is to treat this way of defending Stand Fast as, in fact, a way of defending Reflect: rather than implausibly denying that a peer's private evidence, their religious experience, has no weight at all, we regard our own, *prima facie*, as having more, and consult any further information we might have to work out how much more. This further information we consult must be relevant to whether or not the experience is veridical, rather than merely psychological. And it must be accessible to both parties, or we return to square one. Treating our own, and our peer's, religious experience as making our D-beliefs more or less probable in the form of an event-proposition, and evaluating the probability of that event-proposition using our shared N-beliefs and A-beliefs, satisfies both of these conditions. So this defence of Standing Fast really motivates adopting that New Method.

A final route to defending Stand Fast is by denying Uniqueness in favour of permissivism, the view that a range of credences in a given proposition are rationally consistent with one body of evidence.<sup>232</sup> This allows for two parties to Stand Fast as long as their conflicting credences are within that range. But for our purposes, this defence only pushes back the problem. The rationally permissible range for each of the inconsistent D-beliefs will become, for the theologian, an estimate as to its truth. But we will still want a method for weighing the two rival religious experiences so as to establish the boundaries of the permissible ranges; and a method which will allow us to reduce those two ranges enough to deliver a judgment as to which of the two D-beliefs has better standing.

### 3.4 Looking Forward

Motivating the Circularity Objection by treating religious disagreement as a case of peer disagreement is not an easy task. It requires a commitment to either the Equal Weight View, or to the Total Evidence View, in addition to substantial empirical claims about religious diversity. This discussion has showed that the Equal Weight View looks implausible when translated into a way of continuing theological investigation beyond engagement in mystical practices. It has also shown that the Stand Fast strategy

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<sup>232</sup> See White 2005.

is under-motivated: its desire to recognize the salience of one's own private evidence can be satisfied by Reflecting, whilst Reflecting respects the refusal to arbitrarily exclude the evidence advertised by peers' internally justified judgments. But the Reflect strategy requires significant embellishment to be made into an informative set of instructions about how to incorporate our theological peers' religious experiences into our own evidence. The framework I am about to develop provides such embellishments. It allows us to sensitively settle inter-religious disputes about religious experience-based theological beliefs in a way which can, potentially, render shared and mutually accessible all the forms of theological evidence which Alston's and Swinburne's approaches typically left private to theological disputants.

# 4. Predicting Divine Action

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes a formal procedure for determining how much evidence a religious experience contributes to a D-belief. It is designed for use in situations like the ones we described in the last chapter, when resolving a theological disagreement turns on the religious experiences of parties to the disagreements. It is not hard, however, to see how it can be applied more generally. The procedure explains how to assign a probability to a claim about how a religious experience was caused – its event-proposition<sup>233</sup> – the truth of which guarantees the truth of the D-belief which that experience supports.

Less precisely: is there a fine-grained method which theologians can use to determine the evidential force of a religious experience, whatever their confessional presuppositions? This chapter contributes the most important reason for thinking that the answer is “yes” by presenting just such a method, in enough detail to show that it meets critics’ standards of precision, reflectivity and inter-confessional fairness.

First, I describe how we can represent parties to theological disagreements like those we discussed in the previous chapter as ‘standing outside’ their isolated mystical practices. I show how to represent someone’s ‘standing outside’ a doxastic practice in probabilistic terms, by introducing the notion of the ‘Outsider Outlook’. Someone adopting the Outlook excludes all their controversial derived and basic theological beliefs from the evidence relevant to the D-belief under evaluation; but N-beliefs and A-beliefs<sup>234</sup> are included in that relevant evidence.<sup>235</sup> Adopting the Outsider Outlook can be

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<sup>233</sup> See section 2.3 for an explanation of event-propositional representations of experiential evidence.

<sup>234</sup> See section 0.2.7 for a definition of A-beliefs, and 0.2.7 for a definition of N-beliefs.

<sup>235</sup> See section 2.2.2 for an explanation of the distinction between total and relevant evidence.

considered as the first step in, or the point from which, the rest of the procedure is used. This element of the procedure makes it rationally accessible to theologians whatever their tradition or confession.

Then, I explain how users of this procedure will take probabilistic support as evidence of truth, so availing themselves of the concepts we introduced in Chapter 2. This means that the resulting procedure will allow for precise judgments, which allow the evidence we get from religious experiences to come in different amounts, so that the beliefs we base on them can come in proportionate strengths.

Then I describe the subset of N-beliefs shared by those taking the Outsider Outlook which will act as inputs to the procedure: 'normative' and 'contextual' beliefs. I explain how certain A-beliefs can be derived from these, beliefs about what God would do *qua* omnipotent morally unsurpassable agent.<sup>236</sup>

Our formal procedure will take all the uncertainties of the parties about ethics and the created world around them and translate these into probabilities for these A-beliefs, these judgments about what God would do. To show how this works I lay out the core of the procedure, the 'Anselmian Augury'. As part of this, I present a way of representing moral judgments, principles and beliefs inspired by William Ross's intuitionism<sup>237</sup> and hence called the 'Deontic Discourse', which is intended to be usable regardless of the moral theories preferred by the parties to the disagreement. I relegate to footnotes suggestions as to how the Augury can be refined in the light of objections from probability and decision theory. This part of my exposition clarifies what tradition-neutral evidence theologians will be using to make judgments about religious experiences and D-beliefs, and explains how they will use it.

I then codify a way of representing religious experiences as event-propositions with a standard form, which I call 'Divine Disclosures'. Since each Disclosure is a claim about what God has done, the

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<sup>236</sup> See Chapter 6 for an argument that parties to theological disagreements must regard God as such an agent.

<sup>237</sup> See Ross 1930.

probability of the truth of any Divine Disclosure can be determined from the Outsider Outlook using the Anselmian Augury, making event-propositions an attractive way to represent religious experience as evidence. Since the truth of a Divine Disclosure entails the truth of an associated D-belief, the probability that any religious experience really is a Divine Disclosure will translate instantly to the probability of truth of the D-belief. Representing religious experiences as Divine Disclosures allows us to quantify their evidential force within a probabilistic framework, since only propositions confer and receive probabilistic support. Having described how to represent religious experiences as Divine Disclosures, I explain how to apply the Anselmian Augury to determine the probability that a given religious experience was indeed caused by a Divine Disclosure.

## 4.2 The Outsider Outlook

According to the Alstonian approach, subjects of religious experiences can evaluate those experiences, and their D-beliefs, using the override system of the mystical doxastic practice in which it is practically rational for them to engage. But, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 3, such subjects may come to recognize other mystical practices, ones which would lead to very different evaluations of their experiences, as just as likely to be reliable. Then they might wonder whether and how they can evaluate those experiences and beliefs without using any controversial override system.

On an approach like Swinburne's, subjects of religious experiences will be confronted with others' reports of their own religious experiences, and not know whose to trust or how to weigh their own against these others'. They might appeal to more basic theological beliefs which confirm their controversial beliefs relative to the others'. If that confirmation and disconfirmation occurs by giving them reason to think their experience more likely to be veridical than the other's, and if those more basic theological beliefs have, in turn, controversial D-beliefs and hence religious experiences among their bases, they can be described in externalist terms as relying on their own practice's override

system. If the others can make the same appeals, and they notice this, the problems of parity described in Chapter 3 arise.

My suggestion here is that the position of someone who no longer trusts their practice as reliable can be expressed, without loss, in internalist, evidentialist terms. Externalists can think of such people as losing the appropriate use of their practice's overrider system, since the practical rationality of engaging in it no longer comes with a presumption of reliability. But that overrider system can be represented (for internalists) as a set of beliefs, and its usage as the confirmation or disconfirmation of new beliefs by the members of that set. Since this is so, we can express the situation of someone who has 'slipped outside' a mystical doxastic practice as their having excluded that set of beliefs from their relevant evidence with regards new candidate D-beliefs. By characterizing the 'Outsider Outlook' I explain in appropriate detail which beliefs are excluded and which beliefs are included in their relevant evidence.

#### 4.2.1 The Outsider Outlook as a Simplified Ideal

Previous chapters characterized a situation which my discussion of peer disagreement presented particularly sharply, but into which I assume people can fall to different degrees, and in different ways – whether as 'spiritual seekers' or as 'spiritual waverers', whether by pursuing self-conscious theological inquiry or by having their faith shaken by a surprising experience, or perhaps even by their losing trust in an institution. The situation we have in mind here is one in which, I suggest, agents are motivated to adopt more or less what I will call the 'Outsider Outlook'. I am about to describe the Outsider Outlook as an idealization, and for expository purposes I advocate that real agents in these situations conform to it as taking the first step in a procedure. The whole procedure can, in principle, be modified at various stages, to accommodate the differences in different people's situations of theological 'trouble', while preserving its usefulness. This means that anyone who agrees that I have, over previous chapters, identified an epistemically troubling space, should accept my

recommendation that all those in this space conform to the idealization of the Outsider Outlook. This neither implies that people in various locations in this space of doubt have, in fact, adopted the Outlook; nor that my procedure is only helpful to those who do. But for simplicity I will write as if there are people who take the Outsider Outlook, refer only to them, and identify those facing critical theological uncertainty and apparent peer disagreement as ‘Outsiders’ or those ‘with an Outsider Outlook’.

#### 4.2.2 Outsiders Should Seek Truth by Believing in Proportion to the Evidence

In Chapter 2 I averred to evidentialists’ view that a belief is justified, and known if true, insofar as it is made epistemically more probable by the believer’s evidence. An important such argument runs from the claim that probabilistic support is truth-preserving: if  $q$  is made probable by  $p$ , and  $p$  is true, then  $q$  is probably true. If we agree with this, and we take for granted the truth of beliefs shared by parties to disagreements, then it is natural to recommend that parties with an Outsider Outlook try to discern the truth of the matter their disagreement concerns by seeing whose controversial belief is made more probable by those shared beliefs. In section 4.2.3.3 I point out the easiest place to find shared beliefs which can be used in this way – among the parties’ N-beliefs, specifically their normative and contextual beliefs. The rest of this chapter concerns how D-beliefs are made more or less probable by those normative and contextual beliefs, via the probabilities assigned by Anselmian Auguries to the D-beliefs’ Divine Disclosures.

In Chapter 2 I described how, for the probabilist evidentialist, a belief justified another to the extent that it made it more probable according to “the correct inductive criteria”.<sup>238</sup> Now that justification is dropping out of the picture, these criteria instead become our way of preserving truth – from premises shared by parties to disagreement, to a resolution of that disagreement. They form the background rules of the procedure I am recommending Outsiders follow. It is therefore helpful to make explicit

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<sup>238</sup> Swinburne 2001, 64.

which 'criteria' we are taking for granted. Most of the criteria we need in the procedure below are axioms and theorems of probability theory which are very well motivated by our ordinary intuitions,<sup>239</sup> so should be shared by all parties. For example: parties should seek to ensure their credences form a consistent distribution so that their credences in the negation of a proposition and that proposition sum to 1. More controversially, however, the Anselmian Augury only determines the correct probabilities for its outputs if we also assume certain principles of decision theory. Insofar as any of these are controversial between parties, the controversies will need to be resolved whilst adopting the Outsider Outlook before the Augury can be used; or, parties who subscribe to different principles of decision theory can modify it to use theirs. The Augury is designed to be minimally controversial with respect to these principles.

#### 4.2.3 Relevant Evidence from the Outsider Outlook

A theological inquirer with the Outsider Outlook no longer takes any controversial mystical doxastic practices to be reliable. The rules of these practices' override systems can be represented as sets of prior beliefs with certain strengths, or pairs of credences and propositions: someone engaged in the practice holds these beliefs with these strengths.<sup>240</sup> At the surface level, such rules can be represented as a set of beliefs about what one should do with a new religious experience, given all of one's old beliefs, just in virtue of using this practice. We might naturally think, though, that for some doxastic practices, some of these rules (about what we should do with new evidence arising within the practice) are normative consequences of descriptive premises. In these cases, these rules can be represented as those descriptive claims.

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<sup>239</sup> Whether or not obedience to these axioms, by agents, with respect to their credences, is a necessary condition for ideal rationality is extremely controversial. Since we are not here interested in which inductive criteria are required for 'rationality', but which are 'correct' in the sense of preserving truth from premises to conclusions, use of the procedure described below does not require commitment to this controversial claim.

<sup>240</sup> This needs some qualification. Firstly, there might be degrees of engagement in a practice; but if there are, then there is a 'maximal' degree, and we can think of that as holding every member of the set, to the strength specified, and then imagine a descent from that degree as their credences change from this ideal. Secondly, as we see below, a more accurate representation of mystical practices is not as a set of pairs of propositions and credences in them, but as a set of propositions and those contributions to the subject's credences in them which issue from their engagement in the practice.

If our aim is to make the doxastic practice approach convertible with the probabilist approach, we need to represent the overrider system in a particular way. An overrider system rules as credible – perhaps to different degrees – candidate beliefs presented to the agent for its evaluation. The set of beliefs which perfectly represents that overrider system will make probable each of those candidate beliefs to a degree of probability equivalent to the degree of confidence the overrider system would have accorded them, considered as a procedure.

#### 4.2.3.1 Irrelevant Evidence in the Outsider Outlook

We can then give the following first pass at expressing how, in probabilistic terms, a theologian can capture what it means for her to no longer recognize the reliability of her mystical practice, and adopt the Outsider Outlook: she simply ceases to include the beliefs representing that practice among her relevant evidence for the controversial D-belief.

Here's a misunderstanding we need to avoid. A theologian might hold some beliefs  $\{B_1..B_n\}$  which bear on the veridicality of a religious experience or probability of a D-belief. Although she doesn't hold these in virtue of engaging in her mystical practice, they have the same propositional contents as members of the set of their beliefs which represent their mystical practice,  $\{B_{MP}\}$ . If we read our first pass as suggesting that, in order for her to stand in the Outsider Position, she must exclude  $\{B_1..B_n\}$  because she is excluding  $\{B_{MP}\}$ , mystical practices which invoked 'everyday' rules of reasoning would require their practitioners to adopt very strange attitudes as they stepped Outside them. For example, pretty well all my doxastic practices lead me to be cautious about the epistemic judgments I make when drunk or very tired. If a mystical doxastic practice just happened to also counsel this, then according to this reading of the way the Outsider Outlook segregates my wider from my relevant evidence, adopting the Outsider Outlook would mean ignoring the injunction about epistemic caution when drunk.

So we must be more precise: adopting the Outsider Outlook requires us to exclude, from our relevant evidence, the contributions engagement in the MP makes to our attitudes to the relevant propositions. My practicing a certain mystical practice might lead me to take a certain attitude to a set of propositions towards which I would have taken some other attitude were I not a practitioner. It might lead me to raise my credence in some, lower it in others, and so on. But were I not a practitioner, my attitudes to these might still be such that I 'believed' them, and referred to them when processing new evidence. So we can be more precise by thinking of doxastic practices as a set of pairs of, on the one hand, propositions, and, on the other, the contribution to the practitioner's credence in its paired proposition made by their engaging in the practice.

She must also exclude the "impulsional evidence"<sup>241</sup> conferred by the religious experience. Here's why. On the Alstonian picture, a religious experience contributes evidentially to a subject's D-belief in virtue of their treating a suitable mystical practice as reliable. If the Outsider Outlook means that practice no longer plays this role, what evidential force will religious experiences have?

If we represent religious experiences as content-propositions, the subject might get some experiential evidence from the religious experience by assigning a 'prior' credence to its content-proposition proportionate to the experience's compulsive force.<sup>242</sup> Then after assessing the experience with the overrider system they'll have a 'posterior' credence in the D-belief. The difference between the prior and posterior credence would be the final evidential force of the religious experience. This would mean that, after standing outside the mystical practice, the initial experiential evidence, stemming from the compulsive force, would still remain.

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<sup>241</sup> Plantinga 1993, 192.

<sup>242</sup> Or if we represent them as report-propositions, the subject might derive, from the 'seeming strength' reported in the experience's report proposition, a prior credence in the D-belief nested in that report-proposition.

But we have jettisoned this account of how to propositionally represent the evidence contributed by religious experiences, in favour of treating them as event-propositions, because we have understood the Alstonian picture as determining the evidential force of a religious experience by the extent to which the overrider system recognizes a religious experience as a veridical 'perception', that is, a mental event caused by God in a way that guarantees the truth of the propositional content it suggests to the mind of the subject. The probability that a religious experience is veridical just is the probability of the truth of an event-proposition that represents it. There is then no prior probability for the event-proposition 'given' to the subject before they use their overrider system to assign it one. For someone with the Outsider Outlook, the role of the religious experience is to present them with an event-proposition. They must then ascertain its probability using the evidence they share with others. The Outsider Outlook thereby excludes whatever impulsion evidence a religious experience confers on its subject.

#### 4.2.3.2 A Heuristic for Excluding Evidence

There is a helpful heuristic we can use to exclude the beliefs representing a mystical practice, which applies the Introduction's division of beliefs by their structures of support and theological content. This is worth having because of the difficulty involved in ascertaining the difference which engagement in a given doxastic practice, *qua* taking certain attitudes to certain normative or descriptive propositions, makes to our credence distribution. I suggest to the reader that, in the most extreme cases of inter-traditional theological disagreements, a subject's theological beliefs will need to be excluded from their relevant evidence insofar as they are basic or derived; and non-theological beliefs which are not N-beliefs will also need to be excluded in the Outsider Position.

More precisely: for each of the propositions which are the contents of such beliefs, the subject must alter their credence in them on adopting the Outsider Outlook, in proportion to the difference made

to her credence by the support those beliefs received from the bases that put them into the categories of (partly or wholly) basic and derived theological beliefs. And she must do the same for any relevant non-theological beliefs partly supported by those same kinds of bases.

Let's examine why we might assume the exclusion of all basic theological beliefs from the Outsider Outlook. Basic theological beliefs which are D-beliefs for that subject have their support from within the mystical practice which is being stood outside of, or from some other mystical practice. If the former, they will lose their rational support when the practice is treated as unreliable, and so should lose their place in the subject's evidence. If the latter, the question is whether all parties to the disagreement engage in that second practice, or regard it as reliable. If they do, then this old D-belief can remain among the relevant evidence for the new D-beliefs under assessment. If not, then the subject will have all the same motivations for adopting an Outlook from Outside that practice as he did for treating the first practice this way. Basic theological beliefs supported by experiences which aren't religious experiences will face similar problems. Subjects will need an appropriate doxastic practice to evaluate these. If peers to a disagreement share their engagement in such a practice, then the basic theological belief will remain in the relevant evidence; if not, the same motivations regarding the first mystical practice also apply to the doxastic practice within which this non-religious-experience-based basic theological belief is formed.

Here's an example to support this *prima facie* exclusion of basic theological beliefs. Testimonial basic theological beliefs form a nice subset of basic theological beliefs. Perhaps the testimony that supports the theological claim is of a kind that allows all parties to adopt the same doxastic attitude to it. But this is much less likely in cases where testimony chains terminate in religious experiences,<sup>243</sup> or some

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<sup>243</sup> Sudduth (2009a, 228-9) points out, following James (2002, 35), that dogmatic theology of the kind which provides the rules for mystical practices "involves a systematic reflection on the data of scripture, but scripture is in large part a record of religious experiences ostensibly involving the communication of divine truths. In this way, much of the content of dogmatic theology originates ultimately from the religious experiences of central figures in biblical history."

other kind of non-testimonial experience which would make the theological claim believed in the basic way. More likely, the parties will have standards of expertise and authority particular to their own traditions. The doxastic practices with which they assess testimony might even be contiguous with the mystical practices that the Outsider Outlook is setting aside. Alternatively, we could regard testimonies as making theological beliefs more probable just insofar as features of the testimony and testifier make the belief more probable. Then how the belief was supported for the testifier (or, if they received it as testimony, how it was supported for their testifier, and so on) will be what determines its place in the relevant evidence from the Outsider Outlook. For instance, if one party's basic testimonial theological belief was an A-belief for the testifier, then both parties can share an evaluation of the inferential competence of the testifier and, if they have it, an evaluation of their reasoning. But in situations where the testified claim was a D-belief for the testifier (or an elder testifier in the chain), the options for inclusion and exclusion will split again according to whether the parties regard the testifier's mystical practice as reliable; and so too if the testified claim was a basic theological belief for the testifier, for whatever non-mystical doxastic practice the testifier was engaging in.

Derived theological beliefs will be candidates for *prima facie* exclusion insofar as their own relevant evidence includes basic theological beliefs. If a basic theological belief has been excluded on the above grounds, then those beliefs deriving from it will also need to be excluded. Non-theological claims will, likewise, lose probability in proportion to that share of their probability owing to derived and basic theological beliefs which have been excluded by the Outsider Outlook.

So, *prima facie*, the Outsider should exclude all their basic and derived theological beliefs, and all their non-theological beliefs other than their N-beliefs. As suggested above, however, they can 'work up' to including those credences which would follow from trusting evidence of kinds which parties to disagreement share. But a simpler and more austere option is for all parties to approach claims to

veridical religious experience from theological 'ground zero': even if they agree on some theological claims coming out of testimonial traditions or mystical practices, they agree to bracket these for the sake of reducing the available inputs to the Anselmian Augury by which they determine the evidential force of the religious experiences they are particularly interested in, in the local context. Their only remaining theological beliefs are A-beliefs.

For simplicity's sake, I will write below as if adopting the Outsider Outlook means adopting the more austere of these options – but it is worth noting that the framework as a whole provides options for disagreements where parties are less theologically distant.

#### 4.2.3.3 A Heuristic for Finding Remaining Relevant Evidence

What evidence is left to the Outsider, which is relevant to the probability of a D-belief?

According to the division of beliefs appealed to above, the leftover candidates will be N-beliefs and the A-beliefs they support. The former category is hopelessly broad. A theologian's N-beliefs are just all their beliefs about creatures not based on basic or derived theological beliefs. For many theologians, these are most of their beliefs. Fortunately, we can presume that most of their N-beliefs do not make more or less probable the event-propositions representing religious experiences they want to treat as evidence in theological inquiry. Below, we will see that a particular subset of N-beliefs, 'normative' and 'contextual' beliefs, can support a particular subset of A-beliefs, beliefs about what God would do. And religious experiences can be represented as event-propositions which describe what God did, does or might do. Since propositions about what God would do have a direct and obvious bearing on propositions about what God did, does, or might do, we can see the relevance of these kinds of N-beliefs to the religious experiences' evidence force.

### 4.3 The “Anselmian Augury”

We have decided to measure the evidential contribution of a religious experience in terms of the inductive probability of an event-proposition that represents it. In section 4.4 I develop a typical way to represent religious experiences as event-propositions: as Divine Disclosures. In short, if  $S$ 's religious experience, which occurs in circumstances  $c$ , is supposed to support their belief that  $p$ , then the event-proposition “God disclosed  $p$  to  $S$  in  $c$ ” will entail the truth of  $p$  such that the more probable this event-proposition is, the more probable  $p$  is.

The proposition “God disclosed  $p$  to  $S$  in  $c$ ” describes a specific divine action. This means that one way to discern the probability of its truth is to discern the probability that God would carry out this action. This section describes a procedure for discerning the probability that God would carry out any specified divine action using only N-beliefs, and A-beliefs derived from them. Once we have a procedure which works in the general case, we can apply it to the special case of Divine Disclosures. Sections 4.3.5.1-4.3.5.4 and 4.4.2 describe the Anselmian Augury proper; the rest of this section lays out the groundwork for it in the form of the moral decision-making procedure, and the language for representing moral beliefs, which the Augury uses.

#### 4.3.1 Motivating the Augury

Henceforth, I'll use the placeholder  $Gw$  to refer to any specified divine action, so  $P(Gw)$  is the probability that  $Gw$  would occur, that is, that God would do that action. But the probability that  $Gw$  occurs given what other information? This section argues that the most proximate and general beliefs we should look to are beliefs about God's obligations, that is, beliefs about what an omnipotent being would do, supposing they are morally unsurpassable. I will consistently write as though God has a complex, active mental life, and is subject to and can satisfy obligations. This can all be construed as metaphorically or analogously as the reader likes. The account of obligations I give is intended to generalize between deontological, consequentialist and virtues-based accounts of ethics. If the

account of obligations succeeds in this respect, it won't matter whether God's moral reasoning (or analogous divine equivalent) really makes reference to any obligations binding on God. Perhaps it won't matter whether God carries out any moral reasoning at all: all He needs to do is act like someone who does.

We can divide a perfect being's perfections into those which relate to His character and those which relate to His capabilities: among the latter will fall features like omnipotence, omniscience, and eternity. Independently of His intentions, nothing about these latter features imply that He will carry out some particular action, but only remove limits on which actions are available to Him. If, however, we believe something about God's intentions, then we might find, among those intentions, reasons which would motivate Him to choose one course of action over another. If God is an agent, and the best possible, or a morally unsurpassable, agent, then this sets a constraint on what intentions might guide His actions: God will only act on good intentions. Moreover, the better some intention relative to others, the more important a determining factor it will be among God's action-guiding reasons. So we can work out what God's actions would probably be by considering our moral intuitions about the goodness of various intentions. There's no reason, however, for prioritizing talk of intentions when considering what actions an omnipotent morally unsurpassable being is likely to take. There's a whole range of alternative semantics for describing how a morally unsurpassable being would act: a morally unsurpassable being will always satisfy their absolute obligations, manifest as much of every virtue as possible in each virtue-manifestation opportunity, maximize the occurrence of good consequences, and so on.<sup>244</sup> Whatever feature of an action is supposed to make it the right action, all God's actions

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<sup>244</sup> The 'virtues' and 'consequentialist' semantics here need to be parsed carefully enough to avoid the conclusion that God must create the 'best possible world' if He's 'morally unsurpassable' – maximally virtuous or a perfect goods-maximizer – insofar as this implication might make theism impossible. See Kraay (2010) and Rowe (2004, 88-150) for representative formulations of, and overviews of recent responses to, this argument for atheism. Swinburne gives a concise suggestion for that careful parsing adequate to my purposes in his 2012, 108.

will have that feature. Any of His action-guiding mental states will be characterized in terms of that feature.

Indeed, when we examine predictions<sup>245</sup> of divine action in recent examples of natural theology, we typically find references to God's power and knowledge used to 'remove excuses', but references to God's morally unsurpassable character used to defend the claim that God would do the action in question. Because they're concise I'll use two divine hiddenness theodicies for examples: "God would not force himself upon us, *as that would make the relationship a sham*. [Therefore] He would leave it up to us to enter into [a loving relationship with Him]."<sup>246</sup> And, "God would manifest *His perfect love* by refusing to bring people to belief unless they were sincerely open to [a certain sort of] moral transformation".<sup>247</sup> Our beliefs about right and wrong, both in terms of quite general principles, and in terms of quite fine-grained judgments, such as claims about what sort of activities the best interpersonal relationships involve, provide the evidence for predictions of divine action and hence the grist to the mill of natural theology, on the basis that God is a perfect being.

The assumption that God is to be defined as a perfect being is associated more with St Anselm than with anyone else, so that belief in the subject of perfect being theology is sometimes called 'Anselmian theism'. In the ancient days when we were subject to the elements of the world, their worshippers attempted to predict their actions, with who knows what success, by carrying out procedures involving inspecting innards and counting birds, procedures called "auguries". So I suggest we name any procedure we use to predict the behaviour of a perfect being using our moral knowledge an "Anselmian Augury".

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<sup>245</sup> Just as often as claims about what God would do, or is likely to do, are claims about what He is likely to have done, or 'retrodictions'; for ease of expression I will only refer to predictions of divine action, regardless of when the action is supposed to occur, have occurred, or be occurring.

<sup>246</sup> Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, 13; my emphasis – I take it that sham relationships are supposed to carry enough moral opprobrium to outweigh the goods theists acknowledge would still issue from being in one with God.

<sup>247</sup> Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002, 16-17; my emphasis.

### 4.3.2 The Deontic Discourse

If reasons for action salient according to one moral theory can be paraphrased into reasons salient in another, we need not determine which moral theory is the 'correct' or 'most fundamental', and which of the alternatives are practical conveniences, for the purposes of working out what God has action-guiding reasons to do. In this section, I outline a deontological account of moral reasoning. Why use a deontological account, rather than sticking with consequentialist moral decision-making procedures in which we weigh the goods putatively produced by different actions?<sup>248</sup> Firstly, many theologians aren't very friendly to consequentialism, and so using the deontic discourse will hopefully prevent the propriety of Anselmian Auguries from being held hostage to a moral-theoretic position many would-be augurs would reject. Secondly, consequentialist accounts of moral decision-making are more beholden to problems arising from utility aggregation, problems which in God's case cannot be dealt with by reference to His ignorance or limited causal power.<sup>249</sup>

Here's how I advocate carrying out this paraphrasing: call this the 'Deontic Discourse'.

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<sup>248</sup> Judged entirely in terms of how far a deontological account like mine can homogenize the structures of different normative theories, I suggest it compares favourably with consequentialist attempts, such as Brown's (2011), in coming with fewer substantive commitments. Unlike consequentialist representations, the deontic discourse takes no stand on agent-relativity (Brown 2011, 760-761) because *pro tanto* obligations can include the indexical values required by agent-centric views. It takes no stand on satisficing (Brown 2011, 765-767) because those considerations which advocates of supererogation regard as 'non-moral', yet salient enough to dominate a moral consideration for acting, such that acting on the latter at the expense of the former would be 'supererogatory' rather than 'obligatory', can be represented as *pro tanto* obligations. It can also easily be tweaked to accommodate belief in 'moral dilemmas', understood as the view that some situations present us with no right action (Brown 2011, 763-5), by giving up the idea (see the final paragraph of section 4.3.2.3) that it's permissible to do any of the set of actions with equal or on-a-par (expected) rightness. The Deontic Discourse can instead stipulate that if multiple actions have equal rightness, rather than any being permissible, none are. This might seem weird, because an action goes from being impermissible in virtue of not being the best, to being impermissible in virtue of being best equal; but that weirdness is a feature of moral dilemmas if they are characterized in this way.

<sup>249</sup> Firstly, the infinite value of all or many of the choice-worthy worlds will generate infinite expected utility for any of those infinitely valuable worlds, making God indifferent between them, even if some are intuitively much worse. Secondly, if there's an infinite number of such worlds, or an infinite number of choice-worthy worlds among which God is permitted to choose any, the probability that God makes any one of those worlds is infinitesimal or hard to define. So the natural theologian should opt for a moral theory to describe God's actions which copes with problems arising from aggregation, and deontological theories are promising candidates.

Call a *subjective absolute obligation*, or a *subjective obligation* for short, whatever action one ought to do given one's circumstances and knowledge, including moral beliefs, beliefs about moral theories, and everything else one can access by introspection. Ultimately one's subjective obligation will be what one judges is the right particular action to take, given one's information.

We will have subjective obligations, so defined, whatever moral theory we subscribe to and whatever our particular beliefs about what the goods, *pro tanto* duties, good intentions, or virtues are. If you are an act utilitarian and, given your beliefs, you think the action which will maximize happiness right now is to make some tea, then you are subjectively obliged to make some tea.

Your *objective absolute obligation*, or *objective obligation* for short,<sup>250</sup> is the action which you aim to discover when you carry out situation-specific moral reasoning.<sup>251</sup> Supposing that one can't be blamed for doing one's best, and how well one can do is determined by one's moral (*inter alia*) knowledge, one can't be blamed for carrying out one's subjective obligation instead of one's objective obligation. But objective absolute obligations have to be on the conceptual table as the goal towards which practical reasoning aims.

Suppose you're an act utilitarian, and act utilitarianism is true, and you think that the way to maximize happiness is to make some tea, but unbeknownst to you (your colleagues are too polite) making coffee would generate more happiness. Then making coffee would be your objective obligation. But you can't be blamed for not doing it; in a way you can't be required specifically to make coffee rather than tea, given your ignorance. Suppose you're an act utilitarian, and you believe making tea will maximize

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<sup>250</sup> With the understanding that this does not imply that *pro tanto* obligations, which I define below, are not objective.

<sup>251</sup> The difference here is intended to track the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' or 'external' and 'internal' obligations – see Zimmerman 2008 for a thorough treatment of this distinction.

utility, and not only are you wrong about that, but act utilitarianism is false – Nietzschean virtue theory is true instead. As a consequence your objective obligation is to manifest your will to power by commanding a colleague to bring you wine. Your decadent utilitarian beliefs are sufficient to ensure your failure to satisfy your objective obligation, but given that you had them you still couldn't have done better, so you've satisfied your subjective obligation.

A *pro tanto* obligation is an obligation which you must satisfy whenever possible, and which can be satisfied through a range of particular actions. Objective absolute obligations are determined by the circumstances an agent is in (their powers, their current spatio-temporal, social, etc., situation, but not their knowledge or rational application of it, since then objective obligations collapse into subjective obligations) and which *pro tanto* obligations those circumstances make it possible for us to satisfy. In our example above, if act utilitarianism is true, there's just one *pro tanto* obligation, the obligation to maximize happiness. In that situation I can satisfy happiness more by making the coffee than by making tea, waiting for another to do it, or leaving it undone, so I'm objectively absolutely obliged to do it. If I'm an act utilitarian and I am aware that this is the way to maximize happiness, I'll also be subjectively absolutely obliged to do it. On many other moral theories, however, agents are subject to more than one *pro tanto* obligation, and they must 'balance' these in circumstances where the opportunity to satisfy multiple *pro tanto* obligations arises, but it is impossible to satisfy all of them. As seen in the utilitarian case, any high-level moral theory can be paraphrased in terms of *pro tanto*, *objective absolute* and *subjective absolute* obligations. We might say that if Kant is right we are *pro tanto* obliged to act only on a (set of) special maxim(s); if Aristotle, we have a *pro tanto* obligation to cultivate (or manifest) each of our 'virtues', special character traits.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> We can of course distinguish between subjective *pro tanto* obligations – the *pro tanto* obligations an agent recognizes as binding her – and objective *pro tanto* obligations – the *pro tanto* obligations which actually bind agents.

Note well that, according to the deontic discourse, moral puzzles or dilemmas are not ultimately about irresolvable tensions between absolute obligations peculiar to a circumstance. Moral puzzles are generated by tension between *pro tanto* obligations. On the view sketched here, whenever it looks as though there are two different courses of action which are different ways of satisfying the same *pro tanto* obligation, but we think one of those might be the better course of action than the other, what is really going on is that the two courses of action allow us to satisfy different degrees or combinations of *pro tanto* obligations, and it is that higher-level tension, harder to discern, which generates the puzzle.

#### 4.3.3 Two Kinds of Beliefs Bearing on Moral Decisions

When we make moral decisions, we attempt to satisfy our *pro tanto* obligations. We do this partly by using our beliefs about what *pro tanto* obligations bind us (and what their relative strengths are – see 4.3.2.4 below). But we also need beliefs about those ‘facts of the matter’ to which we must apply whatever moral principles or theories *pro tanto* obligations represent. We need this latter kind of belief in order to determine whether this or that action will satisfy some *pro tanto* obligation or prevent me from satisfying another. Andrew Sepielli distinguishes this kind of belief, from beliefs about our absolute obligations which incorporate or depend upon them, as “non-normative”, as opposed to “normative” beliefs about which moral theory is true (in the Deontic Discourse, what *pro tanto* obligations have what if any strength), or what our absolute obligations are.<sup>253</sup>

I suggest that we use the term “contextual” rather than “non-normative”, since these beliefs are picked out precisely because they are of normative significance. “Non-normative” might also suggest we are thinking of any and all beliefs which are not “normative” in the narrower sense; but most of those are irrelevant to moral decisions, and hence won’t arise in the Deontic Discourse, nor be inputs

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<sup>253</sup> Sepielli 2009, 6-8.

to Anselmian Auguries. I will also restrict the description “normative” to beliefs about our *pro tanto* obligations – what they are and how strong they are – for expository clarity.

With this distinction in mind we can apply it to propositions – a proposition such as “There is a very strong *pro tanto* obligation to keep promises” is a normative proposition and propositions such as “I have promised to buy my friend lunch”, “My friend and I are at the canteen”, and hence “I can keep my promise here by buying my friend lunch”, contextual propositions. I suffer “normative uncertainty” about promise-keeping to the extent that my credence in the former is below 1; and “contextual uncertainty” to the extent that my credence in the latter is below 1.

Note that many of our normative and contextual beliefs will be N-beliefs. According to the relationship between perfect being theology and predictions about what God will do described above, it is normative and contextual beliefs we use as inputs to the Anselmian Augury to generate predictions about God’s behaviour. Outsiders will only input normative and contextual beliefs which are also N-beliefs.

#### 4.3.4 Balancing One’s *Pro Tanto* Obligations

For the sake of concision, I will present the following procedure for attempting to determine one’s objective absolute, and thereby determining one’s subjective absolute, obligation. In presenting the procedure I aim to show it ‘saves the appearances’ of our ordinary moral intuitions.<sup>254</sup>

According to the Deontic Discourse, whenever I am presented, by my circumstances, with an opportunity to satisfy one *pro tanto* obligation by doing some action within my power, I’m objectively obliged to do that action. I’m subjectively obliged to do that action which, given my normative and contextual beliefs, ‘seems’ to be my objective obligation (to put it vaguely enough to be obvious at

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<sup>254</sup> The procedure I offer does not differ significantly, I suggest, from that presented by Lockhart (2000, 22-46).

this stage). If my circumstances present me with the opportunity to satisfy more than one *pro tanto* obligation, however, and I can't satisfy both, I must 'weigh' them against each other in order to decide which to satisfy – to decide, that is, which particular action I ought to do here and now. Suppose that only by doing a particular action *x* can I satisfy one *pro tanto* obligation, *O<sub>x</sub>*, but only by *y*-ing can I satisfy another of my *pro tanto* obligations, *O<sub>y</sub>*. I am in a situation where I know I can do either *x* or *y* and know *x* will satisfy *O<sub>x</sub>* and *y* will satisfy *O<sub>y</sub>*. The result of weighing these two *pro tanto* obligations against each other will determine whether I ought to *x* or *y*.

What are we weighing here? Call the term of measurement by which the two actions are commensurable their 'rightness'. Our objective obligation is to do the action which, of the alternatives, has the most rightness. Because of contextual uncertainty about whether and which and to what extent any action will satisfy a *pro tanto* obligation, however, our subjective obligation is the action which, of the alternatives, has the highest *expected rightness*, which is determined as described below.<sup>255</sup> Expected rightness is rightness weighted by our uncertainty, in a way which takes into account not only how uncertain we are that actions will indeed satisfy the *pro tanto* obligations we think they will, and not only how uncertain we are that the salient *pro tanto* obligations have the relative strengths our moral intuitions accord them, but also the fact that those relative strengths

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<sup>255</sup> It's worth pointing out here that the decision-making procedure the Anselmian Augury uses is risk-neutral. This is a consequence of the "deontic" aspect of the Deontic Discourse, which supplies all the inputs to the formula for expected rightness. When the inputs for obligation credences (see below in section 4.3.4.1) refer to the consequences of actions, they refer only to the intended outcomes of those actions when the relevant *pro tanto* obligations have to do with securing or promoting goods, or when for some other reason the relevant *pro tanto* obligations can only be satisfied owing to some consequence of the actions. These inputs never refer to unintended consequences, and the disvalue of these if they should occur. But neither do the inputs for satisfaction credences (see below in section 4.3.4.1): these only refer to the positive probability of securing the intended outcomes. But the motivation for risk-weighting a decision procedure is to do try to 'raise the floor' on how bad the outcome of one's action could be, counselling different actions where the unintended consequences are worse. So if unintended consequences are not inputs then they cannot be weighted for. They do not 'cost' or 'generate' any rightness or expected rightness, if expressed as parts of a sum to total expected rightness that includes the product of the probability of an unintended outcome with the 'wrongness' of that outcome. But attitudes to risk, including specific kinds of risk indexed to specific bad outcomes or moral mistakes, can nevertheless be expressed as *pro tanto* obligations and hence feed into the expected rightness of actions. For a range of defences of using expected value to decide what to do when we are uncertain, see Hudson (1989), Lockhart (2000, 3-46), and Sepielli (2009).

come in degrees. It's a nuanced weighing procedure which I prefer to proposed rivals since it handles counterexamples to these. For the sake of concision, however, I lean on others' work in presenting those rivals and counter-examples.<sup>256</sup>

A feature of this procedure, which will be very important when we apply it to predicting divine action, is that it does not only generate a judgment as to which particular action among a range of actions is our absolute obligation, but also generates a degree of (subjective) probability associated with each action: the 'best' action is really the 'most probably the best, all things considered' action, and the factors for the probabilities in question will be on display in the rightmost column of a decision box, where we fill in the expected rightness of each action.

I'll describe how to calculate the expected rightness of an action by fixing as many variables at first, and describing how to accommodate change in those variables as we progress.

#### 4.3.4.1 Determining an Action's Expected Rightness

We are in a situation where we can  $x$  or  $y$ , but not both  $x$  and  $y$ . Suppose that we have credence 1 that action  $x$  will satisfy *pro tanto* obligation  $Ox$ , but not satisfy *pro tanto* obligation  $Oy$ , and  $y$  will satisfy *pro tanto* obligation  $Oy$  but not  $Ox$ . Let's suppose  $Ox$  and  $Oy$  can't be satisfied to greater or lesser degrees. We want to know whether to  $x$  or  $y$ . Either  $x$ ing and  $y$ ing are on a par,<sup>257</sup> equal, or one is more right than the other. If either of the first two possibilities is the case, it's permissible to either  $x$  or  $y$ . Suppose that if the third possibility is the case,  $x$  has greater expected rightness than  $y$ . In virtue of what would it have this? It would have to be that satisfying  $Ox$  'produces' more rightness than

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<sup>256</sup> Examples of such case-led discussions can be found at Oddie 1994 (144-146) and Sepielli 2009, and throughout Lockhart 2000.

<sup>257</sup> Chang (2002) appeals to some cases of difficult decisions to motivate the view that this third 'parity' relation between goods is possible. I take it that cases of parity are equivalent to cases of equality, both for decision-makers and for Anselmian augurs.

satisfying  $Oy$ .<sup>258</sup> To avoid implying consequentialism we can think of this relative rightness-production of different *pro tanto* obligations as the ‘strength’ with which different *pro tanto* obligations ‘bind’ moral agents. Now, if  $Ox$  is stronger than  $Oy$ , they must both occupy positions on a scale of ‘obligation strengths’. We’ll look at how to reflect on what strengths we might think different obligations have in section 4.3.4.3; for now, we’ll use placeholders  $n$  and  $m$  to represent the obligation strengths of  $Ox$  and  $Oy$  respectively.

Unfortunately, however, we might be uncertain about the claims that ( $p$ ) “ $x$  will satisfy  $Ox$ ”, ( $q$ ) “ $y$  will satisfy  $Oy$ ”, ( $p'$ ) “ $Ox$  is  $n$  strong”, and ( $q'$ ) “ $Oy$  is  $m$  strong”. Those uncertainties – those credences in, or the epistemic probabilities<sup>259</sup> of,  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $p'$ , and  $q'$  – will make a difference in our attempt to investigate our absolute obligation, by changing the expected rightness of  $x$  and  $y$ .

First let’s worry about the effects of normative uncertainty; that is, credences lower than 1 in normative beliefs like  $p'$  and  $q'$ . I’ll be less sure that  $x$ , not  $y$ , is the right action to the extent that I’m unsure that  $Ox$  is stronger than  $Oy$ , but this uncertainty will also be affected by my attitudes to the differences between  $Ox$  and  $Oy$ ’s strengths. Consider a case in which I’m unsure whether saving a life is more important than telling the truth: whether I think that I ought to lie to save a life will depend not only on how sure I am that saving lives is more important than telling truths, but also on how much more important than telling truths I think saving lives is. The relationship between these two factors can be expressed by a single value – let’s call it an ‘obligation credence’ – which we determine by treating our credences in  $p'$  and  $q'$  (call these  $Cp'$  and  $Cq'$ ) as probabilities that  $p'$  and  $q'$  are true. If we were certain that  $p'$  and  $q'$  then we would be certain that satisfying  $Ox$  will have a rightness tracking  $n$  and satisfying  $Oy$  will have a rightness tracking  $m$ . Because we don’t, however, satisfying  $Ox$  has an expected rightness equal to  $n$  multiplied by the probability of the truth of (i.e. our credence in)  $p'$ ;

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<sup>258</sup> For a more detailed defence of the idea that moral rightness comes in degrees see Lockhart (2000, 80-92).

<sup>259</sup> That is, the epistemic probabilities prior to making a decision and then reflecting on it, or using the Anselmian Augury.

satisfying  $Oy$  has an expected rightness equal to  $m$  multiplied by the probability of the truth of  $q'$ . These values, the obligation credences for  $Ox$  and  $Oy$  (call these  $OCx$  and  $OCy$ ) can then be used to ensure the procedure as a whole accounts for normative uncertainties.<sup>260</sup>

Contextual uncertainty – credences below 1 in propositions like  $p$  and  $q$  – also plays a role in calculating the expected rightness of particular actions. If I think it sufficiently unlikely that telling this lie will save this life, I will think it wrong to tell the lie even though I think saving lives is much more important than telling truths. Call the credences concerning propositions like  $p$  and  $q$  our ‘satisfaction credences’. Now that we have obligation credences and satisfaction credences, we can calculate the expected rightness of an action in a way which accounts for normative uncertainty, contextual uncertainty, and the differences in strengths between different *pro tanto* obligations. Just multiply the satisfaction credence for an act by the sum of the obligation credences for all the *pro tanto* obligations one believes that act has a chance of satisfying. (If we like, we can split up the satisfaction credence for the act into a set of satisfaction credences, one for each *pro tanto* obligation we think the act might satisfy, and add those together, then multiply the result by the sum of the obligation credences for all those *pro tanto* obligations.)<sup>261</sup> Note well that when carrying out this procedure we are interested in comparing mutually exclusive courses of action. Two courses of action which can both be carried out can be combined into one.

#### 4.3.4.2 Representing Hard Cases

Three features of practical reasoning have not yet been accounted for. Firstly, it sometimes seems as though *pro tanto* obligations can be satisfied to greater or lesser degrees – consider, for example, our

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<sup>260</sup> Here’s the formula for assigning the obligation credence for a *pro tanto* obligation  $d$  with a suspected strength  $s$  predicated of  $d$  in the propositional content of the moral belief that  $b$ :  $OCd=Cb*s$ .

<sup>261</sup> Here’s the formula for determining the expected rightness of a course of action,  $EVx$ , which cannot be performed in combination with any other actions:  $EVx=\sum^n SCa...a_n*\sum^n OCd...d_n$ .  $SCa_n$  represents the satisfaction credence for one of the propositions describing how action  $x$  will satisfy the corresponding one of the *pro tanto* obligations  $d$ . More simply,  $EVx=SCa*\sum^n OCd...d_n$ , if one is ready to assign a single credence to the extended proposition  $a$  which describes an action as satisfying *pro tanto* obligations  $d...d_n$ .

*pro tanto* obligation to make people happier. Secondly, it sometimes seems as though some *pro tanto* obligations are stronger than others even though these others might be capable of being satisfied to infinite degrees: consider some peoples' intuitive rejection of the torture option in ticking time-bomb cases, no matter how many lives are at stake. Thirdly, it might be that we can choose ends for ourselves; and sometimes an action which pursues such ends might be as (or more) right than an action which satisfies obligations binding all moral agents irrespective of their chosen ends. Consider, for example, the goodness of my writing a doctoral thesis in philosophy, compared to the moral indifference of my friend's doing so, where they have no vocation to practice philosophy.

I suggest that any *pro tanto* obligation which admits of degrees of satisfaction be treated as a set of *pro tanto* obligations, one corresponding to each degree of satisfaction; the member of that set relevant to calculating the expected rightness of an action which might satisfy it is the one which corresponds to the degree of satisfaction that this action is thought capable of reaching.

Another *pro tanto* obligation which appears stronger than any member of that set of *pro tanto* obligations corresponding to degrees of possible satisfaction might thereby look as though it has infinite strength. That infinite strength will swamp the significance of the credence in that *pro tanto* obligation, generating in turn an infinitely high obligation credence, which will in turn swamp the significance of the satisfaction credence regarding the action we think might satisfy the infinitely strong *pro tanto* obligation. We'll always be absolutely obliged to undertake any course of action with any chance at all of satisfying any infinitely strong obligations. Difficulties with infinite utilities, of this kind, plague any decision-making procedure.

One possible solution is to apply a Sure Loss Principle<sup>262</sup> to all our uses of the procedure so as to prevent the various bizarre effects of putative infinite expected rightnesses. Identify one's absolute obligation not with the course of action with the highest expected value, but rather with the course of action recommended by an application of your Sure Loss Principle. Very concisely, a Sure Loss Principle tells us not to take the action with the highest expected rightness if competing actions also have very high expected rightness, but the action with the highest has a sufficiently low probability of success, where the low threshold is established in some manner which ensures it is set independently of our intuitions concerning the case.

Unfortunately, this solution doesn't save the appearance of the intuition that satisfying some obligations is more right than satisfying any amount of some others, no matter how much. There would be an amount of satisfaction of the weaker, degreed obligation the prospect of foregoing which would reliably 'trigger' the application of the Sure Loss Principle. Then, if we're absolutely obliged to do what the Principle recommends, we're absolutely obliged to do the same action which we would be absolutely obliged to do if we were treating the putative infinitely strong obligation as though it had some finite strength.

I take this consequence to indicate that the intuition that there are some infinitely strong *pro tanto* obligations is unreliable. How we should model a *pro tanto* obligation advertised as infinitely strong is to ask its advertiser to consider an expensive course of action with a very low probability of satisfying the obligation in question. Keep reducing the probability while holding the expense stable: when they are no longer willing to incur the expense, they have implicitly committed to a finite obligation strength for that obligation.

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<sup>262</sup> See Jordan (2006, 115) for an easily adaptable example of a Sure Loss Principle, designed to deal with the St Petersburg Paradox.

The third ordinary moral intuition I have not yet accommodated is that there's a wide scope of situations in which it is permissible, and perhaps even obligatory, for agents to act in pursuit of ends they have chosen for themselves, insofar as they have chosen them for themselves. If this is true, it just generates some situations in which, out of a range of actions with equal highest expected rightness, some are more rational to pursue than others: those actions which pursue the agent's idiosyncratic ends. We can treat pursuing one's own ends as a *pro tanto* obligation and work out its background ranking against other *pro tanto* obligations which bind all agents equally; or if we have multiple idiosyncratic ends which can sometimes conflict with one another, we can treat the pursuit of each of these as a *pro tanto* obligation and assign each a strength relative to the others and to the obligations which bind everyone equally.

#### 4.3.4.3 Assigning Obligation Strengths

How should we assign obligation strengths? Sepielli's solution is to rank *pro tanto* obligations cardinally, since in normal reasoning cases the differences in strengths will have to be significant enough to still make a difference after multiplication by credences.<sup>263</sup> To show the plausibility of this strategy, he appeals to "a good old-fashioned trolley problem".<sup>264</sup> If you believe that it's worth letting (at most) five people die in order to avoid killing one person, then you believe that the obligation not to kill is (at most) five times stronger than the obligation not to let people die. To cut a long story short, and so make it highly implausible, one could in principle run trolley problems with all sorts of different consequences on the two different tracks; offer variations on one's degree of responsibility for guiding the trolley down either track; ensure consistency over one's rankings; and thereby rank all the *pro tanto* obligations one recognizes.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Sepielli 2009, 10-20.

<sup>264</sup> Sepielli 2009, 17.

<sup>265</sup> There is evidence that attempts to find out one's moral beliefs in this way will not be fruitful since we respond unreliably or inconsistently to questions about how and what we value – for an apposite recent study see Bauman et al. (2014). I leave it to moral psychologists to offer a better procedure for finding out peoples' 'true' moral beliefs.

Since we want to have figures for our obligation strengths which can represent consistent ‘background rankings’ of all *pro tanto* obligations against each other, from one occasion of practical reasoning to another, I propose that we assign 100 points of obligation strength to those *pro tanto* obligations which are ranked equally highest. Then assign fractions of 100 to other *pro tanto* obligations in accordance with their cardinal ranking relative to the strongest equal obligations. (So, for example, if we assigned 100 points to the obligation not to kill anyone, then the obligation not to let someone die would have 20 points of strength.) To account for obligations which admit of different degrees of satisfaction, tinker with this approach in the following way. Take a *pro tanto* obligation which admits of varying degrees of satisfaction (in practice, a set of *pro tanto* obligations each of which contains a clause corresponding to each degree of satisfaction) and find another *pro tanto* obligation (either one which is not satisfied in degrees, or one which is a member of one of these satisfaction-degree-indexed sets and has been ranked and assigned a value already) which is ranked equal with satisfying the former to the lowest degree. Then equate the points value of satisfying one degree of the former, degreed obligation with the points value of satisfying the latter.

#### 4.3.5 From Moral Decisions to Anselmian Auguries

If God is morally unsurpassable and omniscient, He’ll always do whatever He’s objectively obliged to do<sup>266</sup> – failing to do what we are objectively obliged to do is only possible for us either because of our ability to wilfully sin, or because of our ignorance, which can lead to discrepancies between our subjective and objective obligations, or both. When we try to work out what God is objectively obliged to do, however, the information we use is our moral knowledge – that is, in practice, our normative and contextual beliefs. But since in our case, with our uncertainties, what that gets us is a judgment

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<sup>266</sup> Libertarians about divine freedom may add “freely” after “always”. That God’s actions are free in the libertarian sense will not affect the soundness of our judgments about the probabilities of divine actions, since that probability is conditional on the reasons God has for so acting, not conditional on determining conditions of the kind excluded by libertarianism.

about what our objective obligation probably is, when we use our moral knowledge to ‘put ourselves in God’s place’, we likewise get a judgment about what God is probably objectively obliged to do – and therefore what God probably would do. Since the procedure for determining what we probably ought to do is that for determining our subjective obligation, then the procedure for determining what God probably ought to do is the one for determining His subjective obligation – that is, what it would be, were He in the situation and epistemically imperfect.

It might sound surprising, or even impious, to suppose that we can probabilistically predict divine action like this. The reason for being sceptical about our ability to predict divine action using perfect being inferences is that we live under so much normative and contextual uncertainty. Given these uncertainties, we are rightly hesitant to make theological claims of the sort “this would be the right thing for an omnipotent being to do, so God will do this”. But theologians make judgments of that sort all the time anyway.<sup>267</sup> All we want is for those judgments to reflect that uncertainty. The Anselmian Augury ensures this; that theological doubt tracks moral doubt. So those worried about potential hubris and risk of error in natural theology should welcome, rather than resist, procedures like the Augury.

Here is how the Augury translates the judgments about the expected rightness of putative mutually exclusive divine actions into probability values for each of those actions.

God’s omnipotence and eternity mean that in any perceived or conceived creaturely circumstance which provides Him an opportunity to satisfy one or more of His *pro tanto* obligations, He will be able to, and so will be objectively obliged to, perform the action determined as optimal in that circumstance by our weighing procedure. Or, rather, we will think it probable that He is so obliged

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<sup>267</sup> See Lovering 2013, 88-104 for a discussion of the role such claims play in natural theology, and the implications of scepticism about them. See Rea 2014 for an articulation of the limits such scepticism can take while avoiding those implications.

(and hence that He will) in exact proportion to how likely we think this the best action, given our normative and non-normative uncertainty. The action with the highest 'expected rightness' figure, in the rightmost column of the decision-box in which we carry out a weighing procedure where we 'put ourselves in God's place', will be the one He is most likely to do.

#### 4.3.5.1 Steps One and Two: Framing the Creaturely Context as a Set of Divine Actions

For Step One, we describe a perceived or conceived state of creaturely affairs in a proposition which suggests clearly enough the moral salience of that state of affairs, in such a way that it's clear enough which *pro tanto* obligations would be satisfied by God acting in that state of affairs.

Here's an example. In a human case of practical reasoning, I am confronted with a drowning child whilst walking along the river on my way to a meeting which I have promised to attend. We can describe this context in the form of a proposition, which we'll call C. Faced with this context described by C I have, plausibly, two morally salient mutually exclusive actions available to me: (C1) "jump in the river and try to save the child" and (C2) "stay on the path and continue walking to my meeting". There's a set of *pro tanto* obligations which I will satisfy to various degrees by doing C1, including saving a life and benevolence; and a set of *pro tanto* obligations which I will satisfy to various degrees by doing C2, including self-preservation and keeping a promise. But, on the one hand, that river is flowing very fast, so by jumping in the river I might not even save the life. On the other hand, by continuing on my journey, I am virtually guaranteed to preserve my life for the foreseeable future, and almost guaranteed to keep my promise to show up at the arranged meeting. For both actions there is a chance they'll fail, and that will be represented in my procedure by an appropriate satisfaction credence attached to each. Plausibly my obligation credences for saving lives, and benevolence of this kind, will be sufficiently high, relative to my obligation credences for keeping promises and self-preservation, that the expected rightness for saving the child will be higher than the

expected rightness for walking on by; then my procedure will determine that jumping in the river is my subjective absolute obligation.

Step One tells us to describe the creaturely situation, analogous to my description of a context for my practical reasoning above, (C) “I am confronted with a drowning child whilst walking along the river on my way to a meeting I have promised to attend”. Here’s an example of a divine case familiar from recent debates in natural theology: (D) “there is a set of non-theists who are capable of loving God and of believing theism, and aren’t irrational for disbelieving theism, and aren’t otherwise culpable for disbelieving theism”. This is the kind of proposition we describe in Step One.

Step Two transforms a proposition like D into a set of propositions which can take satisfaction credences, a set of mutually exclusive actions analogous to C1 and C2. In our divine case, let’s simplistically divide God’s mutually exclusive available courses of action into two: (D1) “give all members of this set of non-theists sufficient evidence to rationally trump whatever evidence supports their non-theism” and (D2) “give fewer than all members of this set such evidence”.

On the one hand we will harbour some doubt about whether God will carry out either D1 or D2, due to our doubts about the relative strengths of the different moral principles or goods God must ‘weigh’ in D. In the divine case, we can have no doubt that these actions will achieve whatever ends for which God does them; or, in the Deontic Discourse, no doubt that these actions will successfully satisfy the *pro tanto* obligations ‘binding’ on God, which would motivate Him to carry out either action. So, if satisfaction credences make an appearance in thinking about divine action, they must represent something rather different from what they represent in creaturely cases.

Satisfaction credences in the Anselmian Augury capture our doubts about whether we have described the creaturely situation wrong. Consider our example, D: some theists think D mistaken. At least, we

are unlikely to be fully certain that D is true.<sup>268</sup> Recall that the morally salient features of a situation determine which *pro tanto* obligations an agent can satisfy in that situation. So, which *pro tanto* obligations God can in fact satisfy, in any particular created context picked out in Step One, depends directly on the actual morally salient features of that context. In a simple case like D, whatever obligations we think God would satisfy by carrying out D1, He will not be able to satisfy if the creaturely situation is not in fact the way that D describes it; and similarly for D2. (Since God is omniscient, indeed, D1 and D2 wouldn't even occur to Him when He considers the situation which we have mistakenly described by D.) The consequence is that the doubt we have about the accuracy of Step One propositions like D will track directly onto propositions like D1 and D2 which describe what God might be absolutely obliged to do in the created context as we understand it.

Propositions describing putative divine actions, like D1 and D2, are of the correct form to take satisfaction credences. Step Two, therefore, is to take the description of creation which we gave in Step One, and derive from it a set of propositions each describing a course of action which will satisfy one or more of the *pro tanto* obligations God appears capable of satisfying, by so acting, in the context described in Step One's proposition. Those courses of action must be mutually exclusive – otherwise, God would do as many of them as He could do together, and that would itself be a course of action. Then we assign a satisfaction credence to each such proposition, equal to whatever credence we had

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<sup>268</sup> I have used a divine hiddenness case here partly to help set up a more extended discussion of how to formalize divine hiddenness arguments in the next chapter, and partly because the archetypal contemporary divine hiddenness argument owed to Schellenberg (Schellenberg 1993) is challenged by doubt thrown on its empirical premises (see Lehe 2004 and Henry 2001 for examples). For contrast, consider some natural theology which also trades on a narrowly described creaturely state of affairs, such as Rowe's 1979 evidential argument from evil. Rowe appeals to the death of a fawn in a forest fire. It's not controversial that such events happen; rather, it's controversial that they happen under Rowe's description, according to which it is "pointless" (Rowe 1979, 337). But we should express controversy about the 'pointlessness' claimed in that description in terms of differing obligation credences about the *pro tanto* obligations putatively satisfied by courses of action available to God in which He both refrains from intervening and creates a world with sensible fawns and painful forest fires. So doubt about descriptions' accuracies will not always correctly be captured by satisfaction credences attached to divine actions available in the described occasion, since sometimes those descriptions 'jump the gun' by using evaluative terms.

in Step One's proposition. *Gw* is a placeholder for whichever of these propositions the probability of which we are interested in.

Note well: when using the Anselmian Augury to evaluate a particular religious experience, to establish how probable it was that this religious experience was a Divine Disclosure, we 'work backwards', and describe in Step One a hypothetical situation in which God had not given the religious experience *qua* Divine Disclosure; I describe how this works in section 4.4.2.

#### 4.3.5.2 Steps Three to Six: Feeding in Moral Priors

Step Three is to reflect on and hence quantify the relative strengths of the relevant *pro tanto* obligations God can satisfy in the context described in Step One, using the best methods of moral reflection available to us. This allows us to determine the values for *n* in propositions of the form "Ox is *n* strong".

Step Four is to introspect our credences in, and so assign probabilities to, the propositions of the form "Ox is *n* strong", and Step Five to generate our overall obligation credence for each *pro tanto* obligation we think God has the opportunity to satisfy in the circumstance in question. Step Six is to multiply the obligation credences with the satisfaction credences and so determine the expected rightness of each mutually exclusive action 'available' to God.

#### 4.3.5.3 Step Seven: each Action as a Fraction of the Total Space

At the end of Step Six we will have a value for each action. These represent something slightly different from what they represented when generated for the purposes of determining our objective absolute obligation. In our case, once we've determined which action has the highest expected rightness, we can ignore the differences between that action's expected rightness and the lower expected rightnesses of other actions: this is just our subjective obligation now. But that is because in our case

the expected rightness values incorporate and account for our uncertainty as to whether each action is really our objective obligation. God, however, has no such uncertainty, and His absolute obligations are not determined by accounting for *our* uncertainties. Rather, He just knows and does His objective obligation. So each value represents the probability, relative to the other actions available to God, of God's taking that action *qua* it's being His objective obligation. But the total of all the values will be some figure depending on the strengths of all the *pro tanto* obligations which could be satisfied in that circumstance, so will fluctuate wildly rather than being fractions of 1, which is what we need for a judgment about probability.

Step Seven, then, is to add the total of the expected rightness values for all the actions and divide 100 by it, then multiply each expected rightness value by the product: this will give you a decimal figure for each course of action which is at all worth God's doing, a figure which tells you the probability of God's doing that action. So, at the end of Step Seven, we have a set of mutually exclusive actions by which God might satisfy various situationally-relevant conjunctions of His *pro tanto* obligations, and each of those actions has been assigned a probability that it is God's absolute obligation – and hence a probability that this is what God does, or will do. So, for any putative divine action *Gw*, we can treat it as an action like *x* or *y* described above, and reach a probability that it's what God would do when He's in the circumstance picked out by the proposition described in Step One.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> And so, finally, a formula for  $P(Gw)$ , where *x* is the action referred to in *Gw* as the action God would take, *SCa* represents the satisfaction credence for one of the propositions describing how action *x* will satisfy the corresponding one of the *pro tanto* obligations  $d_n$ , *y* is the (set of) action(s) excluded by God's undertaking *x*, *SCb* the satisfaction credence for one of the propositions describing how (one or some of) action(s) *y* will satisfy one of corresponding *pro tanto* obligations  $e_n$  (note that some values for  $e_n$  might be the same as some values for  $d_n$ ):  $P(Gw) = (100 / (EVx + EVy)) * EVx$  expanded, that is:  
 $P(Gw) = (100 / ((\sum^n SCa \dots a_n * \sum^n OCd \dots d_n) + (\sum^n SCb \dots b_n * \sum^n OCe \dots e_n))) * (\sum^n SCa \dots a_n * \sum^n OCd \dots d_n)$ , or if one is ready to assign a single credence to the extended proposition *a* which describes an action as satisfying *pro tanto* obligations  $d \dots d_n$ , and to do the same for *b* concerning  $e \dots e_n$ :  
 $P(Gw) = (100 / ((SCa * \sum^n OCd \dots d_n) + (SCb * \sum^n OCe \dots e_n))) * (SCa * \sum^n OCd \dots d_n)$ .

There may be cases where God has open to Him more than one action which is equally right, according to our moral knowledge. When one of us faces multiple courses of action which have equal expected rightness, we can just do any of them. In God's case, however, we can't use our moral knowledge to work out how likely He is to do one among a set of actions with equal expected rightness, since all that tells us is that He'll do one of them. Perhaps in the past God has told us something about His idiosyncratic ends; perhaps pursuing one of these would make it more likely for Him to do one of the best equal actions than the others. Otherwise, we can use Richard Swinburne's suggestion:<sup>270</sup> if there's  $n$  equal best actions for God to choose from, the Anselmian augur should assign equal probability to God's doing any of them. This result will, however, have already been produced by the Augury anyway.

#### 4.3.5.4 Step Eight: Special Divine Actions as Fractions of the Historically Possible Space

When we use the Anselmian Augury to discriminate between different theological interpretations of past events we will need to add an eighth step. In a nutshell, Step Eight accounts for the fact that when we look back at a creaturely context, we consider what different worthwhile actions God might have taken; but we know, now, that a set of these possibilities were not, in fact, undertaken by God. These possibilities need to be excluded from the alternatives to  $Gw$  which 'compete' with it as fractions of the probability space divided in Step Seven.

Step Eight can be understood as an alternative to Step Seven, which applies whenever we are using the Augury to 'retrodict' the probability that God carried out an action which is not the only one compatible with what we know happened. For example, we might be curious about whether a historical event was caused by a special divine action, or whether, instead, that historical event was the result of God 'standing back'. All we need to do is take, from the putative divine actions we are ranking, the subset whose actual performance is compatible with what we know, historically, to have

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<sup>270</sup>Swinburne 2004, 123.

occurred. Then we add the total of the expected rightness values for the members of that subset, divide 100 by that figure, and multiply each expected rightness value by the product.

#### 4.4 Divine Disclosures

The Anselmian Augury allows us to determine the probability for any value for *Gw* using only our N-beliefs and A-beliefs consequent on them. All values for *Gw* are claims about what God has done, or will do, or would do. A religious experience is guaranteed to be veridical if it is an instance of divine testimony: if God has brought about the mental event of the experience in order to truthfully communicate the belief the subject bases on it. In other words, the event-propositions we use to represent religious experiences are candidates for *Gw*. So, those with an Outsider Outlook can use the Anselmian Augury to evaluate the probability of a D-belief, in light of the probability of the truth of the event-proposition representing the experience which supports it, given only N- and A-beliefs. These N- and A-beliefs are, of course, held independently of their controversial mystical practices.

Different phenomenal modes of religious experience will, when described according to those modes, use different words picking out the nature of the divine action by which God produces a belief in a creature: sometimes people know that *p* because they experience God telling them that *p*; but other times they experience angels telling them that *p*, and this will be (externalistically speaking) good evidence for *p* if God in fact sent an angel to tell them that *p*; other times God might genuinely appear to them in such a way that they come to believe that *p*. Or God might give them visions which convince them that *p*; and so on. For now, we can follow the intuition that were God to undertake actions like these, he would be honestly communicating or 'disclosing' *p* to the bearer, so that *p* must be true if the event of that divine action really occurs. In all these cases, therefore, the D-belief that *p* will be probably true is in proportion to the extent to which an Anselmian Augury predicts in favour of God's doing these 'disclosure' actions.

But representing a religious experience, supporting a D-belief that  $p$ , merely as “God disclosed that  $p$ ”, will not be enough. It would mean that the only information we had about the action which bore on its rightness would be in virtue of  $p$ 's truth, since that is what makes the communicative action a ‘disclosure’ as opposed to one in which the communicator is indifferent to the truth or falsity of  $p$ , or one in which  $p$  is false. In the next chapter, I discuss these two possibilities and suggest that we calculate the total expected rightness of a Divine Disclosure by assuming the truth of  $p$ . But I also argue that the intrinsic value of truth, which is what determines the truth-dependent rightness of disclosures, is static across different truths told. And this claim combines with the assumption of truth to mean that every religious experience, if represented merely as “God disclosed that  $p$ ”, would enjoy the same expected rightness under the Augury. So our representations of God’s disclosures need to build in more morally salient information.

#### 4.4.1 Defining Divine Disclosures

Below I offer the generic form of event-proposition which we will use to represent religious experiences in a way which makes them amenable to being treated as divine actions of which the Augury can be used to determine the probability. The form for a Divine Disclosure might seem like a counter-intuitive way of representing religious experiences as propositions, since it draws attention to features salient to the Anselmian Augury, rather than features, such as phenomenology, which have often led philosophers’ and theologians’ interest in religious experiences. It is designed, that is, to make the Augury more ‘user-friendly’ for evaluating religious experiences.

*Divine Disclosures:* for any D-belief that  $p$ , and any religious experience  $E$  occurring in circumstances  $c$  supporting that D-belief, and any subject  $S$  who holds that  $p$  on the basis of  $E$ , there’s a Divine Disclosure proposition of the form “God disclosed  $p$  to  $S$  by giving them  $E$  in  $c$  such that  $d$ ”.

We can refer to the theological claim putatively disclosed,  $p$ , as a disclosure. The term 'disclosure' bears with it a presumption that what was disclosed is true, and this is deliberate: the use of this term in the form Divine Disclosures are to take thereby guarantees that, if the Disclosure really occurred, then  $p$  is true. Next chapter, we will consider other divine actions which are easy to mistake for disclosures. So, I will use the term 'communiqué' to refer to the theological claims, here represented by  $p$ , when I wish to be neutral as to whether they were disclosed, or whether their communication to the believer were cases of deception or discretion on God's part. Accordingly, I will speak of God's communicating that  $p$  when I wish to generalise over types of action in which God produces beliefs in creatures via experiences, regardless of whether those beliefs are true.

Although Divine Disclosures are propositions according to the above definition – because the Augury determines the probability of the truth of propositions, so all values for  $Gw$  must be propositions – I will sometimes speak of the event represented by a Divine Disclosure proposition as a Divine Disclosure itself, for stylistic felicity. So, sometimes, I will speak of the probability of a Divine Disclosure's truth, and sometimes the probability of its occurrence; but this should not cause difficulties, since either will imply the same probability for the D-belief, and the same evidential force for the experience.

When I am considering particular theological claims, subjects of religious experiences, circumstances in which religious experiences have occurred, and the consequences of those Disclosures, I'll conventionally write of a (putative) Divine Disclosure that  $p$ , for, of or to  $S$ , and while, in, on or at  $c$ , such that or and  $d$ ; or that  $d$  occurred 'since' or 'because of' the Disclosure. (Sometimes the relationship between the Disclosure and its consequences will be described in hypothetical terms and we will have "if...then  $d$ "). Sometimes I will omit 'Divine' and use only the capitalized 'Disclosure' for concision.

For example: “God disclosed that <I am what it is to be> to Moses on Horeb while he grazed Jethro’s flocks, and Moses returned to his brother.” Or, “Mani did not pursue a religious vocation in mainstream Christianity since God disclosed to him, when he was a teenager, that <God has never been inside a woman’s womb>”; or, “Whitefield’s Disclosure in Oxford, after his weeks of fasting, that <God has elected him for salvation>, led him to give up his fasting”.

There are two absences from these example Disclosures. The first is surprising if we are interested in the phenomenology of religious experiences: descriptions of the ‘phenomenal contents’ of the experiences have been omitted from the Disclosures above. This is because (to use the Mosaic example) whether God discloses <I am what it is to be> via an angel whose divine nature Moses infers from the presence of a flaming but unconsumed bush nearby, or via some other means, does not *prima facie* bear on the probability of the truth of the Disclosure, when an Augury determines that probability. And accordingly, in the other cases, we have omitted Whitefield’s feeling of a lifted burden<sup>271</sup> and Mani’s encounter with an anthropomorphic angel that looked like him.

The second absence is that these examples, because they were drawn up just to show the grammatical forms Disclosures can take, are very short on other contextual details. When we represent a religious experience as a Divine Disclosure, we want to represent in *c* all the morally salient features of the context surrounding the experience *E*, all those which would impose *pro tanto* obligations which the Disclosure, and rival actions, might satisfy – for example, obligations binding on *S*, standing relationships which morally bind *S* and God, or information about *S*’s psychology relevant to all of these. And we want to represent in *d* all the moral goods occurring as a result of the Disclosure of which we are aware. When we are working out what *pro tanto* obligations a Divine Disclosure satisfies, and to what extent, we will need to look at both *c* and *d*. Having them separated just allows us to

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<sup>271</sup> See Whitefield 2009, 38.

separate out those *pro tanto* obligations which have to do with producing goods from others which depend on the nature of the action independently of its consequences.

If we think God's 'medium of communication' is, after all, morally salient, then we can include phenomenal descriptions among the details in *c* or *d*, whichever is appropriate, whilst keeping the generic term 'disclosure' for neatness, rather than substituting it for detailed alternatives like 'sent an angel', 'appeared as', and so on.

We must be sure to describe both *c* and *d* so that God's satisfaction of an obligation imposed on Him in *c*, by bringing about goods described in *d*, does not lead us to 'double-count' the rightness satisfying that obligation confers on the action. A particular risk here is if *d* is used to express consequences of the action which just are the satisfaction of an obligation imposed on God by the contents of *c* – for example, *d* could contain "such-and-such a promise is kept" and *c* contain "has been made such-and-such a promise". The reader of the Disclosure might count rightness from inferring that God has kept the promise described in *c* via the action, and then count it again when that inference is made explicit in *d*.

I will argue next chapter that the rightness of our obligations to report what we know, and avoid deception in our communications, is not reducible to the rightness of some more fundamental duty. Therefore, there is no need to use either *c* or *d* to express the truth-dependent rightness of a Disclosure, since the term "disclosed" will already express that rightness. In the next chapter I examine in more detail how, in theory, we should account for the contribution that the truth or falsity of *p* makes, in fact, to the rightness of an action in which God communicates *p*.

What is important is that all of the features included in *c* and *d* are equally knowable and investigable from the Outsider Outlook, whatever the other theological commitments of parties.

#### 4.4.2 Applying the Augury from the Outsider Outlook

Once we have represented a religious experience as a Divine Disclosure, we treat it as a value for  $Gw$  among alternative, mutually exclusive actions available to God. This means that, in terms of our seven steps, we begin with one of the propositions in Step Two. To discern what its ‘competitors’ must be, we use the contents of  $c$  to discern the context the creature was in when God is supposed to have carried out the Disclosure. By considering this context independently of the religious experience, we can think of what other worthwhile actions God might have done; and each of these can receive a satisfaction credence equal to the confidence we have in the description of the situation derived from  $c$ . We can also consider the *pro tanto* obligations which would be satisfied by the various actions open to God, and how strong we think each is (at whatever degree each action satisfies it), and how strong our beliefs are that they have those strengths, and thereby attach a set of obligation credences to each action, and so reach an expected rightness for the Disclosure and its competitors, as in Steps Three to Six. Carry out Step Seven, and we will have a probability for the prediction that God would do the action the Disclosure describes, were He considering the situation of  $S$  as described in  $c$ . Carry out Step Eight, excluding putative divine actions which we know, historically, did not occur – namely, actions incompatible with the events leading up to the religious experience, the religious experience’s occurrence, and its consequences – and we will have our retrodictive probability for the claim that the religious experience was a Disclosure.

##### 4.4.2.1 Alternative Theological Interpretations of the Religious Experience

The final figure we have is the probability that the religious experience was a Divine Disclosure – given that the religious experience occurred, and given that God exists. Of course, for the mere occurrence of the religious experience not to entail that the Disclosure occurred, there must be alternative possible interpretations of the event ‘from a creaturely point of view’. These are divine actions in

which the experience *E* occurred, and belief *p* was formed by *S*, and the truth-independent morally salient features of the action described in *d* also occurred.

Consider, again, a case like George Whitefield's. Whitefield was struggling under the weight of his perceived sins, failing to recognize God's love for him, and adopting ever more scrupulous bodily disciplines as a result.<sup>272</sup> If we were to list what actions God might do for Charles in such a situation, these will no doubt include giving him a veridical experience telling him he has been elected for salvation; we might even think (but think it much less probable) that God might give him an illusory experience of being saved – that God hasn't, after all, elected him for salvation, but out of concern for his wellbeing, 'deceives' George that he has been. We might think God lets run their course (perhaps whilst primarily causing *qua* Creator) a series of chemical and neurological events that result in Whitefield's experiencing *E* and so believing *p* such that *d* occurs, despite God's having carried out no Disclosure. All of these putative divine actions are compatible with what we know occurred before we use this procedure. But only the Disclosure's occurrence entails the truth of Whitefield's new D-belief. I will discuss the other possible interpretations of religious experiences – as 'Divine Deceptions' or 'Careless Communications' – in the next chapter.

#### 4.4.3 Comparative Evaluations of Competing Religious Experiences and D-Beliefs

The procedure above allows us to say how probable the experience makes its D-belief, where that probability is based on 'public' evidence shared by all parties – their N-beliefs and consequent A-beliefs. Since we are interested in cases where rival D-beliefs and experiences must be weighed against each other and decided between, we can simply repeat the process we have carried out on behalf of one experience-belief pair, and carry it out for the rival pair. The resulting probabilities for the rival D-beliefs determined from the Outsider Outlook can then be used by both parties either to make a binary

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<sup>272</sup> Whitefield 2009, 34-38.

judgment as to which of the D-beliefs is true, or which to believe; or, they can be used by both to update their other theological beliefs in light of the probabilities of these D-beliefs.

Strictly speaking, the probability of the truth of a Disclosure that  $p$  sets a minimum bound for the probability that  $p$  given only the inputs to the Augury. This means that the Augury can be used to evaluate religious experiences even in contexts where the Outsider Outlook has not been adopted: in such contexts derived or other basic theological beliefs might simply increase this probability – or decrease it and so lead to revision of the Augury’s inputs.

One important *caveat*: in the situations described in Chapter 3, these rival D-beliefs are incompatible and cannot both be true together. Accordingly, the Divine Disclosures representing the experiential support for each cannot both occur. After applying the Augury to each, the parties will share a judgment as to the probability of the occurrence of each Divine Disclosure. But since both Auguries were carried out independently, it is possible that these two probabilities, when added together, add up to a value greater than 1. So theologians who wish to maintain consistent distributions of credences must revise downward the probability they assign to each Divine Disclosure so that the two add to 1 but maintain the same ratio. I explain this rule in more detail in section 5.5 of the next chapter, since it has fruitful implications for the effects of religious diversity on rational theological confidence.

## 4.5 A Look Backward and a Look Forward

In Chapter 1, I considered criticisms of the evidential force of religious experience raised in the last century. Those I grouped under the ‘Interpretation Objection’ appealed to a supposed mismatch between religious experiences’ phenomenal contents, and the propositional contents of D-beliefs, as part of an explanation for the widespread and apparently intractable nature of religious disagreement. I argued that the Interpretation Objection devolved into the “Circularity Objection” if a religious

believer responded to such sceptical explanations of religious diversity by appealing to experience-based theological beliefs which offer an alternative, non-sceptical explanation.<sup>273</sup> I also considered what I termed “Bad Tests Objections”, some of which function by arguing that the means by which we discriminate between veridical and non-veridical religious experiences introduce epistemic circularity – the Circularity Objection appearing again. I argued that the ubiquity of epistemic circularity must mean that those pressing the Circularity Objection are motivated by some concern peculiar to religious beliefs, or theology, and suggested that this concern was that theological enquirers are unable to fairly decide between competing claims to have discovered the truth about God via religious experiences. Chapter 3 presented the same concern in the precise and formalized manner made possible by Chapter 2’s account of religious experiences as a form of evidence in the internalist, probabilist sense. This presentation makes it easy for us to see how the procedure articulated above addresses the concern about resolving theological disagreement which lies behind Circularity Objections. As I have shown, the Anselmian Augury can be applied to controversial religious experiences by theologians to deliver verdicts on religious experiences which are independent of their confessional commitments. All it requires is their moral and non-theological beliefs, both of which are types of belief supported by uncontroversial sources.

Other Bad Tests Objections functioned by accusing existing, traditional mystical doxastic practices of proffering tests which were too coarse-grained: tests which could only be passed or failed in a binary manner, and which allowed only for binary judgments as to the veridicality of a religious experience. These objections also accused traditional mystical doxastic practices of offering tests which are not even in principle relevant to whether or not a religious experience was caused by God in such a way

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<sup>273</sup> I also argued that the Interpretation Objection could be met by considering what purposes God might have in permitting or causing religious experiences which feed religious disagreement and diversity. In the next chapter, I examine how applying the Anselmian Augury to religious experiences can to re-calibrate our beliefs about God’s purposes so that they take account of religious diversity, and so fulfill this promise.

as to guarantee the truth of its D-belief. The procedure I have described in this chapter meets both concerns head-on.

It looks, at this stage, as if all concerns about the credentials of religious experience as a form of evidence have been met by the procedure I have developed here for measuring just how much evidence a given experience is worth. Not yet, though: there are two sources of troublesome issues for the procedure which the next two chapters will address. Both have to do with the inputs to the procedure.

The next chapter considers types of action God can take with respect to our theological beliefs other than disclosure. Considering these leads me to introduce some general principles about the value of truth-telling, defend those principles, and apply them to the case of evaluating theological interpretations of religious experiences as divine actions. In the process, however, I also offer descriptions of how the general phenomena of 'divine hiddenness' and religious diversity should interact with our use of religious experiences as theological evidence.

The final chapter responds to an objection aimed at the stipulation that God is a morally unsurpassable, or perfect, being – a stipulation which lies at the bedrock of the Anselmian Augury. I therefore defend an account of the semantics for the term "God", arguing that the best explanation of the way the term is used is that it denotes whatever being is worthy of our worship. From a consideration of the norms of worship, I argue that "God" will indirectly refer to an omnipotent, morally unsurpassable being.

# 5. Reflecting on God's Honesty

## 5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I developed a procedure, the Anselmian Augury, with which anyone could predict the probability of some divine action. I then showed how we could characterise the event-propositions representing religious experiences in a standardised fashion, as Divine Disclosures. Since Divine Disclosures are claims about God's activities, we can use Anselmian Auguries to discern the probability that they occurred, conditional only on information available in the Outsider Outlook. The application of the Anselmian Augury I outlined therefore provides a method which theologians can use to comparatively evaluate competing religious experiences: a method which is independent of the controversial commitments and resources of any religious tradition or mystical practice. Whenever we have two opposing claims to veridical religious experiences, we can simply use the Anselmian Augury to retrodict the probability that God would really have caused them, that is, the probability of each of the two competing Divine Disclosure propositions. Then we compare the two figures. So long as the parties have put a shared set of normative and contextual beliefs into the Augury, and so long as the Augury delivers a different figure for each divine disclosure, they will have a non-question-begging judgment about whose D-belief is more likely to be true, and how much more likely.

This chapter shows how the procedure outlined above can be used to 'dissolve' the 'problems' of divine hiddenness and religious diversity. Firstly, there are a great many creaturely states of affairs in which God could have given a religious experience to a creature, but didn't. These are theologically interesting because, when they are considered as candidates for an Augury, the Augury can predict in favour of their happening. I call these 'Divine Discretions'. Secondly, there are a great many creaturely mental states which count as religious experiences according to my definition in the Introduction, since they support their subjects' basic theological beliefs. But they could be misleading, having been

caused 'naturally', in a way which does not guarantee the truth of beliefs based on them. We can think of these as divine actions in which God causes someone to form a belief via a religious experience, but is indifferent to whether or not that belief is true.<sup>274</sup> I call these actions "Careless Communications". Finally, we can at least conceive of special divine actions where God plays the 'evil demon', giving a creature a religious experience which communicates a false belief – so that the religious experience is illusory in spite of being caused by God. The wrongness of the action's deceit could conceivably be outweighed by the rightness coming from other *pro tanto* obligations it satisfies.<sup>275</sup> So, for any religious experience, we have two alternative explanations of its occurrence which do not guarantee the truth of its D-belief: Careless Communications and Divine Deceptions.

Firstly, I consider Divine Discretions: loosely speaking, how theists should respond to the phenomenon of divine hiddenness. I show how a well-known argument from divine hiddenness to atheism, owed to John Schellenberg, can be understood as an application of the Anselmian Augury to predict a religious experience which does not, apparently, occur. I show how divine hiddenness phenomena can be represented in the form of a negation of a Divine Disclosure, a Divine Discretion; and how doing so can help us render coherent our beliefs about God's existence and morality.

Then, I elaborate on how to apply the Anselmian Augury in order to take account of the possibilities of God's allowing people to have religious experiences which are not veridical – Careless Communications – and God's giving people misleading religious experiences – Divine Deceptions. I explain how, if we imagine that God has obligations to disclose truths He knows, and to refrain from deceiving creatures, we can account for these as inputs to our application of the Augury, and they will

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<sup>274</sup> Doing so means we can bracket from this thesis a discussion of the metaphysical or moral differences between 'special' or 'intervening' divine actions, on the one hand, and God merely creating the world such that certain things happen to a certain creature at a certain time, on the other.

<sup>275</sup> See Gellman 1997, 97 for a defence of the compatibility of divine lying with divine goodness.

generate a blanket presumption in favour of any Divine Disclosure against its associated Careless Communication and Divine Deception.

Finally, I show how to continue applying the Anselmian Augury in a way which delivers a sub-procedure that tells us how much we should alter our credences in basic and derived theological claims given religious diversity. This allows us to give a precise, nuanced, non-confessional response to the questions raised by critics of Alston concerning the extent to which the phenomenon of religious diversity should invite theological scepticism.

## 5.2 Reflecting on Divine Hiddenness

Common-sense morality tells us that, *ceteris paribus*, if we know something's true, it's worth telling that truth to others. So for any truth He knew, we'd expect a morally unsurpassable Agent to tell it to others if He could, *ceteris paribus*. Common-sense morality also tells us that, other things being equal, if we are describing how things are to another, it's wrong to mislead them. We can represent these in the Deontic Discourse as two distinct *pro tanto* obligations. Let's describe these two *pro tanto* obligations in a way which is maximally vague with respect to how we might satisfy them – and which correspondingly presumes that the 'point' of these obligations has to do with the truth-states of beliefs of persons affected by our actions. And let's give each a name:

*Reportage*: everyone, for each of their justified beliefs that *p*, has a *pro tanto* obligation to bring it about that others, who do not already know that *p*, consider<sup>276</sup> that *p*.

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<sup>276</sup> 'Believe' would be too strong here. It would mean that satisfaction of the obligation would fail insofar as the objects doubted whether *p*. This would create a negative feedback loop when using our procedure to determine the evidential force of a religious experience.

*Honesty*: everyone  $S$ , for each of their true beliefs that  $p$ , has a *pro tanto* obligation not to bring it about that others  $S^*$  consider that  $\neg p$ , nor consider any other proposition which  $S$  knows entails  $\neg p$  whenever  $S$  engages in actions which affect  $S^*$ 's beliefs.

These are worded rather robustly: but they are only *pro tanto* obligations, and could turn out to have low strengths upon reflection.

When it comes to our morally unsurpassable Being, His being 'bound' by *Honesty* and *Reportage* means that, other things being equal, for anything He knows, He'll bring it about that any other persons will believe it; and He'll avoid bringing it about that people believe its denial. The most immediate implication of this is a general presumption that, on theism, there will be many veridical religious experiences, assuming that God is able to produce them. So the widespread ignorance and confusion of creatures capable of holding beliefs might be initially surprising on theism.

In the case of beliefs about what there is in creation, how to treat each other well, build machines, and so on, there are global theodicies to hand<sup>277</sup> which explain in what ways *ceteris* are not *paribus*. Perhaps there are other *pro tanto* obligations God is 'bound' by, such as securing the possibility of "soul-making",<sup>278</sup> which often weigh more heavily on Him than *Honesty* and *Reportage*. Such theodicies might argue that, instead of filling our heads with as much of His knowledge as they can hold, God gives us an opportunity to learn about the created order by creating us with various cognitive faculties and 'leaving us' to exercise them.

Nevertheless, we might be able to find some circumstances where such general theodicies do not hold. The circumstances surrounding basic theological beliefs are a plausible example: perhaps in the

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<sup>277</sup> Swinburne (2004, 236-72) and van Inwagen (1988) offer succinct contemporary examples.

<sup>278</sup> See Hick 1977, 253-61.

case of theological beliefs, God does not have general motivations guiding His actions which dominate the motivations He gets from Reportage and Honesty. If so, it will be surprising that theological ignorance or doubt is so widespread. Particular cases, such as those who seek out theological knowledge or belief, so as to be better people, and cannot find it, might strike us as especially surprising.<sup>279</sup> Perhaps such surprising phenomena<sup>280</sup> – let’s loosely call them ‘divine hiddenness phenomena’ – mean that God does not exist. Or, perhaps they mean that common-sense is mistaken about Reportage. Or perhaps our surprise is due to our insufficient alertness to other *pro tanto* obligations or creaturely circumstances which would mean that it was probably right for God to refrain from satisfying Reportage in such contexts. If our commitments change to countenance one of these possibilities, how should those commitments alter our judgments about supposed Divine Disclosures?

### 5.2.1 Schellenberg’s Divine Hiddenness Argument, Formalized

In contemporary philosophy of religion, the problems described above have generated a literature on “divine hiddenness”.<sup>281</sup> Perhaps the most influential argument from divine hiddenness to atheism in contemporary philosophy of religion is John Schellenberg’s; so, let’s present it concisely and informally, before interpreting it into my terms:

(SDH1) God is unsurpassably great.<sup>282</sup>

(SDH2) An unsurpassably great person is unsurpassably loving<sup>283</sup> (and omnipotent). [From SDH1 by moral and conceptual analysis.]

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<sup>279</sup> Schellenberg articulates the special pressure such cases place on theism in his 2007, 233-235.

<sup>280</sup> See Schellenberg 2007, 228-242 for a description of different classes of divine hiddenness phenomena.

<sup>281</sup> For an early set of responses to the ‘problem of divine hiddenness’ as raised by Schellenberg in his 1993, see Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002. See Schellenberg 2017a and 2017b for an overview of the development of the debate since.

<sup>282</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 10.

<sup>283</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 10. See also his 2007 (198-9) and 2015 (89-103) for alternative examples of this inference.

(SDH3) God’s unsurpassably loving nature means that He will provide for non-divine persons to be in a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him.<sup>284</sup> [From SDH 1 and SDH2 by moral analysis.]

(SDH4) An opportunity to choose to be in an explicit interpersonal relationship with someone requires that the chooser have, if they are capable, non-culpable, reasonable or non-resistant,<sup>285</sup> sufficiently evidentially supported,<sup>286</sup> or sufficiently confident,<sup>287</sup> belief that the other exists. [By moral analysis.]

(SDH5) So for any created person, God would ensure that, if they meet these conditions, they have that kind of belief that God exists. [From SDH3 and SDH4.]

(SDH6) But we know of some people who meet these conditions but do not have that kind of belief that God exists.<sup>288</sup>

(SDHC) This wouldn’t be the case if God existed, so we should conclude that God does not exist. [By reductio, where theism is supplied as a premise.]

We can understand this argument as an application of the Anselmian Augury where the divine action the probability of which is to be determined is “God disclosed that <God exists> to a creature by giving them some form of adequately convincing evidence, when they’re non-culpable, reasonable or non-

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<sup>284</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 18-27.

<sup>285</sup> Schellenberg accepts that if they aren’t capable of the relationship, a perfect being wouldn’t guarantee its availability to them (Schellenberg 1993, 24-5). In Schellenberg’s 1993 statement of the argument, he argues that giving creatures the kinds of belief described in SDH4 might not be a valid way for God to provide epistemically for a creature’s freely chosen loving relationship with Him, if that creature is disposed to resist His love. This is because we must be able to “shut [God] out altogether” (27-8). So in that statement, he includes the creature’s being ‘non-culpable’ among the required conditions. He also includes the creature’s reasonability with respect to whatever evidence God might provide them in order to ensure the doxastic state they need for the relationship, as an extension of the non-culpability condition (39). In later work (1997) he introduced the term ‘nonresistant’ in response to suggestions that creatures might be culpable in ways he denies would excuse God from giving them the relevant beliefs – such as Wainwright’s (2002) suggestion that ignorance of theism might be part of punishment for wrongdoing more generally.

<sup>286</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 33-37.

<sup>287</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 32.

<sup>288</sup> While Schellenberg adverts to individuals readers might know, others have strengthened the empirical case for this premise by pointing to specific populations of the very plausibly theologically ignorant, such as pre-Abrahamic humanity (e.g. Marsh 2013) or entire civilizations which are polytheistic or atheistic (e.g. Maitzen 2006).

resistant, and which would lead them to enter into a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him". Call this proposition *dd*. The claim *dd* is a Divine Disclosure.

Schellenberg stipulates SDH1. There are two ways of representing the move from SDH1 to SDH3 in terms of inputs to the Anselmian Augury. One is to suppose that there is a *pro tanto* obligation to be loving. Then any doubts we have about that claim will be represented in an obligation credence concerning the *pro tanto* obligation to love. Alternatively, we could just run the whole argument from premises which 'cut out the middleman' of love, and refer to how moral obligations *simpliciter* determine that God would act as described by *dd*.<sup>289</sup>

His argument for SDH3 consists in unpacking the nature of love.<sup>290</sup> A natural way to think of SDH3 in terms of the Augury is as an intermediary description of a class of actions which will satisfy God's *pro tanto* obligation to love. Then, we reach SDH4 by reflecting on the practical demands of that obligation, given creatures' natures, so as to lay out a more precisely articulated disjunction of actions God could use – what He needs to do to ensure the loving relationship. That disjunction is the Divine Disclosure *dd*; *dd* is a candidate for the absolute obligation probably binding God. Doubts about whether any member among these disjuncts will succeed will be expressed in *dd*'s satisfaction credence, and hence the satisfaction credence for *dd* as a whole.<sup>291</sup> That satisfaction credence will also be affected by more fundamental doubts about whether SDH3 correctly interprets the practical

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<sup>289</sup> Schellenberg includes this manoeuvre in his 2007 (200).

<sup>290</sup> Schellenberg 1993, 18-27.

<sup>291</sup> Discussion of Schellenberg's argument has touched on exactly what sort of mental attitude God must provide creatures with to have the right relationship with them. For example, the belief or doxastic attitude may not need to be *de dicto* (see Poston and Dougherty 2007, Cordry 2009 and Cullison 2010, 121), or even enough conviction to count as belief rather than, say, hope (see Cullison 2010, 120-22). We can formalize these disagreements in two ways. The first is to interpret them as concerning whether or not divine actions other than those among the *dd* disjuncts will (or won't) satisfy the 'love creatures' *pro tanto* obligation. If they do, they might have expected rightness which drives down *dd*'s final share of the probability space so as to reduce the evidence for atheism arising from the observed non-occurrence of *dd*. The second is to interpret them as adding to the various observable states *dd* predicts, so that it is harder to establish its non-occurrence by observation.

implications of perfect love since, if it does not, God cannot satisfy those obligations via *dd*.<sup>292</sup> Multiplying that satisfaction credence against the obligation credence for the *pro tanto* obligation described in SDH2 will give us our final expected rightness for *dd*. SDH5 implicitly predicts the occurrence of *dd*.

Yet the probability of *dd* will depend not only on the expected rightness we just established, but also on the expected rightnesses of alternative actions God might undertake which would preclude His giving that creature that belief in those circumstances. Arguments like Schellenberg's must make claims about the significance of securing precisely this kind of interpersonal relationship, for people in these circumstances, relative to securing other great goods or satisfying other obligations with respect to them or others, where doing so would require alternative actions on God's part.<sup>293</sup>

After securing a high probability for *dd*, Schellenberg adverts in SDH6 to the empirical evidence that it has not occurred in order to complete an argument for atheism. Call this proposition *ddd*: "It's not the case that God disclosed that <God exists> to a creature by giving them some form of adequately

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<sup>292</sup>Defences against Schellenberg's argument by Cuneo (2013), McGinnis (2015) and Rea (2015) cast doubt on whether perfect love would entail the lover's pursuit of the kind of relationship Schellenberg has in mind.

<sup>293</sup> A popular line of responses to Schellenberg's argument is therefore to depress the probability of *dd* by describing closely related, better, alternative actions God would choose instead. One class is to point out other kinds of relationships which would be better for God to cultivate with these creatures, but which require more discretion on His part because they require different doxastic or evidential states in the creature from those Schellenberg takes to be necessary for the relationship he thinks God would want (e.g. Garcia 2002, Moser 2002, van Inwagen 2006, 149-51, Poston and Dougherty 2007, and Dumsday 2012). Another is to point out other *pro tanto* obligations which might bind on God so as to make preferable to Him alternative courses of action than a Disclosure. Dumsday (2013) argues that God's *pro tanto* obligation to be humble motivates Him to a different course of action; Rea (2009) suggests we should think more generally about how self-centred obligations might bind a perfect being. Hick (1971, 105), Swinburne (2004, 268-71), Howard-Snyder (1996, 443), and Murray (2002) have all appealed to God's *pro tanto* (but sometimes instrumental) obligation to respect or protect our autonomy. Alternatively God might have a dominating *pro tanto* obligation to prevent evils (typically rejecting God) consequent on His self-disclosure to such persons (e.g. Howard-Snyder 1996, 440, Craig 1995, and Thune 2006). These responses can also be characterized as introducing additional information into the description of the creaturely circumstances in the Disclosure predicted in *dd*, information which makes it clearer why the Disclosure would have lower rightness than some other action. Schellenberg (as outlined briefly in his 2007, 211-18) adopts a general strategy of what he calls "accommodationism" to handle this 'downward pressure' on the probability of *dd* coming from such putative alternative actions, by articulating how the *pro tanto* obligations motivating them can also be satisfied via *dd*.

convincing evidence, when they're capable (etc.), and which would lead them to enter into a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him". If we know *ddd*, then *dd* cannot be true. Since *dd* follows from theism, the argument runs, theism is jeopardized.

Lain out for clarity, we have the following triad of claims:

*dd*: If God exists, then God disclosed that <God exists> to a creature by giving them some form of adequately convincing evidence, when they're capable (etc.), and which would lead them to enter into a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him.

*theism*: God exists.

*ddd*: It's not the case that God disclosed that <God exists> to a creature by giving them some form of adequately convincing evidence, when they're capable (etc.), and which would lead them to enter into a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him.

If we know *ddd* on empirical grounds, and we know *dd* via the Augury, then, at first glance, on pain of inconsistency, *theism* had better be false. At least, the probability of *theism* cannot be greater than that of *ddd* subtracted from 1.

### 5.2.2 Rules for Responding to Divine Hiddenness

Here's how the theist can respond: one of the ways in which *ddd* can be true is in virtue of the following claim, which we'll call *dh*: "God did not disclose that <God exists> to a creature by giving them some form of adequately convincing evidence, when they're capable (etc.), which could lead them to form a relationship with Him, and which would lead them to enter into a freely chosen, explicit interpersonal relationship with Him". This entails theism and is consistent with the experience by which we knew *ddd*. Assuming theism, then if *ddd* is true, *dh* must be true. Then, the inconsistency for the theist is between *dh* and *dd*.

Another way of putting this is that when the theist notes the non-belief (and other relevant circumstances) of the individual, or group, who constitutes the divine hiddenness ‘phenomenon’, they get empirical support for a claim about what God has done, not merely support for the denial of a claim that God did something else. They still have a difficulty, however: their evidence for *dd*, which is inconsistent with *dh*. But if their evidence for *dd* does not outweigh the evidence for *dh* provided by the divine hiddenness phenomenon, they can rationally persist in theism. More precisely, the probability of *dd* and *dh* must add up to no greater than 1; assuming theism, they should add up to 1 exactly. In this context, their evidence for *dd* comes from the Anselmian Augury. It determined a probability for *dd* considering its consequent as a putative divine action. And this means that, in this context, their evidence for *dd* consists in the normative and contextual beliefs they supplied as inputs to the Augury. If those beliefs determine that *dd* has a probability which is so high that, when added to the probability *dh* gets from the divine hiddenness phenomenon, the sum is greater than 1, their beliefs are inconsistent.

To maintain a coherent distribution of credences, they can reduce the probability of *dh* by re-evaluating the significance of the phenomenon. For example, they might notice that the creature involved is culpable after all,<sup>294</sup> or not really reasonable,<sup>295</sup> or perhaps does in fact have the kind of theistic belief *dd* describes God giving them. Any suspicions to this effect can reduce the probability of *dh*. But let’s suppose instead that the phenomenon in question is carefully and narrowly described, or clearly and completely presented, and so secure against such suspicions. Another strategy will be reducing the value for *dd* – by revising the various normative and contextual beliefs which were inputs to the Augury for *dd*, just enough so that the Augury now determines a value for *dd* low enough to sum to 1 when combined with the value for *dh*. A revision like this could involve significant normative

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<sup>294</sup> E.g. Lehe 2004 and Henry 2008, 279.

<sup>295</sup> E.g. Henry 2001 and 2008.

and contextual belief-shifts on the theist's part; or it could represent an opportunity to realise explicitly their implicit moral commitments, which had operated in the background to sustain their theism in the face of divine hiddenness phenomena.

It might be that they revise their beliefs about what kind of actions are required to 'satisfy' the 'obligations' of being a lover, so revising downward their satisfaction credences which weighted the expected rightness of *dd*. Or, they might revise downward the obligation credences, by recognizing or entertaining doubts about the relative weight of the communicative 'demands of love' in comparison to its other demands, and the demands of other *pro tanto* obligations. Alternatively, those same obligation credences would be reduced by regarding the weight of the confessional 'demands of love' as lower in comparison to these other considerations. An adjacent set of moves can be made regarding the contribution made to the expected rightness for *dd* by Reportage or other *pro tanto* obligations which don't obviously have to do with love.

We should note well, however, that these revisions to, or recognitions of, the theist's various beliefs will remain in their noetic structure as inputs for future Anselmian Auguries, regarding other putative divine actions – including Divine Disclosures.

For example, suppose I hold the belief that "getting people to believe that God exists will (help to) satisfy my obligation to teach others how to live morally". But a friend of mine, Alex, doesn't believe God exists. Alex isn't the sort of saint who doesn't need any teaching on how to live morally. He's availed himself of opportunities to find out about God from humans, but has reasonably disbelieved them. So it's still possible for someone to satisfy their obligation to teach him how to live morally by telling him about God. Suppose I think that this obligation is, relatively speaking, extremely important, outweighed (perhaps) only by the obligations not to kill, deceive or enslave. Then I ought to be surprised that God hasn't taken the opportunity to tell my friend about Himself – since it's easy to

imagine a way God could do this without killing, deceiving or enslaving anyone. If my theism is to persist, I need to become less certain that the moral teaching obligation has such a high relative strength, or change the strength I believe it has, or both, thus reducing an obligation credence which went into the Anselmian Augury which predicted my friend would enjoy a Divine Disclosure that “God exists”. Or, I could become much less certain that getting people to believe God exists is a way to satisfy one’s moral teaching obligation, thus reducing the relevant satisfaction credence.

But, importantly, this will change the Anselmian Auguries I apply to religious experiences in future: if another friend, Betty, becomes more morally wise after coming to believe that God exists as a result of a religious experience, the fact of Betty’s becoming wiser will provide me with less of a reason to regard the religious experience as genuine, given the revisions I’ve made in the light of the divine hiddenness phenomenon concerning Alex.

### 5.2.3 Generalizing Divine Hiddenness into Divine Discretion

Although *dd* is formulated to fit the structure of a Divine Disclosure, we can reverse-engineer a general structure for describing another type of divine action: a Divine Discretion. A Divine Discretion occurs whenever God acts towards someone, in some circumstance, other than giving them the religious experience in which we’re interested. He might do this by “late-creating”<sup>296</sup> them to be in that circumstance whilst enjoying other goings-on in that moment of their mental life, from the beginning of or from beyond created time.<sup>297</sup> Or He might do it via a special divine action – if God wants to ensure someone doesn’t have some religious experience in some circumstance, He can intervene to prevent it. A well-trained mystic, for example, might be about to have a religious experience which will occur

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<sup>296</sup> See Leftow 2012, 13-21 for a discussion of different ways of conceiving of divine creation, conservation and intervention, which shows that any creaturely state of affairs can be construed as the immediate object of a divine action.

<sup>297</sup> If open theism or the “simple foreknowledge” views about God’s knowledge of created time are true, God will have trouble ‘late-creating’ such a precise set of circumstances from the beginning of, or from beyond, created time.

'naturally' due to their conditioning. But God might regard that mystic as in need of a 'dark night', and so intervene to prevent it.

For the sake of reference and completeness, a Divine Discretion will take the following form:

*Divine Discretions:* for every creature  $S$  who bases a D-belief  $p$  on their religious experience  $E$  in circumstances  $c$ , there's a Divine Discretion, a proposition of the form "God did not disclose, deceive or otherwise communicate that  $p$  to  $S$  by giving them  $E$  in  $c$  such that  $d$ ". For every such Discretion there's a corresponding Divine Disclosure, a Divine Deception, and a Careless Communication, all of which negate the Divine Discretion.

As with Divine Disclosures, I'll use the expression 'Divine Discretion' to refer both to the event and the proposition describing it. Similarly to Divine Disclosures, I'll conventionally write of a Divine Discretion that  $p$ , for  $S$  and in, on or at  $c$ , sometimes using the capitalized 'Discretion' for concision. For instance, "If there had been a Discretion that <Jesus is Lord> for Saul on the road to Damascus, things would have gone badly for the Church there".

The Divine Discretion structure excludes not only God's disclosing, but also other divine actions which would lead to  $E$ 's occurring. A Divine Discretion can be used to represent any divine hiddenness phenomenon.

### 5.3 Non-Veridical Religious Experiences

Assuming for simplicity that all creaturely states of affairs are (more or less directly) results of divine actions, there are two alternative theological interpretations of a religious experience according to which it is not veridical. It might be a divine action in which God gives someone a false belief. Or it might be a divine action in which God gives someone a belief to satisfy some truth-independent obligations He has, but He's indifferent to whether that belief is true.

Let's consider the first possibility first. For every Divine Disclosure, there's also a corresponding Divine Deception which entails that the  $p$  variable in the Disclosure is false. Once again, let's set out a generic form for Divine Deceptions, along with rules to highlight their relationship to Disclosures:

*Divine Deceptions:* for every creature  $S$  who bases a D-belief  $p$  on their religious experience  $E$  in circumstances  $c$ , there's a Divine Deception, a proposition of the form "God deceived  $S$  about  $p$  by giving them  $E$  in  $c$  such that  $d$ ". For every such Deception there's a corresponding Divine Disclosure. Call that Disclosure the 'twin' of the Discretion, and vice-versa.

Here we need to understand "God deceived  $S$  about  $p$ " to mean that  $p$  is false. All we understand by 'deception' here is God's bringing it about via special divine action, and whatever informative medium he chooses, that someone has or entertains a false belief.<sup>298</sup> Like 'disclosure' in the definition of Divine Disclosures in the last chapter, 'deception' is not a success term. God can deceive  $S$  about  $p$  and  $S$  fail to come to believe that  $p$  owing to any defeaters or resistance. For each Deception and its twinned Disclosure, the value for  $c$  should be the same except insofar as  $c$  is being used to represent whatever

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<sup>298</sup> 'Deception' needs to be understood minimally and stipulatively because using various associated terms ('lying', 'tricking', etc.) might affect our judgment about the all-things-considered rightness of the action described, in a way which tracks contextual features other than the falsehood of the communicated belief. For example, if I teach my students a strictly false simplification of a complicated philosophical theory, we probably won't think I've done wrong. But if I called it lying, we might be disposed to thinking of the whole action as overall more wrong than we would without calling it so.

difference  $p$ 's falsehood or truth makes to the action's rightness. Likewise, for each Deception and its twinned Disclosure, the value for  $d$  should be the same except if  $d$  is being used to represent the truth-dependent factor. Only the truth of the D-belief differentiates a Deception from its twinned Disclosure.

Now let's consider the second possibility. For every pair of twinned Divine Disclosures and Divine Deceptions, there is a Careless Communication, which will take this form, which takes the same values for all the variables as its associated Disclosure and Deception took:

*Careless Communication:* for every creature  $S$  who bases a D-belief  $p$  on their religious experience  $E$  in circumstances  $c$ , there's a Careless Communication, a proposition of the form "God provided  $S$  with support for  $p$  by giving them  $E$  in  $c$  such that  $d$  (without intending that  $S$  thereby hold a true belief, nor intending that  $S$  thereby hold a false belief)". Call each Communication the 'triplet' of its associated Disclosure and its associated Deception.

Communication propositions are supposed to represent the rather commonplace events where religious experiences occur, and hence are (however ultimately) caused by God, but God does not mean to use them to give a true, or false, belief. The parenthetic clauses in the Communication structure are therefore included to imply that God neither violates Honesty nor satisfies Reportage. Above, I described Honesty and Reportage in a way that suggests their violation or satisfaction depends entirely on an action's consequences. If so, whenever God gives someone a religious experience it will not be 'up to Him' whether that action is a Communication, Disclosure or Deception, but instead 'up to' the truth-value of  $p$ . And since there are only two truth-values, God would then be unable to carry out Communications. So if there are such things as Communications, we must read Reportage and Honesty such that success or failure in satisfying them requires such deliberation on the part of the agent.

On a 'stricter' reading of Honesty and Reportage, however, God's intentions do not bear on their satisfaction. In that case, we can read the Communication form without the parenthesis, but understand Communications as being saliently different from Disclosures and Deceptions in the following way. There are many degrees of directness and reliability with which God can carry out actions. Communications pick out a case where God has caused a religious experience in a way so indirect or unreliable that He 'waives liability' for the falsehood or truth of the belief.

For example, if God decides to create creatures who are free in such a way that 'open theism' is true, then He might not know what they will do, but only what they will probably do.<sup>299</sup> He might also set up rule-governed 'natural' systems for those creatures to obtain religious experiences, in the hope that they thereby form true theological beliefs. But He can't perfectly predict how the creatures will interact with those systems. Suppose a creature abuses a system and so has a religious experience with wonky phenomenology which leads them to form a false theological belief. It seems in such a case that the indirectness and unreliability of God's action would make it inappropriate to call it a Deception, but also to call it a Disclosure had the belief been true. God's 'hope' that creatures will learn the system, we might argue, falls short of the 'resolve' required for Him to be culpable of Deception or Disclosure.

Two aspects of Careless Communications which bear on how to ascertain their expected rightness should be pointed out: one which simplifies that process and the other that complicates it.

Firstly, the simplification. When we want to use the Augury to evaluate the evidential contribution of a religious experience we will be carving up the rightness-making features of the action described in its event-propositional representation, whether Disclosure, Discretion, Deception or Communication.

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<sup>299</sup> As in, for example, Robert Adams' account (Adams 1977).

Our instinct will be to express the difference made by Reportage and Honesty, and thereby the truth of the communiqué, as part of the descriptions in *c* and *d*. The following discussion of these *pro tanto* obligations considerably simplifies representations, however. Since, as I go on to argue, the rightness contributed by satisfying either Reportage or Honesty is not degreed, those ‘units’ of rightness will not vary with any of the variables in the structures of our event-propositions. The truth-dependent ‘wrongness’ of a Deception relative to a Communication or Disclosure, and the rightness of a Disclosure relative to a Communication or Deception, will be the same whatever the values for *p*, *E*, *c* or *d*. Since the terms “deceived” and “disclosed” express the non-moral facts about the action according to which it satisfies Reportage, Honesty, or neither, they adequately express the degree of ‘wrongness’ or rightness supervening on those facts.

Secondly, the complication. As described above, it is natural to presume that Careless Communications occur only when God allows nature to run its course, without intervening. It may be that some of the relevant *pro tanto* obligations, satisfied by the associated Disclosure or Deception, cannot be satisfied by God if He acts only in such an indirect fashion. If God “waives liability” for an outcome or feature of a created circumstance in virtue of the indirectness of His bringing it about, then He will thereby also waive credit. On the natural presumption that Communications occur when natural religious-experience-producing processes are left by God to run their course, the expected rightness of Communications will thereby look very different: they may well generate a good deal less rightness than their associated Divine Deceptions.

Of course, this presumption may not always apply: it may be that it is possible for God to intervene to give someone a religious experience, knowing that it will cause a belief, and knowing whether that belief will be true or false, and yet not intending to produce a true or false belief in the creature so as for the action to count as a Disclosure or Deception. Whether this is possible in a given case will depend on two issues which Augurs will have commitments about from elsewhere among their ethical

beliefs. On the one hand the relationship between the religious experience, the belief, and the surrounding circumstances might be such that producing the belief must count as a means to achieving the moral ends of God's action. In that case whether the action can still count as a Communication depends on whether the Augur thinks that the known consequences of means to an end count as intended by the agents using those means. On the other hand, the relationship between the experience, the belief, and the surrounding circumstances might be such that producing the belief counts only as a secondary effect. Then the Augur needs to consider the contents of the belief and the impact it might have on the value of its truth or disvalue of its falsehood (see section 5.3.3 below). These contents might determine that it would be disproportionate for God to produce that false belief to attain his other ends for the action, so that we would regard the production of the false belief as deliberate and so count the action as a Deception. If they are not, then we have a Careless Communication which is indeed a case of divine action that is direct in the same sense as Disclosures and Deceptions.

### 5.3.1 The Presumption of a Disclosure over its Deception and Communication

Two reasons to regard any Disclosure as more probable than its twinned Deception and its associated Communication are always ready to hand: Reportage and Honesty. If someone has had a religious experience, we know that God has either Disclosed to them, Communicated with them Carelessly, or Deceived them. If God Disclosed then He satisfies both Reportage and Honesty. If God Communicated with them Carelessly, then He satisfies His Honesty obligation, but not His Reportage obligation. If God Deceived them, then He satisfies neither. Meanwhile, all of the rightness contributed to the action in virtue of *c* and *d* is stable across the Disclosure and Deception alternatives, and is also stable with respect to the (perhaps rare) case where the Communication is a direct divine action. So any Disclosure will have an expected rightness higher than its associated Communication in proportion to the strength of Reportage relative to the truth-independent *pro tanto* obligations satisfied in virtue of the circumstances picked out by *c* and *d*; and higher than its twinned Deception in proportion to the

strengths of both Reportage and Honesty relative to the rightness implied by *c* and *d*. Meanwhile, some, but not many, Communications will have an expected rightness higher than their associated Deceptions in proportion to the strength of Honesty relative to the rightness implied by *c* and *d*.

Significantly, however weak the strengths of Honesty and Reportage are relative to the strengths of the other truth-independent *pro tanto* obligations at stake, Disclosures will typically ‘pip’ their Communications by some rightness, thanks to satisfying Reportage where Communications do not, whilst satisfying all the same other obligations.<sup>300</sup> But Communications will not always pip their Deceptions by satisfying Honesty where Deceptions do not. There may be *pro tanto* obligations not related to truth which the Deception satisfies, but the Communication does not, because of whatever reduced responsibility on God’s part allows us to claim He had no intentions with respect to the truth-value of the belief in the Communication case.

### 5.3.2 Accounting for the Rightness of Honesty and Reportage

More needs to be said about Honesty and Reportage, and how they might contribute to the rightness of an action which satisfies them. There are possibilities here on which the above presumption would be false, and which would complicate comparisons between rival Disclosures.

It could be that the rightness of informing people of the truth, or avoiding deceit, is not dependent on the truth of the communiqué in a close enough way. For example, my going out of my way to tell another something I believe to be true, or my avoiding lying to them, might be a right action not because what I have told them is true (or not false), but because I have manifested a virtue, such as integrity.<sup>301</sup> The relevant *pro tanto* obligation in the Deontic Discourse would then be ‘manifest

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<sup>300</sup> “Typically” is used here since we may think that there are obligations bearing on God which He can only meet by producing the religious experience in the ‘careless’ way – such as, for example, maintaining His epistemic distance (see Hick 2010, 280), perhaps, or upholding the elegance of indeterminate secondary causation (see Polkinghorne 2006, 64).

<sup>301</sup> This is Lynch’s account of why we should treat truth as non-instrumentally valuable (Lynch 2004, 129-136).

integrity'. I typically satisfy this by governing my beliefs well, and going out of my way to share those I'm confident about, and avoiding lying. Then, Honesty and Reportage only count as *pro tanto* obligations by describing types of action tokens of which are often absolutely obligatory as ways of satisfying 'manifest integrity'. In other words, the rightness of the acts which we considered right in virtue of their satisfying Honesty or Reportage turn out really to stem from their satisfaction of 'manifest integrity'. But my success in manifesting integrity might only be indirectly<sup>302</sup> dependent on the truth of what I report to others. There are multiple accounts<sup>303</sup> of the value of truth which might lead to the following picture:

*Deflated*: Honesty and Reportage pick out, not genuine *pro tanto* obligations, but types of actions which tend to satisfy one or more genuine *pro tanto* obligations. These *pro tanto* obligations can sometimes be satisfied even if the communiqué is false. The degree of rightness generated by satisfying these *pro tanto* obligations is strictly independent of the truth or falsity of the communiqué.

If Deflated is true, communicative actions won't be more right just in virtue of having communicated a truth, or not communicated a falsehood. They won't have a higher expected rightness in virtue of the agent's believing to be true, or not false, what they decide to communicate. Indeed, once we have tracked down these other *pro tanto* obligations, we will see that in the case of pairs of Divine Disclosures and Divine Deceptions, God will have satisfied them to the same extent in both the Disclosure scenario and the Deception scenario. Considering the case of divine decisions, however, should lead us to realise that Deflated represents counter-intuitive views about the value of truth and the ethics of communication.

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<sup>302</sup> That is, it might instead be directly dependent on whether I'm justified in the belief I report; and only thereby truth-dependent. See Zagzebski (2003, 25) for an account of the extrinsic value of truth along these lines, Horwich (2010, 66) for an account which refers exclusively to self- rather than other-directed intellectual virtues, and Kvanvig (2014, 360-1) on why "responsible inquiry" may only be tendentially related to truth.

<sup>303</sup> E.g. Horwich 2006, 349-351, and Zagzebski 2003, 21, 25.

To show this, let's consider an alternative deflation of Honesty and Reportage to our previous example. Suppose we had a fully 'pragmatic' account of the value of truth, whereby knowledge or true belief are goods (and thence Honesty and Reportage right-making), only insofar as they are instruments in getting us non-epistemic goods, like safety or pleasure. If so, God would act equally well by systematically deceiving creatures as He would by creating them with reliable or properly functioning faculties. The situation here would be analogous to God's choosing to 'push the button' on a Nozick-style experience machine on behalf of creatures.<sup>304</sup> I suggest that if we think it would be wrong to push the button, then we should reject Deflated.<sup>305</sup> Those inclined to push the button will struggle to defend the argument for presuming a religious experience is a Disclosure, above. Downstream, they won't be able to use the Augury to evaluate the veridicality of religious experience. But Nozick's intuitions here do not seem like an expensive commitment for our procedure to depend on.

There are two alternatives to Deflated: Variable and Binary.

*Binary:* Honesty and Reportage are genuine *pro tanto* obligations. Neither can be satisfied to different degrees. Either an action satisfies Honesty or it doesn't; either an action satisfies Obligation or it doesn't.

*Variable:* Honesty and Reportage are genuine *pro tanto* obligations. Either can be satisfied to different degrees. There can be pairs of actions both of which satisfy Honesty, but one of which satisfies it to a greater degree. Or, there can be pairs of actions both of which satisfy Reportage, but one of which satisfies it to a greater

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<sup>304</sup> See, originally, Nozick 1974, 42-5.

<sup>305</sup> Lynch uses Nozick-type thought experiments to make an intuitive case for truth's non-instrumental value at Lynch 2004, 15-16.

degree. Or, both of these claims are true. Whichever have degrees, those degrees of satisfaction scale in relation to some feature of the true or false propositions involved in the actions which satisfy them.

If Binary is true, it is very easy to account for the rightness, or expected rightness, contributed to actions by their satisfying Honesty or Reportage.

Variable has the unhelpful consequence that the difference between the expected rightness of a Disclosure and its twin will change depending on the content of the proposition or the consequences for the creature of believing it. After dispensing with the second possibility, I argue below that the content of the proposition may well affect the rightness of communicating it, and this will complicate applications of the Augury to rival Disclosures. But the effect of the proposition's content is independent of its truth.

### 5.3.3 Collapsing Variable

If the consequences determine the variation, then Variable is equivalent to Deflated. On the one hand, "believing that  $p$  truly, as opposed to falsely" cannot be the consequence of the proposition which Variable refers to, since there are only two degrees of this consequence available – either the belief is false or it's true. On the other, recall that all other consequences which might make the difference are captured in the variable  $d$ , which remains the same independently of  $p$ 's truth-value.

Alternatively, the degree to which Honesty (or Reportage) is satisfied is determined not by the consequence of "believing that  $p$  truly, as opposed to falsely" alone, but only by that consequence along with some others. In this case, we have effectively transformed each of Honesty and Reportage into a set of *pro tanto* obligations. Each set will include either a Binary Honesty or a Binary Reportage,

along with a *pro tanto* obligation for each type of consequence described in *d* which is independent of the truth of *p*.

Here's an example of such a scenario.<sup>306</sup> Let's suppose that the more degrees of 'reassurance' a belief confers on its subject, the more degrees of rightness are satisfied by disclosing it; but, disclosure of a reassuring claim only nets any degrees of rightness if the claim is also true. You don't satisfy Reportage to any degrees by disclosing a very reassuring falsehood. Reportage can then be satisfied to a minimum degree where a minimally reassuring, but true, belief is disclosed; and satisfied to higher degrees as the reassuring consequences of the true belief increase in degree.

On this reading of Variable, truth of a communiqué is a prerequisite for satisfying Reportage or Honesty to contribute any rightness to an act of communication, but that truth does not exhaust the degrees of rightness which satisfying them might contribute to that act. To see how Variable collapses on this reading, let's consider some arguments for it which suppose that degrees of rightness vary with the contents of the proposition rather than the belief's consequences.

Why would we think that the contents of a proposition would affect the rightness of an action of communication? A clue lies in a standard objection to the claim that truth is intrinsically, non-instrumentally valuable: that there seem to be trivial truths, knowledge of or belief in which we don't care about.<sup>307</sup> These argue that the value of knowledge or true belief depends on the content, not only on the truth, of the belief, either due to the usefulness of beliefs with certain contents, or to intellectual goods associated with that content. Analyses of how or why the value of knowledge or

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<sup>306</sup> For an alternative example see Heal 1987, 104.

<sup>307</sup> See Grimm 2008 for an extended argument of this kind, Horwich 2002, 142 and Zagzebski 2003, 21-2 for examples of this consideration adduced as a reason for instrumental and extrinsic accounts respectively, and Whiting 2013, 226-9 for an overview of the triviality problem and attempts to respond to or accommodate it. See Heal 1987, 102-8 for an influential statement of a triviality-based objection to truth's bearing non-instrumental value.

true belief might be affected by the content of the belief can either take an obviously instrumentalist route,<sup>308</sup> which would lead us back to Deflated, or one which appeals to certain intellectual goods which, unlike true belief, can be had to greater or lesser degrees per belief, but, plausibly, require at least the truth of the belief the holding of which secures them. For example, we might want our curiosity satisfied,<sup>309</sup> where curiosity can be satisfied to different degrees because it is satisfied by explanations, which can have different scopes or depths,<sup>310</sup> we might want understanding;<sup>311</sup> or the topic the contents fill in our picture of might (rightly) fascinate us.<sup>312</sup> For these accounts to support this reading of Variable, they must suppose that any amount of satisfaction of curiosity, or growth in understanding, or fascination, requires at least the truth of the satisfying, understanding-contributing, or fascinating belief.

The difficulty with all such accounts is that they appeal to desiderative phenomena of our mental lives which do not obviously require truth for their satisfaction. I can feel that my curiosity is satisfied by a false explanation. If I am motivated by a sense of puzzlement, that sense can be assuaged by a false solution. Conversely, a true explanation might fail to satisfy my curiosity or give me the sense of having solved a puzzle, for whatever psychological reasons. If a topic fascinates me, I'll value new beliefs I form about that topic just so long as I believe them, but they do not need to be true. Conversely, a true belief about a topic that fascinates me can fail to be valuable to me because it's trivial despite

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<sup>308</sup> E.g. Horwich 2010, 62-65 and 2002, 140-143.

<sup>309</sup> E.g. Hempel 1965, 333, Goldman 1999, 3, Foley 1987, 11, Alston 2005a, 31, and Lynch 2004, 15-16. Kvanvig (2003, 145-6) uses curiosity to argue for the value of knowledge, but by treating curiosity just as the desire for truth, so that curiosity can only be satisfied (objectively speaking) to one or no degrees on his use of it.

<sup>310</sup> E.g. Alston 2005a, 165-9.

<sup>311</sup> E.g. Hempel 1965, 333. In this passage, Hempel also refers to our desire for knowledge; but this won't explain a content-based Variable since the only things there are degrees of when it comes to knowing that  $p$  is our degree of justification that  $p$ , and no amount of justification has truth as a necessary condition, nor does it have to do with the content of  $p$  rather than the 'consequences'.

<sup>312</sup> E.g. Coates 2009, 11. Coates also points out that the value of knowledge or true belief might change with the content due to the differing value of different domains of investigation – so truths about numbers of hairs on people's heads are less valuable than truths about science because science (in the academic sense) is more valuable. The latter value could be understood as accruing instrumentally and pragmatically, or in virtue of these other intellectual goods: perhaps we're more curious about scientific questions, scientific explanations run deeper and broader, science helps us gain deeper understanding, or is more fascinating.

having to do with the fascinating topic. Of course, we might prefer that, for any new belief we form, which satisfies one of these desiderative feelings, it's true rather than false. But that preference can be conceptually separated from the desiderative feeling, unless the feeling is described as a desire in a way which explicitly refers to truth. But if we restrict the evidence for Variable to only those desires (of varying strengths) which include a stipulation of truth, then this is a much smaller evidence base for Variable than our general experiences of fascination, curiosity, and so on.

Consider this argument for Variable from curiosity satisfaction:

(CS1) For each distinct intrinsic, final good, there's (at least) one *pro tanto* obligation binding agents to secure it for each other.

(CS2) We can work out what the intrinsic goods are by looking at what we desire, not as an instrument or case of merely extrinsic value.

(CS3) We desire the satisfaction of our curiosity, neither as an instrument nor as a source of extrinsic value.

(CS4) The satisfaction of curiosity is an intrinsic good. [From CS2, 3.]

(CS5) There's a *pro tanto* obligation to satisfy each other's curiosity, 'satisfy curiosity'. [From CS1, 4.]

(CS6) Our curiosity can only be satisfied by acquiring new, true beliefs.

(CS7) Whenever we satisfy 'satisfy curiosity', we communicate a true belief to someone. [From CS6]

(CS8) Our curiosity is satisfied to different degrees depending on the content of the proposition which satisfies it.

(CS9) We can satisfy 'satisfy curiosity' to different degrees depending on the content of the proposition by which we satisfy someone's curiosity. [From CS8 and CS7.]

(CS10) All *pro tanto* obligations to communicate true beliefs to others are Reportage if Reportage really is a *pro tanto* obligation.

(CS11) If there is Reportage, it's 'satisfy curiosity'.

(CS12) We can satisfy Reportage to different degrees.

An argument from any of the desiderative phenomena we considered above, as sources of the extrinsic value of truth, will take a form like this; and it'll take this form for Honesty as well, with appropriate adjustments. CS1 and CS10 set up the dialectical position we are in, of attempting to show how we can explain why it is right to communicate truths and refrain from deceit in terms of the value of truth. CS10 follows from the exhaustive, generalizing nature Honesty and Reportage are intended to have. CS2 gives us a Millian thesis about how to find intrinsic goods which underlies much of the reasoning about the value of truth.<sup>313</sup> The important premises are CS3 and CS6. In order for CS3 to be well-supported by phenomenological inspections of our desires, the term 'curiosity' is not going to have the right sense for CS6 to come out true. We have all experienced the feeling of curiosity which supports CS3; but many of us have experienced having that feeling satisfied by forming a belief – and then later discovering that belief was false. Our preference for curiosity-satisfying new beliefs which are true, over ones which are false, has to have another source besides the desire for curiosity-satisfaction mentioned in CS3 and supporting CS4. Because an argument like this can be run for every alternative candidate to curiosity offered in support of Variable, the only candidate which can ground the preference will be the desire for truth itself.<sup>314</sup> But, of course, for every truth we desire, that desire can only be satisfied to one or no degrees – so meriting the Binary version of Reportage.

The rejection of Variable does not, of course, mean that the contents of propositions can't affect the good we attain in coming to believe them, independently of the consequences involved. But it does

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<sup>313</sup> See Whiting 2013, 233 for a defence of this strategy in this context, and, historically, Mill 1998, 81 for its original articulation.

<sup>314</sup> There might be candidates, such as 'understanding' or 'wisdom', which much more intuitively have true (rather than false) beliefs as necessary constituents (see Kvanvig 2014, 360 on how different "cognitive successes" can relate, or fail to relate, to truth). Perhaps, for example, I can't genuinely understand how it is that  $q$  in the light of being told that  $p$  unless  $p$  is true. But this transforms 'understands' into a success term, where we can differentiate between the success-term-sense of 'understanding' which entails truth, and the sense which is transparent to us but includes the possibility of failure (where we might believe we understand, but be mistaken). If we value the former more than the latter, it's because we value truth independently of getting whatever we get from the latter. See Grimm 2006 for an overview of treatments of the relationship between understanding, knowledge, truth and justification.

mean that these contents affect the rightness of communication actions in virtue of obligations other than Reportage and Honesty; in other words, independently of truth. The attempt to defend Variable teaches us that these content-dependent features of propositions should be thought of as goods (or harms) for those who believe the proposition – goods like ‘having my curiosity satisfied’, ‘having a predictively powerful explanation’, ‘having lost my frustrating sense of puzzlement’, and so on. And when applying the Anselmian Augury these goods can be accounted for as conjuncts in the description of *d*. Intuitively, the rightness of, say my telling you the truth about my pet’s habits, my telling you the truth about the prime minister’s tax returns, and my telling you the true solution to the problem of universals, varies. But not even partly in virtue, as Variable suggests, of their truth. And we can capture this variance, and capture the independence of this variance from the truth involved in these acts of reporting, by considering my degreed obligations to solve other’s mysteries and unearth political conspiracies, but considering those obligations separately from Honesty and Reportage.

The practical consequence of this will be that the differing contents of rival D-beliefs may affect the expected rightnesses of God’s decision to confer them on creatures via religious experiences. Hence, the difference between the two probabilities for each Divine Disclosure will be affected by the contents of the values for the *p* of each, that is, by the contents of the D-beliefs putatively disclosed. Keep in mind that the rightness consequent on such contents is just another factor in the total expected rightness for each Disclosure; and also that the more two D-beliefs differ in explanatory power, scope, ability to satisfy curiosity, and other similar content-related features, the less likely they are to be incompatible, since they will be making claims on proportionally different levels of generality about God. Finally, it does not seem counter-intuitive that if two subjects of religious experiences learn incompatible claims about God, but one of these claims is relatively trivial, we should think the trivial claim less likely to be the product of a veridical religious experience.

## 5.4 How to Respond to Religious Diversity

Each religious experience can be represented as a Divine Disclosure; the probability that the Divine Disclosure occurred is the probability that this experience is or was veridical and hence that the D-belief it supports is true; from the Outsider Outlook, we can determine this probability using only the Anselmian Augury and the A-beliefs and N-beliefs it uses as inputs, A-beliefs and N-beliefs which both parties to a disagreement about that D-belief share.

Unfortunately, however, we are typically interested in carrying out this evaluation in a comparative context, where we have also evaluated, or are about to evaluate, a rival triad of religious experience, Divine Disclosure, and D-belief. In this chapter and the previous one, we have assumed that both parties to theological disagreements are following the procedure with the goal of reaching the truth, on the understanding that probabilistic support is truth-apt. But probabilistic support is truth-apt, I suggested in Chapter 2, because of its relations to logical validity. These relations demand that our credences are coherent. Throughout the discussion of divine hiddenness above, the goal of a coherent distribution of credences was what drove the divine hiddenness argument, and what demanded that the theist revise her beliefs in the light of divine hiddenness phenomena, appropriately applying the Augury.

Coherent distributions of credences or probabilities never allow the values for mutually exclusive propositions to sum to more than 1; and they demand that, for a disjunction which is necessarily true, or necessarily true given some third proposition we are taking for granted, the values for all disjuncts add up to 1. The problem now is that our two parties to theological disagreement can easily initially violate these norms after independently evaluating each experience-Divine Disclosure-belief triad, because the disagreement began in the face of the two beliefs' being mutually exclusive. So, for example, both parties might agree that the first belief  $p$  has a probability of 0.75 after retreating to the Outsider Position and applying the Augury to  $p$ 's supporting experience; but they might agree that  $q$  has a

probability of 0.5 after doing the same for  $q$ 's supporting experience. But these two values will exceed 1.

In such a situation both parties must revise their probabilities for both  $p$  and  $q$  so that they sum to 1 but maintain the same ratio – since we have not lost interest in which of the two is more likely to be true. When this occurs, however, the new values for  $p$  (0.6) and  $q$  (0.4) will no longer be consistent with the inputs into either of the Auguries applied to  $p$  and  $q$ 's experiences. This should lead both parties to revise those inputs. They have as many options for how to do so as we discussed in the case of revising inputs for Divine Disclosures falsified by Divine Discretions. Presumably, if they could agree on the A-beliefs and N-beliefs which they put into the Augury on the basis of normative and contextual reflection and investigation, then they will be able to agree on how to carry out the revision. The simplest, least controversial way will be to revise downward all their relevant satisfaction credences and the credences representing normative uncertainty which went into their obligation credences; but they might instead revise downward the strengths of the relevant *pro tanto* obligations. This will have consequences, however, for later Auguries, generating lower absolute values for any subsequently evaluated religious experience and hence D-beliefs.

The other 'new data' that will arise after making this comparison and revision is that the 'losing' religious experience must be regarded as either a Communication or a Deception. The disjunction of Communication and Deception will occupy the entirety of the space of probable theological interpretations of the religious experience (once both counter-historical divine actions and the Disclosure interpretation have been excluded). If the parties can agree on how much rightness is contributed by Honesty, then they can divide that space between the Communication and Deception, and so ascertain the final probability that the 'losing' religious experience was a Communication.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> How this happens will depend on their position on the questions we discussed in 6.3. That is, they might think that God cannot Communicate, in which case the Deception will occupy the whole of the space 'left over' by the twinned Disclosure – in this case, 0.6.

For every instance of Careless Communication theologians retrodict, they will need to make sure that the beliefs fed into the Augury associated with that Communication match its probability.

As individuals continually encounter more reports of religious experiences supporting D-beliefs, they will be able to continually revise their beliefs about how God is likely to provide for basic theological belief-formation among His creatures, and continually apply those revisions to new cases. In Chapters 1 and 3 I described how sceptics of the evidential force of religious experience suggested that the wide phenomenon of religious diversity (as opposed to the narrow phenomenon of peer disagreement about theology, the hard core of their argument) should lead to general distrust of religious experiences as evidence. Supporters like Alston replied with the suggestion that perhaps it should lead to some distrust, but not a debilitating amount. But we had no principled way of deciding how much distrust was appropriate distrust. This stand-off leaves individuals seeking to make up their mind about what God is like with no counsel. The Applied Augury effectively counsels us to revise, whenever we come across two competing claims to religious experience, those among our standing A-beliefs and N-beliefs which bear on how we trust religious experiences occurring in various types of circumstances. And it tells us how to make such revisions in a precise, rule-governed manner in which we take for granted as truth-apt neither the reliability of a mystical practice nor the truth of any confessional priors. We need 'take for granted' only uncontroversial epistemic norms, faculties and sources: moral perception and reasoning, sense perception relevant to that reasoning, and logical and probabilistic coherence.

# 6. Perfect Being Theism for All

## 6.1 Introduction

The Anselmian Augury presupposes that “God” is a perfect being, and so my procedure for comparative evaluations of religious experiences and D-beliefs must presuppose the same. This chapter defends this presupposition. To do so, it shifts territory to a consideration of what the word “God” might mean – that is, how its reference is determined, treating its meaning as a function of how theistic religious language is used by us in practice. This involves considering rival theories of the semantics for “God”, to argue that the best way of making sense of how “God” is used is to suppose that its users implicitly understand it to mean “whatever is worthy of our worship”. Then, I employ the distinction between subjective and objective absolute obligations made in Chapter 4 to make this more precise: “God” could mean “whoever is objectively worthy of our worship” or “whoever is subjectively worthy of our worship”. I explain why, given plausible assumptions behind the notion of worship, a morally unsurpassable, omnipotent Being will be subjectively worthy of worship for everyone insofar as its existence is epistemically possible for them. Given those same assumptions, if such a Being actually exists, it will be objectively worthy of our worship. Only if ‘objective worthiness’ is what is at stake, and if there is no morally unsurpassable omnipotent Being, does “God” fail to mean such a Being.

If my argument for what I call the “Worship-Worthiness” view of the semantics for “God” is successful, we have a response to the following easy criticism of the procedure set out in the previous two chapters: each mystical practitioner (or epistemic agent dependent upon mystical practitioners) just means by “God” someone or thing accurately described by the beliefs (implicit or explicit) which constitute the rules of their overrider system. So those beliefs need to be assumed even if the Augury is used, and must not be excluded from the Outsider Outlook. My argument suggests that the general

phenomena of religious discourse indicate that this is emphatically not the case. Worship-Worthiness is intended to predict correctly, and hence gains evidence from, our intuitions about when a theological disagreement legitimately ends in the parties recognizing that they are talking about different beings, and when one party has adopted an artificial definition for “God” so as to avoid rationally revising their theological beliefs.

## 6.2 God is Whoever is Worthy of our Worship

What should our semantic theory for the term “God” be? How is it that when we use the term “God” referentially, it really picks out God? Alternatively, what is picked out by “God”? Any answer to either of these questions will answer both. The answer I defend below is that the reference of “God” is determined via the implicit sense of the term, the definite description “whatever is worthy of our worship”. I begin by describing two desiderata for a semantics for “God”: what I call ‘accessibility’ and ‘scope’. Both accessibility and scope catch various reasons given in favour of one theory against another, and can be satisfied to greater and lesser degrees by different theories. Accessibility concerns how easy it is for individual “God”-users to meet the conditions on successful reference imposed by the theory. Scope concerns how much disagreement about the nature of “God”’s referent can be tolerated, and how far our theory ‘draws together’ parties to disagreements in co-reference rather than letting them ‘split apart’ easily.

I examine three competing theories in contemporary philosophy of religion to see how they fare in meeting our desiderata. The first, which I will call the “Causal Reference” view (CR), has explicit defenders in both William Alston<sup>316</sup> and Meghan Sullivan.<sup>317</sup> In short, this view tells us that “God” is a

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<sup>316</sup> Primarily in Alston 1988, but preceded by Richard Miller’s 1986. Miller’s article explores the effects of CR on genealogical arguments against the rationality of theism: CR may undercut appeals to the genetic fallacy. If this is the case, then it provides another reason to prefer WW over CR.

<sup>317</sup> See Sullivan 2012 and 2015.

proper name bestowed by Abraham on the object of his religious experiences<sup>318</sup> and taught to his astronomically numerous descendants through a chain of testifiers or system-users. The second, which I will call the “Descriptive Denotation” view (DD) is defended in hybrid form by Richard Gale,<sup>319</sup> but is a good candidate for a ‘traditional’ view given theologians’ habit of defining “God” in terms of a list of attributes which set Him apart from creatures. This view tells us that “God” picks out an object which uniquely satisfies a definite description, perhaps consisting in a precise list of predicates, or perhaps a cluster of them. The third view I will call the “Worship-Worthiness” view (WW). The Worship-Worthiness view gives God’s worthiness of worship a more fundamental role than merely being an example of one of the properties DD requires, telling us instead that “God” refers simply to “whoever is worthy of our worship”.

I will articulate each view and assess how far it satisfies the two desiderata. Ultimately, I conclude that the Worship-Worthiness view fares the best: it makes God more easily semantically accessible, and supports the widest scope for co-reference between those who use the term “God”. Accessibility and Scope are not ‘fail-or-pass’ necessary conditions for a successful theory of the reference of “God”, but rather desiderata which a theory can meet more or less successfully. Worship-Worthiness, I argue, meets them with more success than its rival, CR, and its less precise parent, DD.

### 6.2.1 Accessibility

One easily discernible feature of the theistic religious system is that most humans seem capable of playing it successfully. It doesn’t seem to require ‘special training’. Although we might use it better if we have certain kinds of training, children seem to be able to speak as intelligibly about and to God as they can about and to creatures. This seems to be the case even for those children (and adults) raised

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<sup>318</sup> This is, of course, an iteration of CR for “God” as used in the mouths of Abrahamic monotheists speaking English. Zoroastrians, for example, might translate “Ohrmazd” as “God” and thereby inherit “God” from Zarathustra’s initial ostension.

<sup>319</sup> See Gale 1991.

in post-religious cultures where they would not have intellectual access to religious practices or cultural hinterlands that might constitute a form of special training.

So we can infer that God is highly linguistically accessible via the term “God”. What this evidence suggests is that, in general, successful reference to or denotation of God by “God” is easy to achieve. So I contend that our linguistic habits indicate that the object, God, is highly, or very easily, accessible by the term “God”. For brevity I will also write as if accessibility pertains to the term, “God”, by which I only mean that it is easy for us to access God by using it. We are judging accounts by whether they render “God” more or less accessible, and will judge more favourably where they make it more so.

One specific demand this ease of access makes, evident from the above cases of ignorant or juvenile speakers, is that one can successfully refer to God by using “God”, without needing a sophisticated conceptual apparatus related to one’s use or understanding of the term. According to this demand, a semantic theory for “God” will do better insofar as the conceptual resources demanded of its users are low enough to match many typical cases, such as the child at prayer or the questions of the spiritual seeker in a post-religious society. If such people are to use “God” successfully, then such usage cannot require much by way of beliefs about God, or understanding of the senses of predicates involved in such beliefs.

There is another way that God can become semantically inaccessible, however. If successful reference depends upon causal connections between the speaker and the referent, then we end up failing to refer to God by “God” if those connections go awry. A theory which renders God inaccessible in this way raises theological problems because the relational functions of the theistic religious system might require us to refer to God by “God”. For example, when we worship God, or pray to God, it would be unsatisfactory if we were praising the glory or asking for the mercy of someone else, fictional or real. CR, DD and WW view do not make God equally semantically hidden. A theory which reduces the

semantic vulnerability of “God” should be preferred because it eases the burden of theodicy. Semantic vulnerability can also reduce the scope for co-reference, and a wide scope for co-reference is our other desideratum.

I don’t intend to settle the question of just precisely how linguistically accessible the theistic linguistic system makes God – nor appeal to a precise value in my arguments below. Since below we are comparing three theories for accessibility, I hope that our familiarity with religious practices will indicate to us that the Causal Reference and Descriptive Denotation views do not account for sufficient accessibility, and that Worship-Worthiness does not make God ‘too’ accessible. Dialectically, however, the accessibility criterion is on safe ground, since Alston, Sullivan, and Gale use concerns about conceptual demands<sup>320</sup> and fragile chains<sup>321</sup> to motivate their preferred views.

### 6.2.2 Scope

Users of the theistic religious linguistic system should be able to co-refer to God when they use the same term as each other – even when they strongly disagree about what the thing each calls “God” is like. Our different theories provide for co-reference in different ways; and those differences mean that each theory implies a different scope for co-reference.

While I find it intuitive that our theory of how “God” refers will be preferable the wider the scope for co-reference it establishes, a correct theory must draw the line somewhere. We only need to find one case where it is uncontroversial that two speakers uttering “God” in their language do not co-refer to show that such a line exists. Yet there are two aspects of the theistic religious linguistic system which indicate that the right theory will extend co-reference very widely.

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<sup>320</sup> See Alston 1988, 116 and Sullivan 2012, 161-3.

<sup>321</sup> See Gale 1991, 301.

The first is the explicit language used in much religious and theological controversy, coupled with a presumption that we should take such language at face value. When Christians, Jews, Muslims and (many) Hindus disagree, they appear to disagree about the nature of the same object. Christians insist that God was Incarnate in Christ, but Jews that God has not (and perhaps never will) be Incarnate; Muslims claim that God is only one 'person', some Christians that He is three, and some Hindus that It is none. Disagreements typically take the form of "I believe that *a* is F, but you believe *a* is G" or "We should  $\varphi a$ , not  $\psi a$ ". There is no inevitability to this, and it is what we would expect if co-reference is occurring. If co-reference were not the norm, we would expect a lot more disagreement to be couched differently. We would expect disagreements to typically take the form of "I believe there's an *x* which is F, *a*, but no *x* which is G, but you believe there's an *x* which is G, *b*", or "We should  $\varphi a$  rather than  $\psi b$ ". We can regard the assumption of co-reference as an explanation for why theological and religious disagreement tends to take the first two forms, rather than the latter two. If co-reference were not in place, then disagreements of the first two forms would not typically be genuine disagreements, but rather the reference for "God" in the parties' mouths would be 'split'; and those parties would routinely labour under a misunderstanding, talking past each other.<sup>322</sup> Perhaps there is an alternative explanation which is consistent with widespread 'split reference' between "God"-users, but it seems to me that our motivation to look for such an explanation will be provided by other evidence in favour of a view with low scope. A charitable, face-value reading of the language typical in religious and theological controversy puts the presumption in favour of high scope.

The second arises from the translatability of "God" across languages. Missionaries seem able to make theistic claims understood across very different cultures, often without shared linguistic histories. It is natural to suppose that such translation was easy due to shared reference by the two poles of the translation. If "God" (and its translations) refer to One Thing, and our minds are equipped to

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<sup>322</sup> This consideration of typical theological usage is appealed to by Geach (1969, 108-9) and Sullivan (2012, 163) and Tuggy (2016) in their arguments that Abrahamic theists co-refer.

distinguish between that One Thing and other things, translation will be easy. If this explanation is right, the history of syncretism and proselytism will provide evidence of very widespread co-reference.

Terms are sometimes (apparently) translated without co-reference. For example, a referent can be dubbed with a term in one language, and its features over time create a sense for that term; then a different referent, known to the speakers of a second language, can share enough of those features that the term is translated into whatever term in the second language refers to the other referent. Over time, commerce between speakers of the two languages can come to clarify resulting confusions. Cases like this abound in the taxonomy of wildlife.

Should we think that the translation of “God” is such a case? On the one hand, even if (for example) El-Shaddai and Chukwu were in fact two distinct individuals, despite Christian missionaries to Nigeria translating both as “God”, it would be much harder for us to establish that they are two distinct individuals than it is for biologists to establish the distinct speciation of two geographically separated populations in the same genus, so that the ‘confusion’ could be ‘cleared up’. On the other, when we reflect on the translation process, and the ‘clarification’ process, we immediately begin to imagine instances of the theological controversies discussed above. Missionaries, working in the cases we are considering, tried to persuade the Igbo people that they were mistaken about details concerning Chukwu’s activities and nature, not that El-Shaddai existed, but not Chukwu – if they had taken the latter strategy, “Chukwu” would not now translate “God” in Igbo translations of the Bible. It is more charitable to suppose that missionaries and converts at the time could discern the common reference of different terms, rather than that they were ‘misled’ by similarities between two different (postulated) beings.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Egbo 1972, 75-9.

Assuming co-reference between the missionary and convert, such linguistic-historical evidence also tells in favour of both kinds of accessibility, since any necessary concepts must be coarse-grained enough to be available from within unconnected intellectual histories.

The above two arguments together make a generous scope for co-reference a desideratum for theories of how “God” refers.

### 6.2.3 The Causal Reference View

The Causal Reference view applies the theory of the reference of names and natural-kind-terms developed in the 1960s and ‘70s, and associated with Saul Kripke,<sup>324</sup> to the divine case, taking “God” to be a proper name. According to this ‘causal theory’, generally speaking, who (or what) a name or natural-kind-term refers to depends on who was ‘baptised’ with it when the initial users of that name began to use it. Those initial users then communicate it to subsequent users, who defer to the initial users regarding its reference. The second generation can be deferred to by the third, and so on, until members of enormous communities spread diachronically across time can use the term to refer successfully to the initial individual, even if they could never have met that individual, and even if they have few true beliefs about the individual. In the case of “God”, Alston suggests that religious communities might have ways of identifying a common Object of their ‘religious’ experiences and ‘baptising’ it “God”; the handing down of their religious practices enables the communication of the name to subsequent generations.<sup>325</sup>

The Causal Reference view initially scores well on accessibility because virtually no conceptual apparatus is required on the part of “God”-users to refer successfully to God using “God”. As Sullivan explains, “speakers do not need a unique description of God, nor do they even need an accurate

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<sup>324</sup> the *locus classicus* is Kripke 1980.

<sup>325</sup> Alston 1988, 118-9; compare with Sullivan 2012, 162, and her 2015.

description of God in order to use a divine name to refer to him. Children and anyone else who finds themselves theologically impoverished can refer merely by deferring to others who are in a position to refer".<sup>326</sup>

Unfortunately, Sullivan argues that the linguistic accessibility of God is reduced by the potential changing of the reference of "God" over time. According to causal theories of reference, irregularities in the causal chain between baptism and late speaker can make it the case that the late speaker fails to refer to the baptized object. Speakers within the community might use the already-taken name to baptize a new object, and so introduce a "competing chain":<sup>327</sup> if later speakers defer to the re-users of the name, they will refer to the new object rather than the old. Things can be more complicated: Sullivan gives the case of King Arthur<sup>328</sup> to illustrate how late inheritors of a name could, on the causal view, refer indiscriminately to any member of a collection of objects. Whilst there might have been an original baptizand of "Arthur" – let's say, a retired Roman general – a whole band of fictional or obscured heroes hailed in proto-Arthurian epics bear just as strong causal relations to the name in our mouths.

Suppose that we take "God", like Alston, to refer to the common religious-experiential object of the ancient Israelites.<sup>329</sup> Sullivan argues that, empirically, that puts "God" users in semantic hot water: "the contemporary Catholic Church is the product of two thousand years of theological mergers and acquisitions...early Church history is full of events where distinct cultures puzzled over how to combine their metaphysical theories with the growing church...And Catholics are not alone in this; nearly every major religion can find syncretistic events in their formative years".<sup>330</sup> On CR, then, there is a substantial risk that modern-day users of "God" lie at the ends of diverse, confluent, or interrupted

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<sup>326</sup> Sullivan 2015, 43.

<sup>327</sup> Sullivan 2015, 44.

<sup>328</sup> Sullivan 2015, 44-5.

<sup>329</sup> Alston 1988, 121.

<sup>330</sup> Sullivan 2015, 46.

causal chains so that many do not successfully refer to God, and hence refer to different beings or refer with varying degrees of success. Sullivan reckons that this risk raises a “problem of semantic divine hiddenness” because many believers might not have linguistic access to God of the sort we would expect personal relationships to require. CR puts both God’s semantic accessibility, and the co-reference of “God”, in jeopardy to intellectual history. So we should judge the theory to fare poorly with respect to our two desiderata.<sup>331</sup>

Alston’s response to this issue is to lean on mystical practices. Abraham and his heirs and successors successfully pick out God and dub Him “God” by using their mystical doxastic practice, however rudimentary it was, to identify the object of their experience, the baptizand of “God”, as such. They can pass on the name for reference by deference to their intention, as well as teaching their successors how to re-locate God experientially so that “if things go right, we also attain some first hand experiential acquaintance with God to provide still another start for chains of transmission”.<sup>332</sup> Alston’s doxastic practice set-up also provides for a solution to Sullivan’s semantic problem of divine hiddenness which she calls the “*quarantined deference* response”.<sup>333</sup> A practice for discerning when God is appearing and when He is not is epistemically respectable, and hence respectable for the purposes of baptism by ostension and tradition of a name by testimony, only if it is socially established. Socially established mystical doxastic practices are much narrower, and more tightly controlled, than the whole theistic religious system. This narrowness can exclude causal chains gone awry, so that practitioners can “avoid the problem of semantic shift...by resolving to only defer very selectively when [they] use divine names”,<sup>334</sup> that is, only to successful mystics within their practice.

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<sup>331</sup> Bogardus and Urban (2017, 183) appeal to similar considerations of reference change to argue against co-reference between different Abrahamic theists.

<sup>332</sup> Alston 1988, 119.

<sup>333</sup> Sullivan 2015, 48.

<sup>334</sup> Sullivan 2015, 48.

Unfortunately, as Sullivan points out,<sup>335</sup> Alston's solution makes each community's referent of "God" semantically accessible to "God"-users only at the directly proportional cost of scope for co-reference across those communities. Whatever the object of Ignatius of Loyola's religious experiences, my fellow spiritual exercisers and I will have secure and easy access to it via "God" by selectively deferring only to St Ignatius' usage of "God". But if we want to make sure we are referring to the same object as other Christians, we will have to include earlier and more figures in our quarantine of "God"-users, and semantic hiddenness will return. The situation worsens proportionally as we want to refer by "God" to the same object as Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and so on. In other words, advocates of CR must choose a trade-off between reduced scope and reduced accessibility if Gale's objection demands a response like Alston's.

Sullivan's preferred solution to semantic divine hiddenness raises similar difficulties. She argues that the truth of sufficiently robust accounts of providence would imply that the necessary causal chains have in fact been preserved, by divine action.<sup>336</sup> Sullivan notes that this solution ideologically inflates CR to involve divine-providential mechanics as well as familiar causal mechanics. Other things being equal, then, if Sullivan is right about CR's generation of a problem which demands a theodicy, we should prefer a theory which can remain leaner by not raising the problem at all. A similar consideration will apply to a similar strategy suggested by de Ridder and van Woudenberg:<sup>337</sup> that all humans respond (perhaps in religious experience) to the same God via His general revelation. This will guarantee co-reference between speakers in different traditions, but also 'refresh' the causal chains and reduce semantic vulnerability. The doctrine of general revelation may be true, but if an alternative theory of the reference of "God" can do without it, so much the better for that alternative.

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<sup>335</sup> Sullivan 2015, 48-9.

<sup>336</sup> Sullivan 2015, 49.

<sup>337</sup> de Ridder and van Woudenberg 2014, 60.

One final comment about the scope limitations of the Causal Reference view. The Causal Reference view's advocates typically regard it as a reason to prefer CR that, thanks to the common historical origins of the Abrahamic religion, it determines co-reference between "God"-users of all the Abrahamic faiths.<sup>338</sup> The considerations I gave to support the scope desideratum might, however, demand a higher bar: apparently genuine theological disagreement occurs across the boundary between the Abrahamic and other faiths – faiths without a common historical origin.

#### 6.2.4 The Descriptive Denotation View

The simplest version of the Descriptive Denotation view is that "God" refers to Who it does by standing in for a description of someone, and only God satisfies that description.<sup>339</sup> DD seems a natural way to think about how "God" refers due to the habit of theologians from Arius<sup>340</sup> to Zizioulas<sup>341</sup> to 'introduce' their readers to God by giving a list of adjectives intended to differentiate Him from everything else. Because the lists of divine names we find in such sources are heterogeneous, presentations of DD need not commit to a specific list as being constitutive of the theory – any more than accounts of CR need to commit to a specific history of the transmission of the name "God".

In terms of general theories of reference, DD could be taken to rely on a Russellian or Millian view about how names 'denote' in virtue of their implicit description, along with the understanding that "God" is a name in this sense. Understood in this way, however, DD will be vulnerable to standard objections to this view of names. Instead, DD can be articulated as foregoing the assumption that "God" is a proper name – or even a natural-kind-term – and supposing "God" stands in for a definite description which picks out the set of things which (could possibly) satisfy that description. If the

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<sup>338</sup> See Miller 1986, 14, Alston 1988, 126-7, Sullivan 2012, 162-3, and 2015, 39, 43.

<sup>339</sup> More refined versions could appeal to "cluster concepts" where not all co-referents need to have the same description in mind, but the descriptions must be part of a set. The refined versions can ameliorate accessibility problems for DD only by expanding the set, reducing the chance that the descriptions in the set in fact pick out one thing, and so increasing scope problems.

<sup>340</sup> See Athanasius 1892, *De Synodis* 2:15, 2:16.

<sup>341</sup> E.g. Zizioulas 2008, 40-4.

descriptions involved were too vague, then DD would immediately fare terribly on the scope criterion because co-reference would be threatened by multiple membership of the set of those picked out by “God”. Fortunately, however, the candidates for such descriptions which we find in theological literature, liturgy, and the mouths of believers asked to define “God”, typically render that set either a singleton, or empty. For example, “the creator of the universe” is empty if theism is false, whether because the universe was not created, or because it was created by committee. When terms are used to mean things in this way, we sometimes speak of ‘denoting’ as distinct from ‘referring’, and ‘referring’ is then restricted for the kind of ‘meaning’ that names, specifically, have of the things they name.<sup>342</sup> Since either way we are answering the question of what ‘thing’ or ‘person’ is ‘picked out’ by “God”, whether or not “God” operates like a name or a title, I shall continue to write of the ‘reference’ of “God”, even if according to this distinction “God” only ‘denotes’ by standing in for a definite description.

DD can be attacked for its threats to accessibility. For any definite description of “God” which plausibly has a unique satisfier, many apparently competent “God”-users will not have that definition in mind. We can address this by supposing, as Alston puts it, that any such user “has in reserve”<sup>343</sup> their denoting description, perhaps mnemonically, but more normally by deference to others. In doing so, we risk re-introducing the ball of tangled deference chains which threatened ordinary believers’ accessibility on CR. We can, of course, quarantine our deference to untangle the ball somewhat – but again, it will come at the cost of co-reference with “God”-users at the ends of chains outside our quarantine.

A feature of DD which I find more pressing, however, is that on its own it does not specify what definite description allows “God” to denote God. So, just as CR delegates the ‘true story’ about the causal

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<sup>342</sup> This distinction is drawn in Donnellan’s (1966, 281) critique of Russell’s view of the semantics for definite descriptions and, thereby, names.

<sup>343</sup> Alston 1988, 113.

history of the name “God” to intellectual history,<sup>344</sup> DD also delegates the detail of working out the correct definite description. But to what discipline? An answer which has proven attractive to some theologians is ‘confessional theology’. That is, the one who wants to know what “God” denotes might derive a definite description of God from their beliefs about what God is like, more than by considering how the word is used.<sup>345</sup>

When this occurs, it is often part of a wider strategy to close a religious controversy of the typical “I believe that *a* is F, but you believe *a* is G” or “We should  $\varphi a$ , not  $\psi a$ ” forms, and open up a new controversy of the less tractable forms “I believe there’s an *x* which is F, *a*, but no *x* which is G, but you believe there’s an *x* which is G, *b*”, and “We should  $\varphi a$  rather than  $\psi b$ ”. The beliefs cited in such manoeuvres are not even always core credal claims involving concepts widely shared by believers. Consider criticisms of natural and liberal theology at the end of the Reformed tradition: “The God who is ‘conceived’ by thought is not the one who discloses Himself; from this point of view He is an intellectual idol”.<sup>346</sup> By taking the rather Ramseyan property of *having-disclosed-Himself-in-the-Incarnation*, or the Geach-like *not-having-been-conceived-by-thought*, to be part of a definition for “God”, Emil Brunner does not have to show that Reformed Christianity is correct about God, and his opponents mistaken. Liberal Protestants and Catholics are just talking about something else, something which is an ‘idol’ as far as Christians are concerned. Or consider remarks made by Cardinal Burke on Christian and Muslim dialogue in a recent interview: “I don’t believe it’s true that we’re all worshipping the same God, because the God of Islam is a governor”.<sup>347</sup> This absolves him of engaging with the question of who is correct about how God wants humans to live, and allows him to re-cast

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<sup>344</sup> See Bogardus and Urban (184-193) for a more detailed explanation of why and how this is so, appealing to Evans’ 1973 development of Kripke’s causal theory of reference.

<sup>345</sup> In recent work explicitly addressing the reference of “God”, de Ridder and van Woudenberg 2014 gives an example of an answer from the perspective of Reformed (Christian) theology.

<sup>346</sup> Brunner 1950, 136.

<sup>347</sup> Burke et al. 2016, 17.

that question into a question about whose being really exists; or – and I think this is telling – whose being is worth trusting for salvation, obeying, or worshipping.

If this manoeuvre occurred all the time, then it would undermine the empirical claims about theological controversy made in defence of the scope desideratum above. To this reader, however, such manoeuvres stand out as notable exceptions to general practice, exceptions which sometimes seem not to take the religious aspirations of interlocutors as seriously as they deserve. Consider both cases above: Reformed, Catholic and Lutheran Christians assumed they were disagreeing about the same being for five-hundred years before twentieth-century Protestant criticisms of natural theology.<sup>348</sup> Christian and Muslim theologians and religious leaders (if not, perhaps, the authors of popular fiction or political propaganda) have almost always regarded each other as disagreeing about the nature of one God.

Since DD delegates the task of spelling out how “God” refers in this way, it risks massively reducing scope for co-reference. The natural solution is to take on that task for ourselves, having reflected on the desiderata of accessibility and scope, and seek to specify a more principled definite description which meets them better. Worship-Worthiness is an attempt at that task.

### 6.2.5 The Worship-Worthiness View

Having considered the Descriptive Denotation view, we can see that the Worship-Worthiness view is a principled iteration of it, rather than a rival on the same level as the Causal Reference view. The Worship-Worthiness view tells us that “God” stands in for the definite description “whatever is worthy of our worship”. Before evaluating it, we need to see how it ensures that “God” will, indeed, have at most one referent, since this will maximize accessibility and scope.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> See Sudduth 2009b for an overview of the development of Reformed objections to natural theology.

<sup>349</sup> The burden of securing one referent via our definite description, a burden primarily imposed by the desire for wider scope for co-reference, makes worthiness-of-worship preferable to alternative definite descriptions

In their discussion of the phenomenology of worship, Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa present what they call the “*uniqueness thesis*”:<sup>350</sup> that only one thing, God, is worthy of worship. They suggest that the uniqueness thesis is what sets monotheism apart from polytheism. Plausibly, however, all religious language games which include the term “God” ‘with a capital “G”’, alongside the term “god” for other entities their religions involve, set the referent of “God” apart from and above those gods in some way. The distinction between worship and ‘mere praise’, or between worship and “veneration and hero-worship”, or worship and “instances of worship which should be subservient”,<sup>351</sup> tracks the distinction between “God” and the gods.

Bayne and Nagasawa take aim at monotheism for being unable to articulate the difference in kind between the attitude owed only to God according to the uniqueness thesis, and the attitudes we take to our creaturely heroes.<sup>352</sup> Jeremy Gwiazda’s response is to identify “worship” with the degree of praise owed to the most praiseworthy, and identifies praiseworthiness with excellence.<sup>353</sup> At this level of simplicity, Gwiazda’s account seems to fit well with the data of monotheistic and henotheistic religions – that is, all the religions which use the theistic religious system. On it, any maximally excellent being will be worthy of worship. In order to secure uniqueness, however, Gwiazda gives a strong account of maximal excellence, according to which only the best possible being can count, and is uniquely so since transcendent in virtue of His excellence.

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derived from considerations of how “God” is used rather than from confessional commitments. For example, one way of interpreting Schellenberg’s ‘ultimism’ (2016, 167) is as adding “salvifically effective” as an alternative to “worthy of worship” in a theory of what “God” refers to for all “God”-users everywhere. But there could be many beings which are salvifically effective. Another alternative might be “worthy of obedience”; but again, there could be multiple omniscient impeccable beings.

<sup>350</sup> Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 301.

<sup>351</sup> Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 302.

<sup>352</sup> Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 302.

<sup>353</sup> Gwiazda 2011, 523.

That Gwiazda appeals to controversial claims about the structure of value in order to guarantee that only one being is worthy of worship does not mean that these claims must be true in order for the uniqueness thesis to be true about the nature of worship. Nor does it mean that these claims must be true, or be believed or understood by “God”-users, in order for those speakers to refer successfully to God by implicitly understanding “God” to mean “whatever is worthy of worship”. Just as long as uniqueness is in fact true of the nature of worship, and God is in fact (for whatever reason) solely worthy of worship, then He will be the only thing picked out by “God”. In other words, we can follow Bayne and Nagasawa in taking the uniqueness thesis as data from the phenomenology of religion. And according to it, if it turns out that if anyone is worthy of worship, then the set of beings picked out by “God” is a singleton. If there are multiple beings who are equally best, then no-one is referred to by “God”. If no-one is actually the uniquely best then no-one is worthy of our worship, and “God” does not refer, except fictionally.

One more piece of phenomenological data concerning worship is relevant: that although being the best is necessary for being worthy of worship, it is not sufficient. One must also surpass an absolute threshold of excellence. Otherwise, WW is subject to a range of counterexamples in which “God” refers to pitiful or evil beings just in virtue of their being the least pitiful or evil who actually exist. As with the relative excellence condition, this condition on worthiness of worship can be defended with more substantive accounts of worship or excellence, but WW need only commit to the condition, not any reasons for imposing it.

The practices of praise-giving, or whatever other attitudes worship might be a limit case of, such as awe or gratitude, are socially endemic and learnt young. Analogues of worship can be present and proper in local contexts even if only God deserves worship ‘proper’ in a global context. It makes sense to speak of my worshipping my older brother *qua* the most excellent older boy at school, and we can at least make sense of our daughters’ worship of Justin Bieber *qua* most talented of pop-stars. Indeed,

our disagreement with their judgment will initially have to do with Bieber's talents as a pop-star, not with Bieber's inferiority to Yahweh. If this is true, then there is evidence that we are fast learners not only when it comes to praise, awe and gratitude, but also about the distinction between their common, and their limit, cases of desert.

I suggest that "whatever is worthy of our worship" in the global, absolute sense of "worship", is implicitly understood to define "God" by the term's speakers, even if they would not respond to a question about what "God" means by giving WW's definition. In this way, the Worship-Worthiness view renders God extremely semantically accessible in terms of both conceptual demands and semantic vulnerability. Because the concept of worship comes so easily to us through induction into analogous social practices, hardly any "God"-users will fail to meet the conceptual demands required to successfully denote God with the term. Because the speaker only needs to use the term with an implicit associated sense, no history of causal connections to baptizers is required. So WW thereby renders God highly semantically accessible by rendering "God" semantically invulnerable, relative to its vulnerability on the Causal Reference view.

The Worship-Worthiness view also does well in determining wide co-reference. It implies that co-reference will cut across religions' different histories, no matter how complex, diverse or divergent they are. It will also cut across religions' differing metaphysical conceptions of God – perhaps not as unilaterally as their histories, but significantly more so than on CR or DD.

There are two sources of powerful prospective counterexamples to the Worship-Worthiness view. The first is that the view seems to distribute modality across claims about God in counter-intuitive ways. For example, if "whatever is worthy of our worship" is a description for which "God" implicitly stands in, then it will be necessarily false that "God is not worthy of our worship". And this might not seem necessarily false: many seem to have been brought to believe it by experiences of suffering for

which they took God to be responsible. Here is how we should handle such cases. In analogous linguistic systems involving titles, which refer by picking out a singleton set bounded by a description, like “King”, “Champion”, and so on, the semantic reference determined by the description can come apart from the speaker’s reference. Such systems can involve local usages with messy relationships to the global semantics, in which the title comes to be treated as a proper name in the Kripkean, causal manner.<sup>354</sup> So I could come to treat “God” as if it were a proper name for Yahweh rather than a title I take Yahweh to bear. Then, when I suffer at Yahweh’s hands, I can coherently (but, if Yahweh is God, falsely) believe that “God is not worthy of our worship”.

The second source of counter-examples I will consider are those where beliefs about the nature and activities of God differ so widely that we might think that a “God”-user, upon changing their beliefs, come to view their previous beliefs as pertaining to an entity now regarded as fictional. They might then think that they had previously failed to refer. But on WW, they would be mistaken. The critic of this view can argue that WW is mistaken because the beliefs of these characters about their own referential success or failure are better evidence than the considerations in favour of WW. Such cases would not play this dialectical function in non-theological contexts, however – in those other contexts, we simply accept that people can easily be mistaken about whether or not they successfully referred, or what they really referred to. Consider the infamous Jack the Ripper.<sup>355</sup> “Jack the Ripper”, at least according to Kripke, had its reference fixed by a definite description something like “whoever committed all the Whitechapel murders”. If the Whitechapel murders were perpetrated by a team of copycats, “Jack the Ripper” failed to refer to any of them. Suppose in that world our detective discovers the truth: he will realize that he had been referring to a fictional character all along. But if the Whitechapel murders were perpetrated by one man, then the detective is referring to that man. And he will have been referring to that man even if he erroneously comes to believe that the murders

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<sup>354</sup> See Donnellan’s case of the usurper whom both loyalists and traitors call ‘the King’ despite both sides knowing he is a usurper (1966, 290-1).

<sup>355</sup> Kripke 1980, 79 and 94.

were committed by a team of copycats. This detective is like our Christian who converts to, let's say, neo-pagan polytheism. After her conversion she believes she failed to refer to God, since (she believes) there is no being worthy of her worship. But if God exists, she successfully referred to God whatever she believes about God's fictional status before her apostasy. Because people can so easily be mistaken about the success (or direction) of their reference, the attitudes of characters in these cases about their own referential success are not a good reason to reject the Worship-Worthiness view.

## 6.3 From The Worship-Worthiness View to Perfect Being Descriptivism

We cannot yet conclude that "God" refers to a morally unsurpassable, omnipotent agent just because it refers to "whatever is worthy of our worship". In the road from the Worship-Worthiness view to the claim that "God"-users all refer to a perfect being, there are two forks, generating six possibilities. Only on four of those six possibilities will the perfect being be worthy of worship for all "God"-users. On the one hand there is the question of whether the perfect being exists. On the other, there is the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' worthiness of worship. If "God" means "whoever is objectively worthy of our worship", then the perfect being will only be picked out by "God" if He exists and is the only perfect being. If "God" means "whoever is subjectively worthy of our worship", then what matters is not whether the perfect being actually exists, but whether agents subjectively ought to worship Him, given their beliefs about His existence. I will consider the objective case first, since the subjective case is more complicated.

### 6.3.1 Objective and Subjective Desert

The distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' worthiness tracks the distinction I drew between objective and subjective absolute obligations in Chapter 4. If I am obliged to do such-and-such to so-and-so, then so-and-so deserves that I such-and-such him. In other words, he's worthy of my treating

him that way. If the converse is false, it is much harder to see what is at stake when we claim someone is “worthy” of something.<sup>356</sup> If someone is worthy of another’s worship, then that other is obliged to worship them.

If someone is objectively worthy of my worship, then, I am objectively obliged to worship them: whatever I might believe about who I am obliged to worship (and whether I have any worship obligations), they are the one who really deserves my worship. Because of my imperfect knowledge, however, I will have subjective worship obligations, which could be to someone whom I am not objectively obliged to worship. And whomever I have subjective worship obligations to, we can say is “subjectively worthy” of my worship. For example: suppose that Marduk is the best person there is. I am objectively obliged to worship Marduk, and Marduk is objectively worthy of my worship. But, being Scandinavian, I have never heard of Marduk. The best person I know about is Odin. So I am subjectively obliged to worship Odin, who is thereby subjectively worthy of my worship – even though he is only a fictional character, or, perhaps, a real person, quite impressive, but nothing like as excellent as Marduk.

The structure of subjective worship obligations is a little more complicated than this, because worship is a threshold obligation: for Gwiazda, the limit case of the obligation to praise excellent people.<sup>357</sup> Put loosely, while we are obliged to praise anyone with a degree of excellence, we are only obliged to

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<sup>356</sup> Perhaps there is another sense of “worthy of being  $\varphi$ -d” which tracks not another’s obligation to  $\varphi$ , but tracks, instead, another’s merely having a good reason to  $\varphi$ . For instance, my student might be worthy of a shiny sticker on their essay to congratulate them for writing well, but that doesn’t mean I’m obliged to give them one. I suggest that this is not the only sense “worthy” can have, or otherwise our many of our uses of it in both our ordinary moral, and our religious, linguistic systems would not carry the weight they do. If I failed to give that student the grade they deserved, we would think I had acted wrongly, not merely disdained to perform a supererogatory action: it was worthy of an “A” in the stronger sense of ‘worthy’. This stronger sense is the one we are concerned with here.

<sup>357</sup> That praiseworthiness is the most plausible ground for worthiness of worship is the upshot of the debate between Bayne and Nagasawa (2006, 2007), Crowe (2007) and Gwiazda (2011) and Danaher (2012) concerning what more fundamental attitudes worship could be analysed in terms of, which would explain why it is rational or obligatory.

worship the one who is most excellent. But this loose explanation of what it means for worship to be the limit case of praise needs refinement.

When we say that the (subjective) obligation to worship is a limit case of the (subjective) obligation to praise, we can mean one of three things. We might mean that, among the absolute obligations which would satisfy the *pro tanto* obligation to praise excellent people, the one which is our worship obligation is the one which takes as its object the being which is in fact best. This would be an odd candidate for an account of our subjective worship obligations, because it is ‘beyond our ken’ which of the targets of our praise obligation is in fact best.

We might instead mean that, among the absolute obligations which would satisfy our *pro tanto* obligation to praise, our worship obligation is to the one which we believe is best. This option raises the question of what we mean by ‘belief’ in relation to the credences which the Deontic Discourse takes.

Suppose that we are not thinking in terms of the Deontic Discourse, but asking, independently of it, what we mean by our ‘subjective’ worship obligation, since the distinction between subjective and objective obligations appears salient even outside of the stipulations of the Discourse. Here, whatever considerations persuaded us to identify the Discourse’s ‘subjective obligations’ with the action with the highest expected rightness, those same considerations should remain persuasive.

Rather than identifying our worship obligation with the praise-satisfying action whose object we think best with some arbitrary degree of confidence, we should identify our worship obligation with the praise-satisfying action which has the highest expected rightness, insofar as that rightness issues from its satisfaction of praise. This has the surprising consequence, initially, that the candidate who is subjectively worthy of our worship might not be the best person we are aware of. Rather, she could

be a person whose high excellence we are very confident about, while there are other candidates about whom we are certain are rather good, but ‘merely’ rather good; and still other candidates who are even more excellent, but about whose excellence, or even existence, we have grave doubts. But because of our confidence in her excellence, praising her bears higher expected rightness than praising any other; so our obligation to praise her will be our worship obligation.

### 6.3.2 What or Who is Objectively Worthy of our Worship?

Suppose that “whatever is worthy of our worship” is to be read as “whatever is objectively worthy of our worship”. Then there are three possibilities. The first is to follow Gwiazda’s understanding of ‘maximal excellence’, according to which one counts as maximally excellent, beyond the threshold of mere praise, only if one is not merely the most excellent thing there is, but also the most excellent thing there could be. To be worthy of worship one must be “infinite, perfect, and simple” so that worthiness is contingent on “incommensurable superiority”.<sup>358</sup> Then only the perfect being will be worthy of worship, and “God” will refer to Him. The second is to suppose that actually existing, but imperfect, people would be worthy of worship, if they were the best among the actually existing people. But because the perfect being exists, they aren’t, and He is – so “God” still refers to Him. The third possibility is the worst case scenario: suppose that it is sufficient to be the best actual being, and that the perfect being doesn’t exist. Then, some quite impressive person – Marduk, St Francis, Winston Churchill – could be objectively worthy of our worship because they just happen to be the most excellent person who actually exists, and just happen to be above the minimum threshold of excellence required.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Gwiazda 2001, 523.

<sup>359</sup> A fourth possibility which would drive wedges in between maximal excellence, worthiness of worship and the Anselmian Augury is if we take perfection to involve transcending the moral standards to which we hold agents below that threshold. The kind of ultimacy proper to His perfection might put the perfect being beyond these standards, rendering the Deontic Discourse invalid as a means of predicting His actions. I suggest that such accounts of ‘perfection’ make our evaluative terms, of which perfection is supposed to be the limit case, equivocal between the imperfect and the limit case. Alternatively, the Anselmian should claim that even if there is some coherent account of perfection according to which the perfect being is transcendent in this way, that being would not be perfect in a way that renders them worthy of worship.

All three options assume that worship takes, as its proper objects, people: so it is always a 'who' which is worthy of worship. This assumption might seem less plausible when we consider religions which use the theistic religious linguistic system, but which insist in some contexts that God is impersonal. The Anselmian can defend the assumption against such challenges by adverting to the personal language or imagery involved in such religions whenever worship is taking place: to worship *ipsum esse subsistens*, Christians contemplate the life of Jesus; when engaging in worship of Brahman, Hindus venerate murti.

#### 6.3.2.1 Gwiazda's Account: "Maximal Excellence" entails Perfection.

The first possibility can be defended by Gwiazda's account of the nature of maximal excellence, which we might find intuitive. According to this account, anything which is worthy of worship is worthy of the highest degree of praise. But only a maximally excellent being is worthy of that degree of praise, and he takes "maximally" to have a strong, modal sense: maximal excellence means being as excellent as anything can be, not merely as excellent as anything in fact is.<sup>360</sup> If Gwiazda is correct, the connection between worthiness of worship and Anselmian theism is easy to make. Only the perfect being is objectively worthy of our worship; if a person is perfect, they will intuitively be morally unsurpassable and omnipotent.

Here, it's worth addressing dissent regarding the soundness of perfect-being arguments for God's omnipotence.<sup>361</sup> Some might regard God as perfect, but His power limited in some way nevertheless. Yet however limited dissenters think God's power is, they can develop the Augury and its application

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<sup>360</sup> Gwiazda 2011, 523.

<sup>361</sup> Timpe (2013, 198-9) and Rogers (2000, 2) have argued that many theologians who demur from the judgment that God is omnipotent, such as 'process' theologians, do so not out of a programmatic objection to perfect being theology which would mean that "God" picked out something other than the perfect being in their mouths, but rather out of an objection to the inference from perfection to omnipotence, either by way of an axiological disagreement about the value of power or a disagreement about the viability of theodicies and defences which render God's omnipotence and known evil compatible.

to account for these limitations. Here is a suggestion: the weaker you regard God, the lower your satisfaction credences will be, since they will represent not only your doubt about whether you have described the created situation accurately, but also your doubt about whether God has the power to achieve his goals. Some sceptics about omnipotence might regard God's power as being restricted in clear ways by inviolable moral side-constraints, such as not overriding creatures' free choices; and then they can exclude, from the set of God's options, any putative divine actions which would violate such side constraints. This exclusion could be motivated by representing such side-constraints as *pro tanto* obligations which can only be satisfied to one or no degrees, and satisfying which nets an infinite amount of rightness.

6.3.2.2 The Leaner Account: "Maximal Excellence" entails being the single best actual person. If we think that someone can be maximally excellent, and hence objectively deserving of worship, just by being the best actual person whose excellence is above a certain threshold, then we will think that whether "God" refers to the perfect being depends on whether the perfect being exists. This opens up the second two possibilities.

If the perfect being does not exist, "God" might refer to an imperfect person who passes the absolute threshold of excellence, and happens to be better than any other actual person. In that case, God's omnipotence and impeccability will not be secured by the Worship-Worthiness view.

This 'actualist' option can also lead WW to fail in generating co-reference if there are multiple beings who are equally best, even if they are above the absolute standard of excellence which would lead us to call any of them 'the perfect being' were it alone. This is because the uniqueness thesis (about

worship) will mean none of these perfect beings would be worthy of worship. Anselmian theists can try to foreclose this possibility by offering arguments that an omnipotent being must be uniquely so.<sup>362</sup>

If, however, a unique morally unsurpassable omnipotent being does exist, it will be the referent of “God” according to objective desert of our worship if we regard power as an excellence. Even if we do not regard power itself as an excellence, an omnipotent being with perfect virtue will always be in a better position to act, and more reliable in its acting well, than any being of equal virtue but less power. It will have the best moral ‘track record’, and will be disposed to do more and better actions than any being of less power. Moreover, so long as we understand luck, and hence moral luck, as having to do with the possibility of things (results, circumstances, character, constitution, and causal antecedents to its actions) easily having been otherwise, a necessarily omnipotent, morally unsurpassable being will never be deserving of less praise because it ‘got lucky’. With the degree of knowledge an omnipotent being will have, it will never be undeserving of praise for satisfying its obligations due to satisfying them only thanks to resultant luck: it knows all the consequences of all its actions ‘before’ ‘choosing’ them. Since its omnipotence will give it the opportunity to act anywhere, and hence place it under absolute obligations consequent on its being able to act anywhere, it will not be subject to circumstantial luck: it could not have enjoyed worse circumstances than the ones in which it did the right thing. Although its character and constitution are out of its control, it could neither have had a better, nor a worse, character and constitution: it did not ‘get lucky’ with respect to who it is.<sup>363</sup> Even if we understand the perfect being as acting in time, causal antecedents to its actions will not make its praiseworthy actions luckier in a way which diminish its praiseworthiness, since causal antecedents can never ‘unfairly’ improve the scope of actions of an omnipotent agent.

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<sup>362</sup> As given, for example, by Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002, 168), Baillie and Hagan 2008, and, historically, Al Ghazali (1965) and Duns Scotus (1962, 90). See De Florio and Frigerio 2015 for recent criticism of their arguments.

<sup>363</sup> For the classical distinctions between resultant, circumstantial and constitutive and causal moral luck, see Nagel 1979.

### 6.3.3 Who is Subjectively Worthy of Worship?

When considering the distinction between subjective and objective desert, we had to consider what it meant to describe worship as the limit case of praise, and concluded that one's subjective worship obligation was not owed to the person who was in fact the most excellent, since then one's subjective worship obligation would not be discernible given just one's beliefs. Nor is one's worship obligation owed to the person one 'believes' is most excellent, since this is ambiguous with respect to different degrees of confidence we have about different candidates for our worship. So, I suggested,<sup>364</sup> our subjective worship obligation is owed to whomever praising would generate the most expected rightness.

If we take this route, it is easy to see how an omnipotent, morally unsurpassable being will be subjectively worthy of our worship. If praise obligations can come in degrees, depending on the excellence of the one owed praise, then the rightness of proper worship – of praising the perfect being – will be very high. If, for example, virtue and power do not have intrinsic maxima, then worshipping Him might be worth infinite<sup>365</sup> rightness if He exists. The rightness of praising the perfect being would then be significantly higher than that of praising any competitors. And this difference could 'swamp' the difference in credences we might have in the existence of imperfect beings and the perfect being. That is, the possible rightness of praising the perfect being would be so high that this action's expected rightness would still dominate that of alternative praising actions even if there are great differences between our credence in His existence and the existence of various otherwise impressive beings. If so, for anyone who had any credence in the perfect being's existence which was not negligibly low, praising Him would generate the highest degree of expected rightness, so that they would be subjectively obliged to worship Him. This would render Him subjectively worthy of worship for anyone

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<sup>364</sup> See the final paragraph of 6.3.1.

<sup>365</sup> Or suitably extraordinarily high, if we have excluded infinite rightnesses for actions as I proposed in Chapter 4.

who had any confidence in His existence – and for any group of such people, He would thereby be referred to by “God”.<sup>366</sup>

## 6.4 Conclusion

The Worship-Worthiness view, which defines “God” as “whoever is worthy of our worship”, dominates rival theories of the semantics of “God” in competition. Causal theories of reference, applied to God, struggle to ensure that reference is available to all the users of the term who appear capable of using it; when these theories are refined so as to introduce less semantic vulnerability, they struggle to permit co-reference between people who appear to be referring to the same thing when they discuss God with each other, or speak to Him alone, or in concert. An unprincipled descriptivist alternative risks restricting successful reference to a small minority of those who speak of and speak to “God”; and it cannot explain how the theistic religious linguistic system operates in important cases, those of deep disagreement about God’s nature. The Worship-Worthiness view, and its implications for the most basic facts about God’s nature, explains the perennial importance of theology and religion, and provides for an account of what unites religions whose practitioners speak of and to what they call “God”. When we refine the definition which the Worship-Worthiness view gives for “God” in various ways – “whoever is worthy of our worship” – we find that on most of them, a morally unsurpassable, omnipotent person will be worthy of our worship. The natural conclusion is that parties to theological and religious disagreements typically mean the same thing by “God”, and mean a perfect being in the sense the Augury requires for its accuracy.

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<sup>366</sup> This is a formalized version of an argument for religious engagement made in Creel 1993, 36-38.

# 7. Conclusion

Arguments that religious experience is not a good source of evidence can be summarized as a complaint about the absence of a rule-governed method for weighing that evidence. We can dispense with the objection that the phenomenal contents of religious experiences cannot be interpreted reliably as relying either on a hidden radical scepticism, or a hidden concern about epistemic circularity.

Then the objection is that the rules we have for weighing religious experiences are defective in various ways. What kind of defects were regarded as rendering religious experiences evidentially useless? The first three I put under the umbrella of the 'Bad Tests Objection' in Chapter 1.

Firstly, the rules do not clearly express how new evidence can rebut or undermine old beliefs. The method I propose meets this standard by describing principles for how the evidence accrued from religious experiences should lead one to change one's attitudes to old beliefs – see section 5.4 for an explicit example with respect to revising normative and contextual moral beliefs. If a new religious experience testifies to the falsehood of an old theological belief, and is accorded significant evidential weight by applying the Anselmian Augury to its Divine Disclosure, then agents will be bound to alter their attitudes to those old beliefs to render their beliefs and the experience coherent.

Secondly, critics complain that traditional rules use binary pass-or-fail tests, which appeal to moral beliefs without stating how these are themselves to be weighed against each other. The method I propose meets both of these standards. Expressing one's moral beliefs via the Deontic Discourse allows one to reflect more faithfully on their differing strengths and practical significance. The Augury mandates degreed, rather than binary, attitudes to religious experiences and D-beliefs given those moral beliefs.

Thirdly, critics have found unclear the relationship between the traditional rules and the veridicality of the experiences they validate, or truth of the beliefs they propose experiences as good support for.

In some cases this is simply because the rules take for granted other basic or derived theological beliefs the evidential basis for which is controversial outside of some confession. In this case rejection of these rules amounts to one of the next two complaints, under the 'Circularity Objection'.

In some cases this is because the rules take for granted some metaphysical or moral presuppositions which the critic does not share. While it has been predictably impossible for me to design a framework of rules which makes no metaphysical or moral presuppositions, I hope that I have taken as few hostages to sceptical fortune as possible. The Deontic Discourse is designed to make no commitments about what is valuable or right, or how value and permission are structured. The only undefended assumption is that there are no absolute prohibitions or proscriptions which dominate all others (see section 4.3.4.2). In section 5.3 I defend the assumption that truth is intrinsically valuable, and state what we should do if we think that the value of any given truth depends on the content of its proposition. Similarly, I defend in Chapter 6 the assumption that God is an omnipotent, maximally virtuous person – or at least should be regarded as such in a sufficiently realistic analogous sense to legitimate the Anselmian Augury. There I state which assumptions lie behind the alternative view.

In some cases it is insisted that some feature of God's nature means that no rules could ever allow us to assess religious experiences for veridicality. The best proof of possibility is actuality. If Divine Disclosures are an acceptable event-propositional representation of religious experiences, and the Deontic Discourse is an acceptable representation of our moral beliefs, and God is the perfect being, then the Anselmian Augury provides for rules that allow us to assess religious experiences for veridicality.

This takes us to two alleged defects of traditional rules which I labelled instances of the 'Circularity Objection'.

Fourthly, the criticized traditional rules have authority only from within a confessional tradition, so that they do not speak to the most interesting situations in which we use religious experiences as evidence – deep inter-confessional disagreement.

Fifthly, we can easily augment such rules with topic-neutral rules about responding to peer disagreement so that they can be used to speak to inter-confessional disagreement. When we do, we find that scepticism is the appropriate response. Of course, any kind of evidence which typically supports beliefs which should not be rationally held, cannot be a good source of evidence.

The rules I propose explicitly address these situations. Moreover, since they do so in a way which is sensitive to the particular features of religious-experiential evidence – its purported nature as divine communication to creatures – they are preferable to the topic-neutral rules for peer disagreement. We saw in Chapter 3 that those topic-neutral rules either asked parties to defer to topic-specific rules, or had nothing to recommend them but the absence of such topic-specific rules.

The framework I have proposed is no doubt vulnerable to accusations of a mismatch between its ideal representations of experiential evidence, beliefs of different kinds, and the relationship between different forms of evidence and beliefs – and the more complicated reality of theology as it is practiced, religious and moral belief as it is formed and held, and religious experience as it is enjoyed, reflected on and survived. Nevertheless, I hope that I have described it in enough detail that those interested in refining the fit between ideal representation and complicated reality can see where to begin.

Alternatively, critics of my framework might complain that adopting the Outsider Outlook is inappropriate in many contexts – typically, in cases of intra-religious, but inter-denominational, or even intra-denominational, disagreement. It may also be inappropriate when we have strong practical motivations for subordinating the pursuit of theological truth, to some extent, to other goals which theological belief bears on. Perhaps most obviously, applying the Anselmian Augury to Divine Disclosures will typically generate rather low evidential force for religious experiences due to dwindling probabilities as products of extensive multiplications; and hence rather low values for D-beliefs which derive most of their epistemic support from those experiences. But many of these D-beliefs might be central to the religious life well-lived. I think that the framework can accommodate these concerns. Perhaps it simply helps us to see more clearly the role played by practical rationality in shoring up commitment to many religious beliefs; or encourages us to play down the proportion of support for theological beliefs we are ready to attribute to religious experience as opposed to prior beliefs or testimony.

At the very least, describing an idealized confession-neutral framework of rules defeats the most robust impossibility claims made by religious sceptics – that religious experience as evidence, and theology as a discipline, cannot even in principle be rule-governed in the way that would make beliefs about God accountable when they go beyond natural theology. The existence of a framework like mine shifts the burden of proof onto the sceptic to show that it is seriously inadequate.

Quite apart from considering the framework as a means of responding to scepticism about religious experiences, it should be of value in advancing reflection within analytic theology and philosophy of religion on how theology does, and ought to, work. Understood as the discipline whereby we attempt to discover more, and test present putative discoveries, about God's nature, character and intentions, theology is a science. A hallmark of development of a science is increased understanding of how and

why it discovers the truth in its domain, as well as the discovery of truth within its domain. The Anselmian Augury can be applied to assess a varied range of pieces of evidence for God's existence and about God's nature in natural theology, which routinely consists in examining how the world we know conforms to the predictive implications of theism. The Anselmian Augury simply enables more precision in ascertaining the predictive implications of theism than the binary practices of deductive 'proofs' for God's existence and the ball-parked figures familiar from Swinburne's and his successors' probabilistic translations of those proofs in the twentieth century. But the application of the Anselmian Augury to Divine Disclosures, along with potential modifications of the highly generic Divine Disclosure form to match different kinds of special divine action familiar to theologians, allows us to expand the reach of formal, probabilistic reasoning from natural theology into revealed theology if only we are willing to represent putative instances of revelation in forms to which the Augury can be applied. If the instance of revelation which supports a revealed truth can be represented in a way which allows us to predict the likelihood it in fact occurred, given extra-confessional moral prior beliefs, then we can assess that revelation against competitors.

Finally, it is perhaps worth stressing the ways in which the framework is traditional. Moral fruits tests have been a staple part of traditional mystical practices – that is, frameworks of rules for assessing the veridicality of religious experiences. This thesis offers nothing fundamentally innovative: it spells out in detail why these tests are relevant to a religious experience's veridicality, given theism. It describes such a test in terms which rely on fewer (if any) substantive moral assumptions, and which make it explicit how uncertainty about moral judgments tracks into uncertainty about religious experiences and beliefs. Finally, it gives a set of rules which are independent of the practical, spiritual concerns of the social settings where traditional moral fruits tests are used, and so which are focussed on the theological significance of religious experiences, screening off their practical, spiritual significance.

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