

Liam Small (1807018)

MA Philosophy

Dissertation

Title:

Do the accounts of religious experience justify theistic belief?

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name..Liam Small

Date 24/09/2022

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MA Philosophy

Name Liam Small

Date 24/09/2022

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name Liam Small

Date 24/09/2022

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name Liam Small

Date 24/09/2022

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed:

Date:

Section 1

1. Accounts of religious experience

The accounts of religious experience reported by those who undergo a claimed encounter with the divine or supernatural, report a range of phenomena that require classification in order that we might distinguish between accounts of the supernatural and other non-supernatural experiences. This distinction is requisite for the purpose of examining the quality and content of human experiences, and the degree to which the varieties of human experience are epistemologically authoritative. In other words, what is it about the content of the accounts of religious experience which make them qualitatively different from other truth-claims formed by experience? Furthermore, why are these accounts frequently dismissed as incredulous by philosophers who give epistemic weight to human experience more generally?

Defining religious experience:

Religious experience can be defined as events or phenomenon that defy the laws of nature or are incompatible with a materialist metaphysic. This definition includes, but is not restricted to, the following: apparitions of the deceased or visitations from supernatural beings; disembodied voices; miracles; near-death experiences; mystical experiences; prophecy and paranormal activity. Religious experiences which appear to defy the laws of nature are characterised by what appears to be the suspension of, or intervention in, what is currently recognised to be scientifically possible i.e. consistent with the laws of nature.

It is possible that some religious experiences can be accepted as real events but be given a naturalistic explanation. For example, it may be possible to explain the sensations from what has been attributed to a mystical experience with reference to brain activity or another physiological phenomenon. *"It is alleged that founders of religions and saints have nearly always had certain neuropathic symptoms or certain bodily weaknesses"* (Broad, p.113). However, one will later contend that such naturalistic aetiology is not antithetical to a religious one.

A second type of experiential state, which is primarily experienced by those who have religious beliefs or new age practitioners (and others who would not fit either group) is a spiritual intuition or special awareness. This experience may be articulated as a sense of dependence, an awareness of the 'wholly other' or of something greater than the spatio-temporal world. These experiences do not necessarily defy the laws of nature but are incommensurate with a materialist metaphysic when the experient interprets them as evidence of the supernatural. Furthermore, this supernatural 'outlook' is arguably the result of inculcation into a non-naturalistic worldview, however, a significant minority of those who have had a religious experience have never engaged in religious activities (Argyle, 2009, p.12).

Furthermore, there are accounts of religious experience which fall into a third classification: ordinary experiences which are given a religious interpretation by the recipient. These experiences are natural events which have been interpreted as having supernatural origins or a special noetic quality, examples include human consciousness; moral intuition; recognising the 'hand of God' in a person's life; witnessing a loved one unexpectedly survive a terminal prognosis; interpreting the beauty of nature as the handiwork of God etc. (Attfield, 1975, p.336).

However, it is important to note that this study is not committed to the hypothesis that naturalistic or scientific explanations preclude or are mutually exclusive to the existence of God. Furthermore, one wishes to avoid any drift into the 'God of the gaps fallacy' whereby future scientific explanations could expunge the need for God. Instead, it is argued that if a divine being were to exist it would be reasonable to conclude that God operates with and through natural laws.

Parallels between religious experience and other experiences:

Religious experience has parallels with other forms of knowledge *by acquaintance* or *knowing of*; these forms of knowledge are dependent upon our sense-data and are formed through our experience of the external world (Russell, 1911, p. 108-128).

Knowledge attributed to acquaintance can be distinguished from practical (knowledge

how) and propositional knowledge (knowledge *that*). Practical knowledge is achieved from our knowledge of skills and the abilities to complete tasks e.g., to drive, whereas factual knowledge entails the assent to (or refutation of) propositions which make claims about the world e.g., a bachelor is an unmarried man.

Furthermore, it is potentially possible to identify all our collective forms of knowledge with knowledge of acquaintance. The knowledge of *how* is gained from our past experiences of attempts to complete activities and our knowledge of *that* is accrued from our experience of tangible and observable classes, in the aforementioned case, males and the state of being unmarried (Ayer, 1998, p.25).

In the locus of religious experience, it is arguably the case that one's experience of *knowing of* has parallels to ordinary experiences of *knowing of*, such as familiarity with a person, or with sensations (taste, smell and touch). This similarity can be located in the subjectivity of religious experiences and other forms of *knowing of*, neither of which can be easily objectively verified or externally tested: the truth-claims that result from them are dependent upon the subject's testimony. For example, the claim that one's partner is loving is empirically unverifiable and dependent upon the subjective experiences of those within the relationship. Likewise, the claim that '*God is present in my life*' is a subjective experience of the one who makes such a claim.

As Davis (1999, p.80) comments:

our beliefs about other humans qua persons are things for which we cannot give grounds and which we often cannot articulate; and they seem to be generated directly by personal encounters—yet we accept them uncontroversially as knowledge. Many experiences of God are apparent personal encounters, and subjects should not therefore be required to give grounds for their belief in God or to describe the object of their experiences before they can be said to 'know' God.

However, one might object to this comparison on the basis that in the case of relationships between two humans, there is the possibility of the external verification of the object-subject's existence. This objection would need to resist the counterclaim that this external verification is reliant upon the experiences of others, much like the way in which those who have had a religious experience are supported by other people's

accounts of religious experience. Here one would need to establish why corroboration can be relied upon in the case of natural events but not the supernatural.

The corroboration available in the case of the loving partner does, however, include a public dimension – witnesses can check the behaviour and speech of the partner in a shared way. This is not available in the case of religious experiences where the experiencers' encounters occur individually. However, corporate religious experiences may well provide corroboration which benefits from the public nature of such experiences. When we compare the case of a large group of people who share an apparition of a deceased saint, for example, with that of a large group of people who witness a non-supernatural event, one is inclined to accept the former and reject the latter. A possible reason for this is the background beliefs of the culture in which perceptual claims are made. Reports of religious experience may be readily accepted in a society which has a religious inculcation and rejected in those which are secular.

Perhaps a distinction can be established by distinguishing between those experiences that *all* individuals have and those which are only experienced by a sub-section of humanity. Alston (1987) argues that whereas “[n]ormal adult human beings” (p.147) are able to use perceptual practice, religious experience is only enjoyed by a small section of the population. However, this observation does not negate the fact that conclusions drawn from non-religious perceptual practice vary, some conclusions are veridical and others non-reliable, therefore perceptual practice *in and of itself* is not epistemically infallible. Furthermore, this claim arguably *begs the question*; it is assumed *a priori* that religious perceptual practice is distinct from sense-perception. It could be the case that religious experience is simply one of the many conclusions that can be drawn from standard perceptual practice. Alston (1987) maintains that non-religious perceptual practice also enjoys a culturally universal “*conceptual scheme*” (p. 147). However, this claim would be largely anthropological and presupposes a generalised phenomenology of human cultures both now and historically; such a claim is beyond the remit of philosophers.

If we accept the degree of corroboration required to justify our accounts of experience (especially the requirement that these experiences can be shared) a demanding threshold for *justified true belief* would result. This would risk engendering epistemic doubt about many of our commonly held beliefs, and universal doubt about those justified beliefs which are established through the accounts of experts, particularly experts in science and medicine.

However, one might argue that scientific 'experts' provide tangible pragmatic effects which evidence their status as such. The medical and technological advances which are not fully understood by non-experts do have an observable impact on people's day-to-day lives in a way that the proponents of religious experience do not. One must, however, recognise the counter argument that religious experience results in observable changes in people's moral outlook, health, and relationships. Argyle (2000, p.244), for example, presents empirical support for a correlation between religiosity and increased life-expectancy, lower suicide rates and altruism. Such evidence does not, however, negate a sociological or naturalistic explanation for the fecundity of religious experience.

Furthermore, it is also the case that religious experience (*knowledge of*) can also inform other forms of knowledge. For example, having undergone a religious experience one might then acquire the knowledge of *how* to induce another similar experience or arrive at the propositional belief that *God exists*, we are yet to explore whether or not this propositional belief arising from religious experience is *justified*. It is not within the remit of this work to discuss whether or not the belief that one can induce a religious experience is justified.

Moreover, it is important to note that religious beliefs, like all beliefs, are formed by other – including non-religious – beliefs; religious experience does not operate within a vacuum of belief in the way that might be proposed by foundationalism. Proudfoot (1977, p. 344), notes the problems with interpreting experience as an infallible conduit of the divine and immune from the contamination of background beliefs:

It is not a space or range of events that transcends language, or that stands outside of the activities of the mind in thought and judgment. It is misleading to speak of experience as if it denoted a locus to which one could appeal in order to confirm or infirm particular propositions. There can be no access to any realm of experience that is not shaped by the forms and categories of the mind.

Proudfoot (1977) rightly rejects the notion that religious experience can be an unmediated and pre-linguistic, devoid of prior beliefs (p. 344). However, this is true of all beliefs other than basic axioms, such as 'I think', and it would be self-defeating if the theist attempted to claim otherwise. It would appear self-defeating because one could not refute the atheist's claim to have foundationally not experienced God and thus provide an equiplausible rebuttal of the argument from religious experience.

However, it is possible that some beliefs are accepted intuitively, these beliefs can neither be supported nor inferred from other background beliefs. Beliefs, such as '*I am a thinking thing*', '*I have memories*' or '*there is a real external world*' are difficult to support with recourse to background beliefs because any reference to such background beliefs appears circular, for example to posit '*I have memories because I have had other experiences of memories*' provides no external justification for the experience in question, because it relies upon experiences of the same kind to justify memory, the validity of which has not yet been justified.

Similarly, beliefs about personal identity and the objectivity of the external world are often defended in a way which *begs the question*. It could be reasonably claimed, at this stage, that religious belief can operate at this intuitive level, '*I experienced the presence of God*' operates through categories of the mind but may be impossible for the experient to articulate non-circular justification for. Thus, there may be some latitude for giving some experiences the status of non-mediated. These non-mediated experiences may lack the status of being *justified true beliefs* but be prerequisite for such justification to be possible. One possible candidate for an un-mediated belief is the commitment to the reliability of sense-experience.

Knowledge and justified belief

Attempts by religious apologists to frame the argument from religious experience are characterised by moving from *knowledge of*, in the form of religious experience, to *knowledge that* or 'propositional knowledge'. Discussions of the type and degree of knowledge arising from religious experience entails discussions of belief and justification.

The epistemological consensus supports the idea that *knowledge* entails *true belief* (Ayer, 1998, p. 20). For example, it would be generally held that one cannot have knowledge of a false proposition, for example, 'I *know* that pigs fly' would not be *true belief*. However, *true belief* often remains epistemically elusive as we may be unable to access the truth conditions which would be needed to ascertain whether or not our beliefs are true. We find ourselves in this position when considering the existence of God; God's existence is either metaphysically true or false but cannot be known decisively.

The standard for *propositional knowledge* is commonly considered to be *justified, true, belief* (Graham, 2019, p.111). Under this construal the proposition we assent to must be true, but it is also necessary that we *believe* and have *justified reasons* for believing that the proposition is true. Let us say someone reports perceiving an object, a cat for example, but believes this to be a hallucination, this would mean that that individual cannot *believe* the cat is situated in front of them, even if this happens to be the case. When applied to religious experience it would seem possible for an individual to report '*I have heard God speak to me*' and concurrently claim '*but I don't believe in God*' - although this belief is potentially unjustified. God, therefore, might exist and be the cause of a religious experience which does not give rise to belief. Therefore, religious experience in and of itself does not entail religious belief, however, I would argue that in such cases non-theism is unjustified.

We may also wish to distinguish between forms of belief: *general* (or weak) *belief* and *absolute belief* (or outright belief) (Ichikawa, Jenkins and Steup, 2018). A *general belief* might include claims about future events, such as: it was forecast correctly that it would rain today; it is forecast that it will rain tomorrow; '*I believe it will rain tomorrow*'. Whereas, *absolute belief* may be reserved for states of affairs that we are certain about - as far as is reasonably possible - such as 'I exist'. This belief conforms to our day-to-day sense perception, memory and accounts of others. Absolute beliefs operate in a way that it would

be *unreasonable* to not believe; a *true absolute belief* would entail *knowledge*. For the purpose of this study it will be argued that at present we cannot have *absolute belief* in God, neither can we have absolute belief in God's nonexistence. This is due to the fact that there is no compelling evidence for or against theism, and therefore neither position can be considered unreasonable. However, what will be argued is that those who have had a religious experience can, under certain conditions, unreasonably doubt the existence of God.

Justification denotes beliefs that arise from suitable reasons, suitable reasons are states of affairs that we would usually view as reasonable to confirm certain propositions. For example, we would say someone is justified in their belief that Charles III is King of England, if this proposition is corroborated by others, reported in the media and in public documents.

However, justification does not in and of itself entail truth. So, one might be justified in believing in God without having *knowledge* of God's existence. This essay will argue that there is *prima facie* justification for belief in God's existence when a religious experience is accepted as *reasonable evidence* (truth condition) for God's existence. Likewise, this belief will not be *absolute*, unless one has personally had a religious experience that one has, on balance, more reasons to believe than to doubt. Arguably, this also applies to other areas of knowledge that one does not have direct access to.

One must take for granted that experience is the best candidate for justified belief. This is because there is no alternative source of appropriate data - with the exception of justified beliefs which are established *a priori* - to form human knowledge. Whilst recognising that experience is often unreliable, this observation does not entail that we accept global scepticism or seek to invent a *World of the Forms* to anchor our epistemology. Moreover, sense perception is a pragmatic prerequisite for humans to function, whereas solipsism is a practical impossibility (Davis, 1999, p. 68)

Internalists maintain that beliefs are justified if one has access to the subjective (internal) reasons for those beliefs, for example '*I experience pain*' therefore '*I am in pain*'; or '*I see a computer screen*' therefore '*a computer exists*'. Internalist justification claims that if a belief is supported by the evidence *available* to an individual, it is justified (Bonjour, 2002, p.238).

"[Internalism] arises when I ask simply whether or not I have good reasons for thinking that my various beliefs are true" (Bonjour, 2002 p.237). Therefore, the standard of internal justification can be met through available evidence in religious experiences, such as *'I encountered God through an ineffable union with the divine'* or *'I hear God speak to me'*. This construal of justification would maintain that one who has had a religious experience cannot deny the existence of God, unless they have access to countervailing evidence. Some may find this objectionable and want to argue that one could rationally claim *'I have seen God, but don't believe in Him'* whilst not having access to the reasons for this. However, cases of this type are *prima facie* unjustified.

However, in accepting internalism, one would need to accept that in a hypothetical scenario where beliefs arose from a universal simulation; these beliefs would be justified on the available evidence. Furthermore, internalism remains vulnerable to the contention that the 'reasons' one has access to are bad reasons. One, however, cannot expect omniscience from human subjects and individuals can only choose beliefs from the reasons they have available to them. It will be argued that religious experience can be a *good reason* for belief in God.

Moreover, externalists maintain that access to evidence or reasons is not enough, instead one needs access to *reliable processes for justification* (Bonjour, 2002, p244-245). So, the claim *'I heard God speak to me'* is not sufficient – hearing a voice could be the product of a hallucination, for example. However, externalists only require that our processes be *usually reliable for justification*. Religious experience could be considered reliable by virtue of the fact that our experiences are for the most part reliable. Alternatively, religious experiences could be deemed unreliable because they are considered the product of physiological or psychological phenomenon. The externalist is required to concede that *'I believe in God, because I have experienced Him'* is justified if one's processes are reliable.

Furthermore, for the externalist God's objective existence would entail the validity of religious experience and therefore it is at least theoretically possible for a religious experience to be a reliable process for externalist justification. In fact, reliabilism does not require that a believer has access to the *reasons* their belief is justified for it to be justified, it only requires that the belief results from an accurate process (Bonjour, 200, p.245).

The externalist would also need to acknowledge that claims such as 'I am not a brain in a vat' or 'the external world exists objectively' are of the same status as 'God exists' because we cannot objectively check the reliability of our processes of justification or know that our processes are reliable.

Reliabilist externalists favour those processes which more often than not give accurate results. Sense experience and testimony usually produce reliable results and therefore religious experience should be considered as a reliable process when it is not divorced from other forms of perceptual practice. However, this entails that religious perception is subject to the same reliability checks as other perceptual claims, it will be argued that corroboration is one check which can be met.

What is experience?

The epistemic nature and value of experience has been contested by philosophers; it is apposite for the purpose of this study to seek a working definition of experience.

Rationalists, in their appeal to thought, valued the experience of "*[s]eeing that a proposition is clearly and distinctly true*" (Yandell, 1974, pg. 175). Thus, attempts were deployed to locate the experiential argument for God's existence within the experience of human consciousness, most notably formulated by Descartes ontological argument through which he constructed his foundationalist basis for knowledge of the external world. The empiricists, however, built their epistemology on experience of the external world, from which Berkeley notoriously posited the existence of the divine observer to maintain the existence of matter *ad infinitum*.

Yandell (1974) offers a useful definition of experience for the purpose of analysing arguments from religious experience. Experience entails the subject (someone) having an experience of *something*; the experiencing of *something* is to be held as distinct from the *something* (object) *in and of itself*. A subject can be said to have had an experience of *something*, if that *something* has affected the subject's experience. For example, my laptop can be said to exist as an object affecting my experience of the datum processed by my mind to create sense-impressions of a laptop. However, whilst Yandell (1974) maintains that this account of experience satisfies the possibility of experiencing God, it does not adequately satisfy the experiences of '*being in pain*', which is not object dependent, or

nirvana – which denotes the loss of *self* as a subject of experience. Perhaps, however, for some religious believers, faith functions something like the experience of pain, an intuitive awareness or feeling that has no basis in external objects or reasoned argument. For these believers, faith potentially functions as a *basic belief* in a way not dissimilar to the Cartesian cogito. This belief is wedded to the background belief in the epistemic reliability of intuition. Intuition, however, fails to provide *reasons* for one's epistemic commitments.

The argument from religious experience will need to avoid any attempt at an ad hoc foundationalism, whereby a religious experience is considered to be the foundation of knowledge and immune from scrutiny. Taking experience seriously as a source of knowledge requires that religious experience should be subject to checks from other experiences. Religious experience would come up against the problem of evil and the absence of religious experience, obstacles which themselves are rooted in human experience.

Yandell (1974) concludes that a subject's experience meets the conditions of the claim 'God exists' if the subject believes their experience to be of God, and if their experience is affected by God, then the claim 'God exists' is true. There is *prima facie* evidence for the existence of God, if there is no counterevidence for God's existence or evidence (of equal weight) that an experience of God has a *correct* alternative explanation (Yandell, 1974, p.180-181). However, Yandell (1974) concludes that such naturalistic evidence of equal weight can be found. It is arguably the case that if one does not have access to this counter evidence one has internalist justified belief in God.

Yandell (1974) continues to argue that no experience is *self-authenticating* because no experience can provide incorrigible evidence for truth-claims; and no experience is *self-interpreting* because experiences can be false evidence for belief (p.183). This definition usefully rules out the kind of foundationalist experience of God which establishes the existence of God non-inferentially or an experience of God that is not subject to truth conditions.

For the purpose of this study, 'experience of God' will be taken to mean that a recipient of religious experience has (purportedly) been affected by the supernatural, which is causally responsible for the sense-impressions which are interpreted as God's self-revelation.

However, this essay will not primarily seek to support the claim that these experiences should be considered non-inferential and instead subject these experiences to scrutiny. Thus, *"[r]eligious beliefs [...] are subject to much the same criteria as are any other beliefs and hypotheses"* (Proudfoot, 1977, p.344). This process will focus on ascertaining whether or not religious experience can lead to *justified belief* in God. As noted above, the *truth condition* of such beliefs is impossible to judge without eschatological verification.

The role of perception

The role of sense-perception in the formation of justified belief - or more ordinarily-common-sense belief, is to confirm the veracity of experiences when they conform to certain criteria. Perceptions are usually considered reliable if they cohere, roughly, with other sense-experiences. For example, it would be expected that what we see is congruent with what we touch and smell. Non-religious perceptions are judged by their fitness for conforming to *"the structure and normal expectations of a public world of material objects with positions in space and enduring through time"* (Attfield, 1975, p.337).

Religious experience appears to be in conflict with the 'normal expectations' of the physical world when accounts defy the laws of nature. However, new scientific discoveries would also come into conflict with these prior expectations. It would exclude much of intellectual progress if we required experiences to conform to what has gone before.

However, it is arguably the case that the perceptions reported by those who claim to have had a religious experience can also be verified in a way not dissimilar to the way in which experiences are corroborated in a secular paradigm. Despite the variety in reports of religious experience, both phenomenologically and doctrinally, there is arguably a common core to the content of what has been reported. Furthermore, the volume of experiences and diversity of experiences throughout history provide corroboration in a way which has parallels with the criteria of non-religious perception (Attfield, 1975, p.337).

The allegation that religious experience as a type is unveridical amounts to the claim that not a single instance of the myriad religious experiences of humankind is veridical, that is to say, all these experiences are totally delusory (Kwan, 2006, p.643).

Kwan's (2006) claim that we cannot dismiss religious experience is analogous to a situation where a vast number of the population had hallucinations with a common core - common features which could be compared with other experiences of such experiences once they had regained their day-to-day faculties. Let us imagine that the common feature of these hallucinations revealed a metaphysic which was compatible with the world of ordinary sense-experience (causation, motion, contingency, personal identity etc.), appeared to transform the lives of the recipients, and provided moral motivation to those that received them. Furthermore, academic philosophers developed cogent arguments for the fundamental metaphysical content of these hallucinations. At what point would those people who had not had such experiences begin to doubt their incredulity? Let us imagine that over time more people than not had such experiences. It would surely at this point indicate that there was some degree of evidence to be found in the experiences and that those who had had them held their beliefs reasonably and had achieved an internalist justification for them, even if they were no truth to them.

Kelly (2011, p.141) makes a similar argument in his attempt to rehabilitate the epistemic value of common consent:

The fact that a proposition is widely believed can constitute strong evidence that that proposition is true, even if there would be no evidence that it is true in the absence of its being believed.

The social dimension of our belief means that what we 'know' is often formed by the majority view. Whilst it may be true that the majority of the population have accepted a false proposition, it is at least part of the process of arriving at a reasonable belief to consult the dominant belief system – this is especially the case when one does not have access to the available evidence.

In fact, it appears that this is true of many of our reasonably held beliefs. We hold beliefs about historical matters, political and social events because they are the social consensus. When common consent is applied to the global population, it is clear that the argument benefits belief in the supernatural over materialism. Moreover, common consent is often the

basis on which we check sense-perception. If the majority maintain that they perceive an object to be round rather than flat, the balance of probability sides with the former view.

Those beliefs that come to us from a specialist minority share an interesting asymmetry with the common consent argument. Scientific knowledge is assented to on the testimony of a specialised minority of the global population, based on evidence that will never be fully accessible to the general population. It would be counter-intuitive to maintain that the general population lack justified belief in scientific propositions. Intuitively, it would appear that when a majority have access to evidence - as in the case of religious experience - that is not available to the minority; the testimony of the majority would be reasonable justification for those not privy to it.

A problem the argument from religious experience comes up against is the potential that in the future more and more people will not have any experience of the supernatural. If this were to obtain, one could argue that any argument from 'common consent' is obsolete.

Now, within a particular report of divine apprehension there may be specific reasons to designate the account as delusory and fanciful, whereby a psychological explanation might be more compelling. It is not, however, reasonable to conclude that the whole phenomenon of religious apprehension should be dismissed as incredulous. Likewise, it would be illogical to move from instances of failure in material sense-perception (optical illusions, dreams, hallucinations etc.) to global scepticism. The illogic in global scepticism is mirrored in the attempt to dismiss the totality of divine apprehension (Attfield, 1975, p.337-338).

The argument from religious experience draws parallels with the argument against global scepticism. Whilst there may be no *"logical absurdity"* in the claim that the world of appearance is an illusion and that *"the whole of life is a dream"*, the simplest hypothesis is that there are real physical objects *"whose action on us causes sensation"* (Russell, 1998, p.297). The argument for the objectivity of the external world rests on the intuitive claim that it is more likely that our sense-impressions are veridical than them being the result of an all-consuming simulation. However, any formal attempt to defend sense-experience becomes circular. Our readiness to accept sense-perception, may lead us to conclude that the entirety of religious experience cannot be dismissed as an illusion because such a

hypothesis is the least economical one. The simplest hypothesis is that there is some real causal agent of religious experience.

Attfield (1975) draws upon the common-sense belief that sense-perception is veridical to support the argument from religious experience. It is generally held that the material world exists objectively and that our sense-data is a reliable source of knowledge as to how objects exist in and of themselves, albeit through the conduit of consciousness and the external conditions (mass, light, heat etc.) which make sense-perception possible. It is taken for granted that there is a distinction to be made between *what is perceived* and *objects in and of themselves*. It is here that we can make room for the multiplicity of perceptions of the divine. The totality of God's objective existence may remain hidden from what can be accessed by the senses, nevertheless intimations of the divine, however faintly, reveal the object of perception (Attfield, 1975, p.340).

One may be inclined to raise the issue of failed perception, however, common-sense indicates that this should not be the presumption of our experiences, similarly bogus religious experiences should not be considered to nullify the totality of religious experience.

The multiplicity of religious experiences and the beliefs that arise from them

The range and diversity of religious experiences is reflected in the multiplicity of the beliefs and truth claims that arise from them. For many non-theists, the multiplicity of both religious experience and belief undermines the credulity of the accounts of religious experience and their concomitant religious doctrines.

Furthermore, the multiplicity and incompatibility of religious doctrines similarly raise questions about which beliefs arising from religious experience are philosophically pertinent. Surveying religious claims, we can demarcate them accordingly: religious-metaphysical claims, for example, '*God exists*'; anthropological claims for example, '*humans share in God's nature*'; ethical claims, for example, '*pre-marital sex is forbidden*' and theological claims, for example, '*God is triune*'. The first category of claims is prima facie philosophically pertinent on the basis that it can be subject to inductive and deductive

reasoning. Religious anthropological, ethical, and theological claims are philosophically unrelated on the basis that they are dependent upon particular instantiations of divine revelation, and thus are only philosophically pertinent insofar as they share in common the claim to have encountered the divine through special revelation (Yandell, 1974, pg.174-175).

A broad typification for the purposes of philosophical argument:

It is, however, important to clarify the kind of religious-metaphysical claims arising from religious experience that will be relevant to this study. Philosophers of religion have been invariably preoccupied with arguments concerning the God of classical theism; generally attributed the 'necessary' characteristics of omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence in such discussions. This preoccupation may represent the tendency of anti-theists to discredit the possible co-existence of such attributes in an attempt to give weight to their own metaphysical sympathies. In the context of the debate concerning arguments from religious experience, this may be an attempt to locate the God of classical theism beyond that which can be available to human experience and to invalidate such experiences from the outset. The latter attempt fails to recognise the distinction to be made between the temporal comprehension of eternity and the encounter of the finite with a being who *is* eternal.

Additionally, this study wishes to broaden the definition of religious experience to experiences that do not only report the God of classical theism. Partly to avoid the pitfall of *a priori* excluding any phenomena which do not conform to a predetermined definition of God and to give appropriate epistemological consideration to the totality of human experience. 'God' in this discussion will be commensurate with religious experiences of the supernatural, such as Nirvana, ultimate reality or the paranormal by virtue of the fact that these denote religious-metaphysical claims. The competing claims objection will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this study.

Religious-metaphysical claims therefore must be distinguished from naturalist-metaphysical claims to operationalise the question of God's existence. Religious-metaphysical claims inherently entail a being or entity of maximal greatness, self-aware (or rational) and in some

way responsible for the ordering (morally or causally) of the universe. One or more of these characteristics is enough to distinguish the religious-metaphysical from the domain of the natural sciences.

A formal argument from religious experience:

P1. Religious experiences are reported by many subjects

P2. Religious experiences are a specific type of perceptual experience

P3. Perceptual experiences are reliable processes for justified belief

Conclusion: religious experiences lead to justified belief in God

Why religious experience should be taken seriously:

If philosophers wish to give epistemic weight to experience, it would be prudent of them to take seriously the entirety of human experience of which religious experience is a subsidiary experience. However, this requires that other problematic experiences are also given such treatment, hallucinations are one such problem. However, hallucinations arguably lack a common core and do not provide an explanatory metaphysic for the existence of the world and our place in it. Those who experience hallucinations are usually able to distinguish these experiences from their ordinary perception and do not report them as noetically informative experiences when they are not undergoing them.

Corresponding to normal human confidence in perception it may be reasonable to claim that there is a conviction religious men (sic) have as part of their commonsense, that their experience is in general veridical and that they only need to reconsider their stance if weighty and irrefutable arguments can be brought against it (Attfield, 1975, p.337).

One problem with this claim is the non-theist's objection that their own common-sense perception leads them to conclude that God does not exist and that they might only reconsider their conviction if considerable arguments are levelled against their common-sense non-theism. It could plausibly be proposed that those who do not experience God's

providence or encounter the numinous in the mundane are equally justified by common-sense perception. Beyond sense perception, the non-theist can make recourse to rational arguments against theism, including the problem of evil.

At this point, it appears that both the nontheistic and theistic paradigms are aligned with our common-sense perception of the world, and both would need to resort to secondary arguments for their particular appeal to common-sense.

There are other claims, however, which may build up a cumulative case for the existence of God which help overcome '*weighty and irrefutable*' arguments against theism. Those which have a particular overlap with arguments from religious perception include moral arguments and the argument from consciousness.

One will need to address here the claim that religious experience is inherently part of human experience and that all people experience the divine, however faintly, in their lives. Candidates for such similar experiences could be aesthetic encounters or experiences of human vulnerability and dependence. This comparison can also be more clearly drawn between monotheistic belief and polytheistic and nontheistic belief systems. The theistic argument would develop along the lines that throughout human history, there has been quantitatively more sensibility to the divine – commensurate with common-sense perception – than there has been the perception of the absence of God. This would stray into an anthropological argument, however.

2. A survey of the accounts of religious experience pertinent to the focus of this study:

Supernatural experiences, that is experiences which are not compatible with a materialist metaphysic, vary greatly. For some people these experiences have no religious content whatsoever, either because they are not believed to originate from a *maximally great being* or they do not inform a religious belief system. Some examples which may fit this definition: UFO abductions and aliens; bodily possession; mediums; mythical creatures; ghosts etc.

There are other experiences which are especially extraordinary, experiences which are highly incongruent with our ordinary perception of the physical world. Jinks (2012) refers to these as “[c]ontact with weird entities that aren’t ghosts or spirits” (p.85) because the content of them is entirely otherworldly and lacks any appeal to an organised belief system, and for many people are deemed extremely bizarre, even for those who have reported them. Jinks (2012) discovered, for example, supernatural accounts of lake monsters, winged fairies and a “10-foot caterpillar slug” that he gives this designation (p.19).

The above experiences seemingly provide no evidential content for the God of classic theism or for that matter the Dharmic religions. Taken at face value these types of supernatural experiences offer little explanatory power in the way of an informative metaphysic. Furthermore, these accounts arguably lead to weaker justification for belief in the supernatural. They appear less reasonable on the grounds that they fail to conform to our ordinary sense-perception in the way that organised belief systems claim to. In addition, these experiences are more problematic because they lack any substantial shared content.

Whereas reports to have experienced a divine being, through mystical experiences or the actions of the supernatural i.e., miracles, seem to offer more credulity than the ‘weird entities’ because they tend to cohere more closely with ordinary sense-perception. The apparition of the Virgin Mary, for example, fits more closely with our experiences of persons located in time and space. Furthermore, religious experience is more likely to produce a systematic belief system which attempts to explain the origins of life, morality, and human destiny in a way that bizarre beings or extra-terrestrials do not.

However, this unsympathetic analysis is perhaps driven by a cultural bias and *a priori* commitment to perceptual expectations. If we are to take human experience, in particular, experience of the supernatural seriously such accounts need greater accommodation. This might be achieved by separating the lower and higher claims made as a result of supernatural experiences. Higher claims can be discerned in the core content of the experiences: to have encountered an entity or plane of existence which is beyond the material world. Lower or secondary claims include the referents and details of the entity encountered (size, shape, movement, personal attributes etc.) and the non-material dimension perceived. These secondary claims can be found in the world religions, new religious movements, and supernatural encounters.

If we accept that the higher claims indicate the common core of religious experience, we can accept that all such encounters build up a cumulative case for the object of such claims. Furthermore, if we accept that perception of the supernatural is partial and fallible one can adequately accommodate the incompatibility of these secondary claims. Thus, encounters with the supernatural and '*weird entities*' should form part of the argument from religious experience. This concession does leave problems for the exclusivist who wishes to retain the epistemic supremacy of their own tradition. However, the exclusivist cannot maintain the value of their own experiences and discredit others without undermining their argument for God's existence from religious experience.

Some might argue that such an assessment of religious experience is too sympathetic and that we fail to afford the same generosity to sense-perception. Why do we permit religious experience to lack uniformity when we do not permit this for sense-perception? However, on closer inspection this variation also obtains for the material world. Perceptual variation of objects occurs regularly. Objects appear to us as different shapes from different angles, their colour is affected by light and our reports of taste, texture and smell vary when we report on the same percept. Such variation in secondary qualities should not lead us to reasonably doubt the existence of the objects themselves. Divergence in perception tells us that sense-data can never be fully shared.

If we accept indirect realism as our best understanding of sense-perception and that our interaction with the world is mediated through representations, one may reasonably conclude that such a schema can be applied to religious perception. It would be expected that a being which is maximally great and is non-physical will enjoy a greater degree of perceptual variation than objects located in the spatiotemporal world. Thus, bizarre claims can be adequately accommodated into our argument from religious experience.

3. Philosophical arguments against justified belief in God from accounts of religious experience:

Naturalistic explanations

Atheistic apologists often argue that the accounts of religious experience can be explained away with reference to naturalistic causes. Naturalistic causes include psychological and sociological explanations as well as physiological factors, such as drugs, alcohol and physical illness.

One variant of this objection levelled at the argument from religious experience is the classic fallacy of affirming the consequent (Becker, 1971, p. 64). The fallacy of affirming the consequent is a rebuttal not only deployed at arguments from religious experience but also cosmological and design arguments. It is argued that the evidential force of religious experience can be accounted for naturalistically, and that a naturalistic hypothesis is just as possible or more likely to be the cause of a 'religious experience'. If 'q' is taken to be 'religious experience' and 'p' the conclusion 'God exists', the argument for religious experience claims that 'q' entails 'p'. However, the anti-theist objects that whilst 'p' would arguably entail 'q', there are other candidates for the causal explanation of 'q'. In other words, the formal argument for God's experience is invalid because one can always present an equally, albeit inconclusive, explanation for 'q' which is non-religious (Becker, 1971, pg. 64).

It is claimed by Yandell (1974) that in cases where two incompatible explanatory hypotheses are offered for a report of numinous experience, one which entails God as the origin of an experience and the alternative that the experience is *projection*, for example, when these hypotheses are equiplausible, the first hypothesis cannot be accepted as evidence for God (because it is not more convincing than the alternative hypothesis). However, Yandell (1974) maintains that God's self-revelation does not have more weight than alternative hypotheses and therefore remains *unjustified* (p.182). However, he fails to identify why the onus of proof should be on the supernatural explanation rather than the naturalistic one.

This discussion highlights the assumption that naturalistic and supernatural explanations are mutually exclusive. One could conceive of a religious experience as having both supernatural and naturalistic explanations without such explanations cancelling each other out. Whilst God could be the origin of a mystical experience, it could also be true that this experience is interpreted through the projection of the father figure, for example. Or the projection and desire of a father figure could precipitate an experience of God who exists objectively. Likewise, the *a priori* commitment to a naturalistic explanation arguably reflects

the tendency of the non-theist to “*bring in and to take for granted a dogma of metaphysical materialism*” (Attfield, 1975, p. 340). A cogent argument for atheism is yet to be established in favour of a general presumption of materialism. The theist who claims that religious experience is unmediated and foundational, as under the Plantingian construal, would be uncomfortable with the concession that naturalistic and supernatural explanations could co-exist.

Furthermore, it can be successfully argued that the Freudian objection itself lacks any empirical evidence. References to the subconscious id, wish fulfilment and repressed desire are more epistemologically elusive than the claims made by religious experiencers (Kwan, 2006, p. 652). Freudian explanations are especially vulnerable to being unfalsifiable, the fact people experience violent urges and that others do not both confirm Freudian psychoanalysis. Former cases give ‘evidence’ for the id and the latter ‘evidence’ for the superego.

Likewise, the claim that religious experiences are mental events does not preclude a religious explanation. Sense-experience, of a non-religious nature, can also be explained with reference to neural and psychological processes without this explanation threatening the ontological status of material objects (Kwan, 2006, p.654).

The metaphysical critique

A second objection to the argument from religious experience offers a metaphysical critique of the plausibility of an infinite being interacting with a finite world. Becker (1971) frames this argument in the following way:

a God who is a proper object of worship could not possibly be 'available' for the crass kind of empirical confirmation procedure the religious experiencer seems to want.
(Becker, 1971, pg. 65).

However, this objection fails to adhere to the common-sense lines of inquiry involved in the pursuit of knowledge. To deny the possibility of arguments for the existence of God because of an *a priori* understanding of a transcendent being - as incapable of communication with a temporal world – relies on the assumption of a restricted area of epistemological concern.

The scientific method, for example, is invariably concerned with discovering hypothetical entities that are not yet fully understood.

As Becker (1971) correctly claims:

[o]ne fails to see the reasonability of insisting that unless what one encounters or can infer corresponds in every detail to a given definition of God [...] then what one encounters or infers is irrelevant to the 'God question' (Becker, 1971, pg. 66).

Furthermore, this objection only stands when one is willing to accept a narrow definition of the divine nature. It assumes that God would be 'super-sensible' and therefore beyond empirical investigation. In an attempt to invalidate the existence of the supernatural, it only works to exclude a certain 'type' of God and remains innocuous to a God who is immanent to some degree (Becker, 1971, p. 66).

A concomitant argument to the metaphysical objection is the object-related challenge to religious experience. Accordingly, the object of divine apprehension is deemed entirely improbable on the basis of background experience. Thus, the religious percept is unlikely to have been present, occurred, or the reported state of affairs to have obtained. However, the potency of the subject's experience overrides such background evidence. Swinburne's (2004, p.312) analogy of unexpectedly spotting a friend across the road when all of one's *a priori* beliefs indicate that this state of affairs is improbable, demonstrates the importance of temporal evidence for overriding background evidence. If this were not the case all our present experience would be required to conform unequivocally to prior belief. However, background evidence may preclude the possibility of the object in question when the object defies logic, however, there is no logical contradiction in the existence of God.

Furthermore, as Davis (1999, p.134) notes:

the degree of improbability on background evidence required to defeat the combined perceptual claims of many witnesses is far greater than the degree of improbability required to defeat an individual perceptual claim. Since arguments from religious experience are based not on a single experience but on the testimony of a great many subjects.

Religious experiences are too rare (today)

Another objection to the argument from religious experience is the empirical recognition that for the majority of people today religious experience is absent from their life, thus giving greater empirical weight to those who report to have had no religious experience. Thus, making the claim '*God does not exist*' more plausible. However, "[i]t may be replied that the fact that some men are colour-blind, unappreciative and unaware of beauty or insensitive to moral claims does not necessarily invalidate the objectivity of these facets of the world of human life" (Attfeld, 1975 , p.339).

Furthermore, this argument is largely overstated. Sociologists have largely abandoned their commitment to the secularisation thesis. Non-theism is primarily restricted to the western world and the growth of new age movement has for the time being abated such a hypothesis.

As the sociologist of religion, Berger (1999, p. 4) notes:

what has in fact occurred is that, by and large, religious communities have survived, even flourished to the degree that they have not tried to adapt themselves to the alleged requirements of a secularised world [...] religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalisms have widely succeeded.

Additionally, this argument seems to pay little attention to the historical method. Our knowledge of historical events is dependent upon documented accounts of those who had experience of them, the fact that direct experiences are no longer available to us does not undermine the veracity of human history. Thus, a parallel argument can be applied to the argument from religious experience, if historical accounts of religious experience justify belief in the existence of God, it would be insignificant if such experiences were to disappear in the future.

Kwan (2006), develops this reply to the experience of the absence of God objection further. He maintains that the instance of a *positive experience* is more persuasive than a *negative experience*: the claim to have '*seen something*' is more persuasive than the claim to have '*not seen something*', and there is a greater onus of proof on the latter (Kwan, 2006 p. 650). The reason for this is due to the asymmetry of positive and negative metaphysical claims. If x claims to have seen p and y claims to have not seen p, we only need one veridical case of having seen p for it to be true. However, the claim not to have seen p requires that we have

access to all possible locations where p could exist. Thus, the negative claim '*I have not experienced God, therefore God does not exist*' lacks the strength of the claim '*I have experienced God, therefore God exists*'.

Furthermore, the causal relationship between the object of experience and the experient, in the case of a positive experience, only requires one causal chain. Whereas the negative experiential claim, that an object has not been experienced, requires access to an infinite series of possible causal chains. Thus, the negative experience is less probable than the claim to have not experienced the object in question (Kwan, 2006, p.650-651).

Logical gap objection

Bagger (1999) insists that it is necessary to "*disambiguate phenomenological immediacy from epistemic immediacy*" (pg. 5). The *logical gap objection* to the argument from religious experience hones in on the distinction between the subjective certitude (psychological certainty) of the experient and the ontological state of affairs posited by the recipient (Kwan, 2006, p.644). In other words the certainty of the religious believer is derived from the religious experience, but this certainty does not validate the existence of God.

However, the *logical gap objection* is also problematic for materialism. We infer from our psychological experience of objects that they exist objectively (independent of our sense impressions). It is therefore arbitrary to apply this objection to religious experience, but not to sense experience more generally. Furthermore, even if it were to obtain that religious experience were illusory, the logical gap objection would be a threat to non-religious sense-perception. In cases of optical illusions, for example, the certitude of the observer can be separated from the actual state of affairs, thus making sense experience vulnerable to the logical gap objection also.

Kwan (2006, p.644) comments:

A hallucination is exactly an unveridical sense experience which nevertheless produces subjective conviction. If the certitude/certainty distinction in itself threatens religious experiences, it will also threaten sense experience.

It would appear that those who wish to consistently object to the cogency of religious experience would need to embrace scepticism of our sense-perception *in toto*, if they are to avoid accusation of arbitrariness.

Theory-ladenness objection:

The theory-ladenness objection maintains that religious experience is too enmeshed with background beliefs to be justified. Accordingly, religious experience is taken to be a product of pre-existing beliefs and commitments. Whilst it is right to recognise that religious experience is interpreted through one's prior beliefs, the same is also true of non-religious experience. Moreover, this is also true of other areas of empirical study.

The scientific method itself is composed of background beliefs, a commitment to empiricism, testability, cause and effect and quantifiability etc. Furthermore, the scientific paradigm often resists new scientific theories and discoveries until a new scientific consensus is established.

In addition, there is no verification independent from our background beliefs for our day-to-day sense experience. Such a requirement would lead to global scepticism about the reliability of our sense-perception. It remains unclear why the opponent of the argument from religious experience requires background neutrality for religious experience but not for ordinary sense-perception.

Perhaps the problem with religious experience is not the truth-claim 'God exists', which one can argue is justified on the basis of having an experience of the divine, rather it is the additional concomitant doctrinal claims which lack justification or rationality. We may think the recipient of religious experience *justified* in their assent to theistic belief whilst designating as unjustified claims that follow from such an experience, such as '*I should surrender my life to God and renounce earthly pleasures*'; these claims are much more wedded to background beliefs.

Perception

The *privacy objection* attempts to undermine the accounts of religious with reference to the level of subjectivity involved in religious perception. The fact that no one else has access to an individual's experience of God makes it impossible to corroborate their authenticity. Thus, religious experience appears impossible to authenticate through witness testimony, much like illusions and hallucinations (Kwan, 2006, p.644).

If P reports that he sees or hears something of a size or loudness such that ordinary persons normally see and hear such things, and no one else in the vicinity sees or hears it, the claim of perception is dismissed without further ado (Matson, 1987, p. 117).

However, all perceptual experiences of material objects are inherently private, a subject of experience cannot have access to another individual's experience of material objects. Both are *public* in the sense that they can be compared with the reports made by others, but we have no direct access to an individual's sense-data. Furthermore, religious experiences have documented commonality in a way that hallucinations do not. James, for example, identifies the following common themes: passivity, ineffability, noetic quality and transiency (James, 1987, p.97-98).

Secondly, there is an obvious disanalogy between religious experience and sense-perception, in the case of sense-perception given the same external conditions those with normally functioning senses would experience the same sense-impression. However, this does not strengthen the reliability of sense-experience because the same would be true in cases where multiple people with healthy sense-organs see a mirage (Davis, 1999, p.74). Furthermore, these objections do not easily obtain when applied to a being who can choose when and to whom, and to what degree, they appear.

Competing claims objection

The competing claims objection maintains that the reports of religious experience and their claims about God are too incongruous to build an evidential case for the existence of God because the various accounts undermine each other's credulity. Whilst at first compelling, this criticism would become unworkable when applied to other justified beliefs.

Flew (1966, p. 127) proposes to explain the competing claims with reference to the cultural milieu of those who report them:

[religious experience] seems to depend on the interests, background, and expectations of those who have them rather than upon anything separate and autonomous ... the expert natural historian of religious experience would be altogether astounded to hear of the vision of Bernadette Soubirous occurring not to a Roman Catholic at Lourdes but to an Hindu in Benares, or of Apollo manifest not in classical Delphi but in Kyoto under the Shoguns.

However, as one has already argued religious experience is not an infallible or unmediated self-disclosure of the divine, thus one can expect divine intimations to be wedded to background beliefs.

Kwan (2006), deploys an analogy of a nuclear fallout to undermine the persuasiveness of the competing claims objection. In this analogy a nuclear catastrophe has damaged sense-perception to such an extent that only medium-sized objects can be reliably detected, in such a situation it would be unwise to dismiss the entirety of sense-perception on the basis that smaller objects cannot be detected. Over time the survivors learn that their perception of medium-sized objects is received alongside inaccurate data (the absence of smaller objects) that they can therefore filter-out as unreliable.

Likewise, it is plausible to suggest that human sensibility to the divine operates fallibly and to certain degrees of reliability, whilst there is some accurate detection of the divine, full comprehension is impossible for finite beings. One might be given access to the 'larger' metaphysical truths, e.g. an omnipotent being exists, but not have access to 'lower' metaphysical facts e.g. God is Trinity. This analogy may borrow a parallel with sense-perception: the indeterminate subatomic world is inaccessible to the naked-eye, whereas the ordered macro level is visible.

Furthermore, no empirical evidence can be immune from conflicting beliefs, the argument from illusion makes it clear that sense-perception is vulnerable to conflicting and inaccurate information (Kwan, 2006, p.655). It does not entail that we should reject sense-perception in its entirety, similarly errors within the scientific community do not undermine the value of the scientific method. Sense-perceptions, within a naturalistic context, can vary enormously; a number of people can perceive an object and come to different conclusions about its colour, size and texture, conclusions of which are affected by light, distance and subjective experience – this disagreement does not refute the existence of external objects (Kwan, 2006, p.656).

Furthermore, this competing claims objection would undermine the use of conflicting testimonies in court cases and the historians use of historical documents to ascertain evidence for past events, both examples require the arbiter of accounts to synthesise an overarching narrative by excluding inconsistent evidence (Kwan, 2006, p.655).

4. Philosophical arguments for justified theistic belief from accounts of religious experience:

Plantinga and Bagger: is religious belief warranted?

Plantinga (2009, p.285) delineates between two orders of inquiry into the credulity of religious belief:

The *de jure* challenge to Christian (or theistic) belief ... is the claim that such belief is irrational or unreasonable or unjustified or in some other way properly subject to invidious epistemic criticism; it contrasts with the *de facto* challenge, according to which the belief in question is false.

Plantinga (2009) maintains that it is self-evidently the case that theistic belief is rational and therefore to construct a genuine *de jure* question regarding the credulity of religious beliefs he proposes that we question to what extent theistic belief is *warranted*. For Plantinga, an individual's beliefs are *warranted* if they result from mental capacities which are functioning ordinarily in a cognitive milieu (conducive to those mental capacities) that conform to a schema which is successfully directed at truth (Mourad, 2005, p.394). This construal of *warranted* coheres with a reliabilist externalist conception of *justification* because it requires the truth-condition is met through reliable processes and is not restricted to the evidence *available* to the subject (internalism).

Plantinga (2009) identifies two mental apparatus that humans utilise to form the belief in the existence of God: the *sensus divinitatis* and the *Holy Spirit* (p 287-293). The *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) operates as an innate capacity to intuit the existence of God, whereas the Holy Spirit functions to impart knowledge of God through God's self-revelation; Plantinga maintains that if these faculties are functioning properly, and lead to theistic conviction, such belief in God is *warranted* (Mourard, 2005 p.7). However, "*if theistic belief is false, it probably has no warrant*" (Plantinga, 2009, p.295).

Plantinga, also argues that these beliefs are to be understood as '*basic*'. '*Basic*' in the sense that they are not derived logically through argument or historical judgements and are instead arrived at through experience; basic beliefs also include memory and logical intuition (Mourard, 2005, p.393).

As Davis (1999, p.88) explicates:

A properly basic belief arises in us spontaneously under certain conditions [...] if I have an experience of its seeming to me that there is a tree in front of me, then my 'natural disposition' to believe what my sense experiences reveal to me generates my belief that there is a tree in front of me.

For Plantinga, *basic beliefs* are not incorrigible or groundless, but they are not inferred from other beliefs and can be justified through experience, moreover *basic beliefs* can be discredited by counter-evidence. 'God exists' is not itself a basic belief, but is entailed by basic beliefs induced by the *sensus divinitatis* (Davis, 1999, p.89).

However, Plantinga's reliabilism comes across two problems. Its standards for *warrant* (or justification) are too demanding and it appears to beg the question as an argument for God's existence. The first weakness, its demandingness, risks undermining our pragmatic use of justification and potentially becomes self-defeating as an apologetic for religious belief. It is too demanding because it requires that our 'warranted' beliefs are infallible, that is brought about by entirely reliable causes, in the case of religious experience, the *sensus divinitatis* and the *Holy Spirit*. This requires that our *warranted* beliefs are without error. However, this seems to undermine any workable notion of justification. Plantinga's definition would entail that an individual who has strong evidence that they reasonably believe to be reliable - but in reality is false - is unjustified in their belief. Such high a threshold of *warrant* would mean that scientific consensuses of the past, now discredited, were in fact held as unjustified beliefs and that miscarriages of justice - where the evidence pointed towards a guilty verdict - caused the jurors' beliefs to be unjustified. In fact, this requirement for justification would also render many theists' beliefs unjustified, if their belief did not arise from the infallible instigation of the *sensus divinitatis* and the *Holy Spirit*. Theistic beliefs which arose from religious inculcation

or from academic study would not meet the criteria of *warranted* under the Plantingian reliabilist construal.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that people can *reasonably* believe in God (based on the available evidence) and this belief be false. The truth-condition of theistic belief is not metaphysically available to us, but this is also true of other beliefs, for example, beliefs about the past and future. Whilst one can maintain that the truth-condition is apt for *knowledge*, for *justification* to avoid becoming meaningless and unachievable it must accommodate human error and thus reject infallibilism. There are very few things that we can be entirely certain of, but what we can distinguish between is the level of justification for various beliefs.

Justification, on its self-referentially coherent formulation, characterizes subjects who fulfil their duty to believe propositions that seem true to them. Since the inward instigation of the Holy Spirit produces basic beliefs with a sufficient appearance of truth for many Christians (even after they consider the relevant objections), those Christians are justified with respect to their religious beliefs (Plantinga in Mourard, 2005, p.395).

Moreover, Plantinga's reliance on the activity of the *Sensus Divinitatis* and the *Holy Spirit* for *warranted belief* in God, begs the question of the justifiability of religious belief by presupposing the existence of God who instigates such belief and is also the condition of its justification.

Plantinga's claim that *basic* religious beliefs function like memory and logical intuition also needs to be addressed. Unlike memory, which at its most basic level, reports our past experiences, religious beliefs make more inferences which do not simply report events. However, it does appear that theistic belief can function much like logical intuition, although intuition is not enough to meet the truth-condition of knowledge. The intuition that God exists, however, may be as equally justified as the intuition that God does not exist, whereas this does not seem to obtain for other logical intuitions, such as '*nothing can be red and green all over at the same time*'.

Plantinga's assertion that religious beliefs are *basic* needs also to be resisted. Experience, under Plantinga's construal, is basic because it does not require reflexivity or inferences from

other beliefs. However, all experience does require background beliefs to operate, firstly there must already be an at least tacit trust in sense-perception and the concepts needed to formulate belief in an omnipotent being. To separate religious beliefs from other beliefs in this way risks undermining the argument from religious experience by questioning the reliability of sense-experience on which the argument is built.

For Bagger (1999), justification entails the giving of reasons for beliefs (Mourard, 2005, p.396). He rejects the Plantingian notion that any beliefs are basic or *prima facie* justified. Bagger, instead, argues that such notions suggest that 'basic' beliefs can be formed independently of other beliefs directly from experiences, which he claims commits foundationalism (Mourard, 2005, p.396).

Bagger (1999) argues that justification is only philosophically pertinent when one has reasons to question one's beliefs:

justification . . . will come into account only relatively rarely when genuine doubt about knowledge surfaces. . . . Construed in this way, justification will always consist in the giving of apposite and weighty reasons to resolve doubt. Because genuine inquiry always presupposes doubt, justification will play a role wherever anyone undertakes an inquiry (Bagger, 1999, p.70)

The theist may be inclined to raise the objection that there is no genuine doubt regarding the veracity of religious experience. However, whilst this is possibly the case for people who have a religious worldview or intuition, much like it would obtain for those with an atheistic paradigm, it would not obtain for other *extraordinary* religious experiences. World religions have established processes of excluding specific experiences from the canon, genuine doubt appears to be an established feature of many religious communities. However, religious communities do have recourse to 'apposite and weighty' reasons in the form of the classical arguments for God's existence and theodicies.

Bagger (1999) fails to apply this criterion to an atheistic belief system. It is arguably the case that religious experience as a global human phenomenon in itself gives rise to *genuine doubt* about a materialist metaphysic. It appears that both religious and atheistic belief can be equally guilty of unfalsifiability. Bagger (1999) rejects the possibility that religious belief can

be justified by religious experience. Religious experiences may not always make inferences, however, they rely on background beliefs and assumptions. As we have already established this is also true of naturalistic explanations.

For Bagger, beliefs are based on experience without being *justified* by such experience. In the absence of epistemic doubt there is no obligation to justify beliefs; in cases of epistemic doubt *good reasons* provide *justification* (Mourad, 2005, p.394).

I maintain that the goodness of reasons consists in explanatory coherence. Good reasons indicate how a belief coheres with others we hold in the best overall explanatory account of the phenomena in question. Good reasons can even account for the erroneousness of competitor beliefs. Bad reasons, conversely, can fail to justify even without well-articulated competition. These judgments, of course, presuppose values, in this case epistemic values (Bagger, 1999, Pg. 80).

For Mourad (2005, p. 397), this indicates Bagger's drift into a relativist epistemology of justification through arguing that:

subjects can responsibly disagree about what constitutes the best explanation of a phenomenon, and therefore about which experiential beliefs are justified, when they appeal to the coherence of their explanations with different systems of beliefs, values, and ideals of human flourishing.

Bagger, however, explicitly rejects the notion that different belief systems and epistemic values are equally valid (Mourad, 2005, p.397). Despite this, Bagger fails to provide a process of checking the reliability of one's beliefs with reference to a neutral, objective and non-inferential internalist construal of justification. As has already been argued, such a process is unattainable because we cannot step outside of the evidence we have available to us, nor can we divorce our epistemic commitments from our conceptual framework. Furthermore, Bagger (1999) assumes that justification via a *coherent belief system* for the theist is unattainable in a scientific paradigm.

Bagger would be wise to embrace fully the logic of an internalist view of justification. This logic would rightly recognise that people have a duty to believe, and are justified in believing, that which is coherent with the information they have available to them. In the case of the theist, such coherence can be obtained in the overarching metaphysic and value system which

is congruent with religious perception; supported by classical arguments for God's existence and theodicy. Neither should we accept that science and religion are mutually exclusive.

Becker (1971), outlines a *good reason* for belief in the existence of God from religious experience. Firstly, it must be established what an act of God would entail, an 'act of God' would then need to be encountered. An act of God that occurred in response to human petitions and demonstrably fulfilled repeated requests would be *relevant* to the belief that God exists and surely be "*the most plausible conclusion*" to come to (Becker, 1971, pg. 67-68) and "*as good as those for the most widely accepted scientific theories*" (Becker, 1971, pg.68).

[i]f Moses ... did in fact experience what he is reported to have experienced, then in terms of how he might have defined God, he had reasoned proof of God's existence. Any denial of his claim to have known God's existence cannot be merely a claim that he made the mistake of affirming the consequent – that he mistook ambiguous evidence for unambiguous. It either must be an historical judgment to the effect that what was reported to have happened did not happen, or it must be a linguistic judgement to the effect that what he called God was not what we mean by 'God' (Becker, 1971, pg. 68).

Now, if it were possible to establish that what Moses did not encounter was the objective existence of God and instead the manifestation of the 'father figure', resultant from the oedipal complex, for example, it would still obtain that Moses' belief in God within the cultural milieu of his day was *justified*. This is because if such an experience did occur and it was taken as an encounter with the divine, the evidence available would make such belief reasonable.

Bagger (1999 p.13), furthers his rejection of the argument from religious experience by accusing the theist of an epistemological *double standard*, whereby they commit themselves to two incoherent beliefs: theistic belief and modern science. The distinctive feature of religious experiences that Bagger finds objectionable is that the implicit explanations informing them involve appeals to the "*finite supernatural*", which "*concerns supernatural beings, qualities, or effects within the finite, created, natural universe*" (Bagger, 1999, pg.16). Bagger writes, "[t]o designate an event as miraculous we eliminate the possibility of completely explaining the event naturalistically" (Bagger, 1999, 224-225).

Bagger here is guilty of falling into his own epistemological objection. By *a priori* attempting to seek a naturalistic explanation he is as guilty as the theist who fails to consider alternative explanations for religious experience. Bagger commits a metaphysical bias by failing to accept that the evidence could ever lead to a dualist belief system. Furthermore, he assumes that modern science and theistic belief cannot coherently coexist. For many modern theists this claim is an outright rejection of their reasonably held beliefs.

[i]n searching for the best explanation of discrete phenomena, we never choose the supernatural explanation. We await a more economical naturalistic explanation (Bagger, 1999, p.221).

Bagger (1999) fails to articulate why the naturalistic explanation is the most parsimonious. In fact, the insights of modern science are so far beyond the kin of the non-specialist that the simplest explanation is a belief in a being of maximal greatness. Furthermore, both the physicist and the theist are united in their quest for an ultimate explanation, intuition arguably indicates that a self-conscious ultimate explanation is the most economical.

The prescription of a coherentist epistemology by Bagger - which attempts to adjudicate between the explanations offered by experiences - fails because *"experience is always a phenomenon that is subject to multiple explanations, and as such, it does not itself function as a reason that would justify a preference for anyone of them"* (Mourard, 2005, p 401). If one is willing to accept that the argument from religious experience can accommodate and cohere with other contemporary beliefs, Bagger's attempt to undermine the argument for religious experience will not succeed. Whereas Plantinga is right to recognise that if the subject's experience of the world coheres with theistic beliefs, then subjects will typically be justified in choosing those beliefs, given the choice between alternative explanations of equal weight (Mourard, 2005, p. 407). Furthermore, one must be willing to accept that subjects have access to supernatural explanations of phenomenon that, within the present context, are more persuasive than the explanatory system offered by naturalistic accounts.

Swinburne testimony and credulity

Swinburne proposes an epistemological framework of justification that seeks to promote the argument from religious experience by means of an argument for the veracity of human experience as a source of knowledge more generally.

His *principle of credulity* argues that what one has perceived – all things being equal – are in reality as they are perceived to be. Thus, when one claims to have encountered the supernatural, one should be willing to accept that such an encounter is as it presents itself to the individual. Thus, “*(in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present [...] then probably x is present*” (Swinburne, 2014, p.303).

Furthermore, Swinburne argues that the *principle of testimony* provides us with a standard on which to base our acceptance of the accounts reported to us by others. Notwithstanding, the fact that some individuals are characteristically unreliable, our knowledge of the world is generally reliant upon accepting the reports of experiences given to us by others. Thus, “*[s]ince (probably) others have the experiences that they report, and since (probably) things are as a subject’s experience suggests that they are, then (with some degree of probability) things are as others report*” (Swinburne, 2014, p.323).

Why then should this not obtain when assessing the veracity of reports of encounters with the supernatural? It appears that the suspension of the principles of credulity and testimony in the cases of religious experience reflect an *a priori* commitment to naturalism.

Hume’s claim “*that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous*” (2009, p. 332) illustrates the commonly rehearsed anti-theistic response, which supposes that our past experiences and observations render religious experience entirely improbable and fanciful.

Opponents of Swinburne’s defence are likely to argue that in cases of religious experience there is compelling background evidence to suspend the epistemic principles of credulity and testimony. Credulity should be withheld because the object in question is deemed improbable, whereas perception of material objects are highly probable. However, such an appeal to improbability is reliant upon the success of arguments for non-theism. It is not the scope of this study to appraise such arguments, however, one can tentatively postulate that such arguments can be at least counterbalanced by theistic arguments. As has already been

noted, a metaphysical preclusion of God is dependent upon a myopic epistemology. It can also be accused of a double standard by virtue of the fact that prior probability is not used to *a priori* dismiss new scientific observations.

Furthermore, subject-related challenges are incorporated into Swinburne's assessment and psychological or physiological explanations overlook the integrity and conviction in the experiencers. As Davis (1999, p. 112) concludes:

Where many experiences are at stake, such implausible and unsupported explanations look even more ad hoc, and the counter-evidence has to be even more overwhelming before the simplest explanation (veridicality) is rejected. Were the implausible theory that religious experience is all a giant hoax the only alternative to taking it to be veridical, for instance, the sceptic would be in a very weak position.

Moreover, Swinburne (2014) deploys the *principle of simplicity* which entails that one should opt for the least complex explanation when one has to decide which explanation is the most persuasive. Accordingly, beliefs should be rejected when deemed incompatible with the simplest theory; the simplest theory is the one which is most congruent with the data taken from accepting that things are as they appear, in most cases (Kwan, 2006, p.647).

Thus, the simplest theory is that our experiences are reliable because this is consistent with the information that generally holds that what we see, touch, hear and taste is to be generally believed, because for the most part it leads to accurate results. One should therefore *prima facie* accept religious experience as reliable evidence for God's existence.

Whereas the hypothesis that religious experience is hallucinatory is the least simple explanation because it runs against our commonly accepted reliance on sense experience. We would therefore need to make religious experience exempt from the reliability of our senses in order to nullify the argument from religious experience.

Swinburne's detractors argue that there is no means of distinguishing between religious experiences which are valid and those which are false (the *uncheckability objection*) in the way that we can distinguish between false and accurate sense perceptions. The theist will contend that such methods are available, for example by excluding those which do not conform to Church teaching (Kwan, 2006, p.648). However, this is vulnerable to the claim that

these processes of validation are already committed to a religious paradigm and that any argument for them is circular. Despite this, it can also be argued that the naturalistic equivalent means of testing the truthfulness of perceptions are already committed to a materialist paradigm.

Furthermore, the claim that religious checks are circular fails to recognise that the same can be said of perceptual checks. An observer of a physical object can have recourse to touch, photographs and the observations of others. However, these checks are also dependent upon the reliability of perception, which is already in question:

Checks by others' reports depend on our hearing experience and capacity for understanding and so on. All checks are ultimately circular (Kwan, 2006, p.648).

Ultimately, no sense experience can provide an objective basis of knowledge because no evidence can be 'read off' of experience, whereby the object in question could be established to exist irrefutably. Take, for example, the existence of my laptop, I cannot 'read off' the existence of my laptop from my experience of it. If I were to photograph my laptop, a photograph would provide no evidence of my laptop independent of my experience of the photograph. Likewise, if I were to rely upon the experiences of others to verify my experience of the laptop, I would have to rely upon my experience to access their accounts. In other words, there is no check on experience that can operate outside of experience (Kwan, 2006, p.648-649). So whilst religious experience remains 'uncheckable' this is also true of all experiences.

However, in day-to-day corroboration of experience, some experiences are given greater status than others. A child's report of events may be considered more prone to imagination, for example. Similarly, individuals who have a tendency to embellish the truth will be considered less able to check the experiences of others. Notwithstanding, this admission there is no requirement that we preclude a domain of human experience as proposed by those who refute the totality of religious experience *a priori*.

Furthermore, the checks that are available to naturalistic experiences (reports of others, memory, recording etc.) are arguably mirrored in the checks available within the domain of

religious experience. Religious communities have vigorous checks on the subjects of religious experience and the content of their claims.

Swinburne's argument for the veracity of religious experience could be accused of promoting a credulous attitude to *all* reports of experiences. However, it is not the case that Swinburne asks us to accept every account we hear, but instead that we are consistent with how we filter naturalistic and supernatural perceptions.

Swinburne's approach has to be distinguished from an "anything goes" approach. It is recognized that man's ability to know is far from perfect: his initial epistemic seemings are fallible. The hope lies in the ability of man to sift and correct these initial data. For example, an erroneous epistemic seeming can be corrected by other epistemic seemings. However, to do this we need some rational principles to organize our data. For Swinburne, the supreme principle is the Principle of Simplicity (Kwan, 2006, p.647).

Alston and perception

Alston (1987) presents an argument for justified theistic belief on the suitability of perception as the basing-relation of belief. Alston attempts to illustrate that although the checks on naturalist perceptions are more stringent, there are convincing reasons to permit weaker checks on theistic perception. In particular, the weaker level of verifiability and predictability of religious perception.

However, I would argue that Alston's case can be strengthened by removing his particular appeal to the validity of Christian perceptual practice. A stronger argument can be made for theistic perception, more generally, when the justified belief in question is the simple proposition 'God exists'. This is because the level of verifiability and predictability available for such a proposition is much higher than it is for specific Christian perception.

Moreover, Alston's (1987) analogy between perceptual practice and Christian practice fails, because the former is willing to accept that one's experience can be revised by further experience, whereas religious traditions do not permit this by virtue of their fixed beliefs (Zackarissson, 2006, p. 335). This objection can be overcome by removing the appeal to orthodoxy and embracing agnosticism about God's nature.

For example, the simpler belief that 'God exists' can be verified by other experiential accounts to have perceived God, likewise this belief can meet the criteria of predictability through further instances of divine apprehension or induced mystical states. Parallels between religious and non-religious epistemic claims can be made. For example, claims such as 'the material world exists', is justified through the verification of others and the predictability of an object's behaviour (persisting in space, having mass etc.).

Alston (1987) is concerned with the veridicality of *direct justification* of religious belief, belief in God that arises from directly experiencing the divine rather than belief which arises from indirect experiences, such as experiences of the moral transformation of those who have undergone religious conversion (p. 143). Alston (1987) maintains that justified beliefs arise from *habits* or *practices* (epistemic practices) that are themselves justified (p.144). Alston, continues that *practices* are justified if those practices usually give rise to beliefs which are true. It is here that Alston, strays into a circular argument because for one's beliefs to be "true" they must issue from practices that are already true, but for these practices to be true they must produce true beliefs. One would have to establish that theistic practice was true by virtue of the beliefs it produced, however, it is not possible to access the fact of God's existence. Nevertheless, he rightly admits that there is also no non-circular argument for sense-perception.

Alston argues that experience leads to justified belief when experience occurs in "*favourable circumstances*" (Alston, 1987, p.145). These favourable circumstances appear to be when our sense-perceptions are functioning properly, how we know this relies upon our memory of when our perceptions have been accurate:

the general improbability of this [water running up hill] greatly diminishes the justification the corresponding belief receives from that experience (Alston, 1987, p.145).

However, this does not rule out the possibility that our consistent perceptions are illusory; Alston (1987) takes it as given that such a hypothesis is implausible. However, I would like to argue that "*favourable circumstances*" are not always achievable or checkable. One does not need to have perfect conditions to justify one's beliefs. Thus, if the entirety of human experience were an illusion our resultant beliefs would still be justified. Likewise, if religious

experience were in fact illusory it would be justified because it is at present the simplest hypothesis. Alston (1987, p. 145) concedes that a belief can be untrue *and justified*, when an individual has no way of knowing that their processes of forming beliefs are unreliable.

Alston (1987, p. 145) provides a convincing qualification of justification; justification he stipulates is always *defeasible*. This reformation of justification admits that sense-perception is “*inherently liable to be overridden, diminished or cancelled by considerations to the contrary*” (Alston, 1987, p.145). Therefore, we can only ever have *prima facie* trust in our perceptions. However, this conclusion could become self-defeating to Alston’s overarching aim if we can identify *considerations to the contrary* in relation to religious experiences. I would argue that *considerations to the contrary* are at present wanting or at least equiplausible to supernatural considerations.

The fact that Alston (1987) maintains that sense-perception and religious experience are equally *prima facie* justified makes sense-perception equally vulnerable to contrary explanations. The non-theist might claim there may be fewer *considerations to the contrary* when applied to sense-perception, but the argument from illusion, dreams and hallucination still apply.

Alston (1987, p.145) identifies the role of defeaters within *Christian practice* and *perceptual practice*, the former enjoys the benefit of tradition and scripture. This, however, appears circular: the reliability of scripture and tradition are dependent upon the existence of God and using them for verification would beg the question being considered. As has already been discussed this circularity is also a feature of verifying naturalistic perceptual claims. However, one might argue that with perceptual claims the defeaters available are *open* – they are available to all. Whereas, religious *defeaters* are inherently *closed*, by virtue of being only available to those inside *Christian practice*. Alston’s commitment to orthodoxy as the *overrider* for religious experience, heavily undermines his argument by creating a disanalogy between religious experience and perceptual practice (Zackarissson, 2006, p. 331) this also means that the argument from religious experience cannot be defended by the appeal to non-Christian experiences.

Perhaps, religious defeaters are nothing more than the body of testimony to divine apprehension. The purpose they might serve is to build up a case for excluding those

experiences which are incongruent with the totality of religious sense-perception, but they cannot identify the content of what Kwan (2006, p. 655) refers to as the *lower level* of religious apprehension. These higher level perceptions might include 'God exists' or 'there is an afterlife' but would exclude such lower level perceptions, such as: 'Christ is the Son of God' or 'Muhammed is the Last Prophet'.

Alston (1987) claims that perception can only yield *weak justification*. He offers two reasons for dismissing some epistemic practices: "*ineradically internally inconsistent*" or "*conflict with the results of other practices to which we are more firmly committed*" (p.146). However, these criteria are clearly too demanding, inconsistency and conflict is a feature of all religious and materialist belief systems. Despite this, it is useful that we can make room for the complementary doxastic practices of science and religion. It may also, help us to filter out some of the bizarre claims discussed earlier which fail to conform to our ordinary sense-perception.

Alston argues that many epistemologists are guilty of a 'double standard' and epistemic 'imperialism' (Kwan, 2006, p.645). This imperialism is analogous to requiring that maths conforms to science. However, we do distinguish between veridical and non-veridical empirical evidence or good science and bad science. We can therefore claim that there are 'good experiences' and 'bad experiences'; the non-theist may claim that religious experience is a 'bad experience'.

Alston's (1987) project distinguishes between *Christian practice and perceptual practice*, a distinction that I would argue unintentionally undermines the argument from religious experience. He argues that *perceptual practice* has standardised ways of checking. However, these checks are themselves perceptual and not an external check on perceptual practice. Furthermore, he claims perceptual practice allows us to accurately predict events. However, the theist would also claim that religious experiences imparts foretaste of the future and further experience can be induced.

Alston (1987) concludes that perceptual practice is part of Christian practice, however, there are additional practices within Christian practice which are not analogue to standardisation, prediction, inclusivity and universality. Alston's designation of the rules of perceptual practice is too generous and uniform, and his ultimate flaw in his argument is to give Christian practice

an additional perceptual element. This undermines the argument that theistic belief is justified via the basing relation of perception.

Despite identifying the apparent differences in practice, Alston claims that they share the 'same epistemic status' (1987, p. 147). This case would be better made by recognising that Christian practices arise from perceptual practice. We have no non-circular argument for perceptual practice, thus we have no non-circular argument for accepting religious experience.

Alston claims "*the reality CP [Christian Practice] claims to put is in touch with is conceived to be vastly different from the physical environment*" (1987, p. 148). This claim hones in on one of the most feasible objections to the argument from religious experience, that what one claims to have encountered through experience is so greatly distinct from our day-to-day experiences of the natural world that it is to be dismissed as incredulous. However, this claim can be levelled at other empirical disciplines which are quite rightly afforded the status of being empirically or perceptually founded. Areas within the natural sciences, such as neuropsychology and particle physics, produce conclusions which are dramatically different to the physical environment accessible to sense-perception. Furthermore, specialist areas of human knowledge are often the preserve of experts who we rely upon to relay their expertise – expertise which will often be impenetrable to non-experts.

What may remain dissimilar in our comparison between religious perception, and other exclusive areas of perception, is the ability to bring about tangible effects. Religious experience presumably fails to bring about pragmatic effects that can be witnessed publicly. For example, as inscrutable as subatomic physics is to the general public, the technological advances that are made available as a result thereof are visibly evident in contemporary life.

However, we may discover the effects of religious experience further down the line and we should not rule out possible effects *a priori*. The case could also be made that we already have some suitable candidates, it is claimed for example that religious belief may lead to a longer life expectancy and provide the motivation for moral behaviour.

Alston (1987), suggests that Christian practice may fail to meet the conditions of perceptual practice because: "*God is too 'wholly other'*" and therefore we cannot deploy a system of checks or predictions; we can only glimpse an "*insecure grasp of what God is like*" and that

God chooses the subjects of his self-revelation (p. 148). If these features of Christian practice obtain then we can plausibly establish why religious perceptual practice is not readily available to everyone who can engage in perceptual practice.

Conclusion

Whilst religious experiences give their recipients justified belief in God, the supernatural or ultimate reality (a non-materialist metaphysic), they fail to compel the non-theist - or those who do not engage in religious perception - to embrace theism. Religious experience, however, cannot meet the necessary conditions for *justified true belief*, this is because the truth condition cannot be fulfilled without access to the metaphysical fact of God's existence or non-existence. Neither does non-theistic belief have access to this metaphysical fact.

Sense perception is the ordinary reliable means to access *knowledge*. This is because – all things being equal - more often than not perceptual practice leads to accurate results. Much like perception justifies inferences to belief in the external world or personal existence, it can give rise to justified belief in God. To reject this hypothesis one would need to deploy an epistemological double standard, whereby sense perception is only an acceptable foundation for materialist truth claims.

The fact that some people experience God, and others do not, is not epistemologically irreconcilable because the same can be said of other areas of human perception. Reports of phenomena will vary from person to person, however, this does not undermine the reliability of sense-perception as a whole. For example, reports of colour, the appearance of objects and accounts of events vary, which entails that human experience is both subjective and fallible but does not render experience meaningless. If we were to reject religious belief formed by religious experience *a priori* we would risk engendering scepticism about human perception more generally.

Additionally, reports of religious experience are supported by the principle of credulity and testimony. All being equal, sense-data is accurately interpreted by the human mind and reports of experience are genuine. However, this does not mean that we should become credulous in accepting *all* perception and reports of events. It may, for example, be prudent

to reject those events which are exceptionally rare, it is self-evident that the global and historical reports of religious experience would not fit this description. Likewise, human testimony is afforded greater weight when it is corroborated by the testimony of others – reports of the supernatural are supported by many experiencers. For the sake of parsimoniousness, the simplest hypothesis would be to accept *prima facie* the validity and accuracy of reports of religious experience. To reject the entirety of religious experience, would be akin to the sceptic's rejection of the objectivity of the external world from cases of failed sense-perception.

On the balance of probability, there is enough evidence provided by religious experience to justify theistic belief. It is also the case, that experience can be supported by rational argument and empirical enquiry. Religious experience finds adequate support from cosmological, ontological, design and moral arguments. Much like non-religious perception finds support from other disciplines.

This leads me to conclude that for those people who have had a religious experience it would be unjustified for them to espouse metaphysical materialism (without being at risk of an epistemic double-standard) if they do not have *internal* access to countervailing evidence. However, for those who do not enjoy religious experience their non-theism is equally justified, unless they have access to weighty reasons for theism. As has been argued, theistic and non-theistic arguments are available within most cultural contexts.

Whilst religious experience gives rise to justified belief in those who have had them, this belief is absolute by virtue of internalist justification. Intuition tells us that we can only provide appropriate reasons for beliefs from the evidence that we have available. Thus, religious experience meets the internalist criteria of justified belief, for those who have had a religious experience - who have no compelling reason to reject it – their religious belief is justified. Externalist justification for beliefs arising from sense-perception is not possible, this is because we cannot have anything other than circular arguments for the validity of perception. We must therefore concede that our beliefs, whilst justifiable, are never infallible. Thus, religious experience provides internalist justification, in a similar way to other non-religious justified commitments e.g. 'I exist'.

Furthermore, I would like to reject the notion that religious belief formed by religious experience can be 'basic' or unmediated. Such arguments are self-defeating because the argument from religious experience relies upon at least one background belief – an epistemic commitment to sense-perception. I also maintain, that the attempt to divorce religious perception from sense-perception in some way, such as that proposed by Alston, raises more problems than it solves and is primarily driven by an attempt to avoid religious pluralism. Religious perception is a subsidiary of perceptual practice and shares practices with it, to reject this is to undermine the argument from religious experience and to attempt an *ad hoc* defence of exclusive Christian practice.

There is a common core to perceptual practice, which is mirrored in the common core of religious experience. If one accepts the primary claims of this common core of religious experience and shelves the secondary (doctrinal) claims, one is able to strengthen the argument from religious experience from the competing claims challenge. Furthermore, a pluralist construal of religious experience requires no commitment to perceptual infallibility.

(16,346 Words)

Bibliography:

- Argyle, M. (2009). The Psychological Perspective on Religious Experience. *Religious Experience Research Centre, Second Series Occasional Paper 8*. [Online]. Available at: <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/367> [Accessed 04 August 2022].
- Alston, W. (1987). Religious Experience and Religious Belief. In Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (pp. 143-149). USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Argyle, M. (2000). *Psychology and Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Ayer, A. J. (1998). The Right to Be Sure. In Martin Alcock, *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (pp. 20-26). Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers.
- Attfield, D.G. (1975). The Argument from Religious Experience. *Religious Studies*, Vol. 11 No. 3. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20005259> [Accessed 5 September 2022].
- Bagger, M. (1999). *Religious Experience, Justification and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, C. Lawrence. (1971). A Note on Religious Experience Arguments. *Religious Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20004860> [Accessed 13 October 2021].

Berger, P. *The Desecularisation of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Bonjour, L. (2002). Internalism and Externalism. In Paul K. Moser, *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (pp.234-263). New York: Oxford University Press.A

Broad, C.D. (1987). The Argument from Religious Experience. In Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (pp. 108-114). USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Davis, C. F (1999). The Evidential Force of Religious Experience. [Online]. Oxford Academic. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198250012.003.0007> [Accessed 07 Sept. 2022].

Flew, A. (1966). *God and Philosophy*. London: Hutchinson.

Graham, P.J. (2019). Social Knowledge and Social Norms. In Stephen Hetherington and Markos Valoris, *The Philosophy of Knowledge: A History Volume IV Knowledge in Contemporary Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Hume, D. (2009). *Of Miracles*. In Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds), *Philosophy of Religion, The Big Questions* (pp. 320-330). Singapore: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Ichikawa, J. Jenkins, J. and Steup, M. The Analysis of Knowledge, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2018 Edition. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). [Online]. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>. [Accessed 04 August 2022].

James, W. (1987) *Mysticism*. In Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (pp.97-107). USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Jinks, T. (2012). *An Introduction to the Psychology of Paranormal Belief and Experience*. USA: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Kwan, K. (2006). Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy. *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 1, Issue 6. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2006.00037.x> [Accessed 22 April 2022].

Kelly, T. (2011). Consensus Gentium: Reflections on the 'Common Consent' Argument for the Existence of God. In Raymond J. VanArragon and James Clark Kelly (eds), *Evidence and Religious Belief* (pp. 135-156). Great Britain: Oxford University Press.

Matson, W. (1987). Skepticism on Religious Experience. . In Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (pp.115-127). USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Mourard, R. (2005) . Argumentative Justification and Religious Experience. *The Journal of Religion* , Vol. 85, No. 3. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/429572> [Accessed 13 March 2022].

Plantinga, A. (2009). Warranted Belief in God. In Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds), *Philosophy of Religion, The Big Questions* (pp. 285-297). Singapore: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Proudfoot, W. (1977). Religious Experience, Emotion and Belief. *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 70, No. ¾. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1509635> [Accessed 05/09/2021].

Russell, B. (2011). Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 11. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4543805> [Accessed 18 July 2022].

Russell, B. (1998). The Problems of Philosophy: Appearance and Reality . In N. Scott Arnold, Theodore M. Benditt, and George Graham, *Philosophy Then And Now* (pp. 289-303). Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers.

Swinburne, R. (2014). *The Existence of God, Second Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yandell, K. (1974). Religious Experience and Rational Appraisal. *Religious Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20005150> [Accessed 13 October 2021].

Zackarissson, U. (2006). A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience. *Religious Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008658> [Accessed 14 September 2022].