Care Relationships, Testimony,
and the Argument from Religious Experience

by

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Abstract

One issue that has been generating considerable debate within the philosophy of religion is whether or not certain religious experiences could provide at least some evidence towards justifying beliefs in the existence of a divine being. Within the literature, positive accounts are typically referred to as arguments from religious experience. I aim to contribute to this debate in two ways. First, many versions of the argument from religious experience rely on a simple perceptual model in order to understand and assess the evidential value of religious perceptual experiences. However, I shall be developing a specified perceptual model that allows for the relational dimensions of religious perceptual experiences to be taken into account. I refer to this model as the care relational model. Second, many versions of the argument from religious experience only include a superficial assessment of the role testimony plays in relation to justifying religious beliefs grounded in religious experiences. I shall attempt to remedy this by assessing the evidential value of religious perceptual experiences in light of recent developments in the philosophy of testimony.

Table of Contents

Title Page..... i

Supervisory Committee..... ii

Abstract..... iii

Table of Contents..... iv

Dedication..... v

Introduction..... 1

Chapter One..... 6

Chapter Two..... 22

Chapter Three..... 64

Bibliography..... 94

To Esther Robson

Introduction

One issue that has been generating considerable debate within the philosophy of religion is whether or not certain religious experiences could provide at least some evidence towards justifying certain religious beliefs. At least since C.D. Broad published his influential work "Arguments for the Existence of God", there have been numerous attempts to argue that a subject's belief in God's existence may be warranted or justified on the basis of religious experience.[1] Within the literature these accounts have typically been referred to as *arguments from religious experience* (ARE). This thesis will defend an affirmative position on the matter, and as a whole it can be taken to be a modified version of an influential ARE.

Many different ARE's have been offered. Proponents of these arguments generally begin from roughly the same starting point. They consider the fact that throughout history a vast number of people report having had a variety of religious experiences where it seemed that the divine was present.[2] Yet even though these arguments start from roughly the same basis, the various versions employ very different argumentative strategies. Some authors attempt to argue that certain religious experiences ought to be considered sufficiently analogous, in all relevant epistemic respects, to other types of experiences that we undergo in our everyday lives.[3] Various proposals for this type of strategy include attempting to draw an analogy to standard sensory experience, aesthetic experience, and moral experience. These "normal" or "common" types of experiences are held to play a major role in justifying our beliefs about the world. As a consequence of the perceived

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[1] Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," 175-201.

[2] Strictly speaking this is not exactly correct. Some authors propose that the range of religious experiences that are to be assessed for their evidential value be kept as wide as possible. As such, many varieties of religious experience are taken into account in the cases they provide. Caroline Franks-Davis, following in the footsteps of Richard Swinburne, has provided a paradigmatic positive account that assigns considerable evidential force to a wide array of religious experiences. See Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Other authors propose a considerable restriction on the range of religious experience that are to be assessed for their evidential value. In part this move is made to avoid what are seen to be damning criticisms against certain kinds of religious experience. See, Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 141-176.

[3] For attempts to draw analogy to sense perception see Wainwright, "Mysticism an Sense Perception," 257-78; Alston, *Perceiving God*.

analogy, certain religious experiences are held to play a sufficiently similar evidential role towards justifying religious beliefs.

Other versions of the argument maintain that the strategy of attempting to draw an analogy to experiences of external objects or state of affairs is an illegitimate one. This is because it treats the purported divine being as a mere object to be perceived. However, to do so is to diminish and obscure the personal and self-authenticating nature of such experiences. As such, some authors maintain that the appropriate analogy to draw is to personal encounters with other individuals.[4] This is because experiences where it seems to a subject that they have encountered God have the same immediate, personal and self-authenticating nature as some of our experiences of other persons. Consequently, knowledge of God is something to be directly acquired on the basis of these immediate religious encounters.

It strikes me that the most persuasive and defensible versions of ARE's are those that treat certain religious experiences—experiences where it seems to the subject that they are directly perceiving a divine being—not merely as analogous to sensory perceptual experiences. Rather, these experiences are to be considered as being one type of perceptual experience amongst others. Furthermore, these arguments emphasize that any perceptual experience accords prima facie evidence for the beliefs based on the experiences in question. In particular, I have in mind the version of the argument offered by Richard Swinburne in his "Existence of God", and those versions offered by authors who follow in his footsteps. These include, Caroline Franks-Davis's ARE offered in "The Evidential Force of Religious Experience" and Jerome Gellman's argument in his work "The Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief".[5] It will be evident to the reader familiar with the literature that large portions of the account I provide will be

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[4] Many who take this line of argument are influenced by work of Martin Buber. Accordingly, these authors maintain that an experience of God is essentially different from our ordinary experiences of objects or 'Its'. This is because God is, to quote Buber, "the Thou that by its nature can that by its nature cannot become It". In an experience of God, something is not given in the experience from which "God (is) then elicited from it; but God is the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed, not expressed". Buber, *I and Thou*, 123-168. Proponents of the direct personal encounter argument maintain that in certain encounters with other human persons we find that a significant, though imperfect, analogy to experiences of God. See Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, 25.

[5] Swinburne, *Existence of God,* 293-327; Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*; Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief.*

based on their works. In fact, I will be utilizing Swinburne's argument as a general framework from which to construct my own. I make no apology for this. In order say anything of worth (hopefully) we must stand on the shoulders of Giants. If these authors are not Giants then at the very least they are very influential figures within the literature that I am concerned with.

However, even though I will be relying on what these authors say to a considerable degree, it strikes me that their accounts are limited for three reasons. First, they are too narrowly focused on the evidential value of temporally isolated instances of the religious perceptual experiences. As a result, they tend to neglect the evidential value of a series of experiences undergone over a subject's lifetime. Second, these authors assess certain religious experiences exclusively in terms of a perceptual model or framework. As a result they neglect other models that can be constructed to understand the epistemic value of certain religious experiences. In particular they neglect a relational model that can be drawn under the umbrella of the perceptual model and can work in conjunction with it to strengthen the argument. Third, they depend upon a specific view of testimony's role in justifying beliefs. However, they have failed to provide an adequate analysis of testimony as a source of justification and the way in which such justification could be "transmitted" from speaker to hearer.

This thesis will address these deficiencies. I will do so by taking a holistic approach to the religious perceptual experiences that subjects have throughout their lives. The force of the argument will come, not simply from the fact that the experiences in question are one type of perceptual experience amongst many, but also because they can be understood in terms of a relational model. It will be seen that certain religious experiences conform to the epistemic criteria for assessing when one is in a genuine care relationship with another being. As such I will argue that individuals who have a variety of, what I call religious perceptual experiences over the duration of their life, would be well on their way to becoming justified in believing that they are in a genuine care relationship with a divine being. That is, I will argue that these experiences can play a major evidential role in justifying one's religious beliefs.

However, the case I provide must not be overstated. In the third chapter of this thesis I will assess the role that testimony plays in justifying beliefs based on reports of

religious experiences. I shall argue that subjects who undergo religious perceptual experiences would be prima facie justified in accepting reports made by other individuals who undergo similar experiences. However, it is my contention that those who have not undergone the experiences in question lack adequate grounds for accepting such reports. Consequently they would not be prima facie justified in believing that religious perceptual experiences had by other individuals are probably veridical.

To be fair, let me make note of the areas in which my thesis can be considered to be deficient. I mentioned that this account's proper home is in a cumulative case that would maintain that one's religious beliefs are justified. Richard Swinburne has provided such a case.[6] He draws upon various traditional sources of evidence such as moral, cosmological, and teleological arguments to argue that belief in God's existence can be shown not to be highly improbable. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this work to provide a cumulative case for God's existence. I will be assuming that Swinburne and other authors have successfully argued that the existence of God, or anyways an incomprehensibly powerful, knowledgeable, and holy being, is not a *highly* improbable matter. This assumption will be essential, for if God's existence can be shown to be a highly improbable matter to everyone's satisfaction then any argument from religious experience will likely be a non-starter. Regardless of evidence that could be mustered on the basis of religious experiences we would have to conclude that such experiences are probably not caused by a divine source. If it is highly improbable that God exists and we accept this to be the case then it is highly unlikely that he caused the experiences in question to occur.

Second, it is beyond the scope of this project to address all of the main arguments and conditions that could potentially defeat the justification that may be accorded to beliefs based on religious experiences.[7] All that I will be able to do is respond to some of

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[6] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 133-235. For a good account of a synergistic or cumulative case see Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, 39-98.

[7] In particular I will not be able to respond to the various reductionist challenges that have been launched against ARE's. These challenges maintain that the occurrence of the relevant experiences is to be best explained in terms of certain 'pathological' or abnormal physiological states or alternatively in terms of non-pathological natural processes. One of the great strengths of Franks-Davis's account is her extended assessment of such challenges. I take it that her responses to these objections are persuasive. Franks-Davis *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 193-238. It is also worth consulting Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, 122-149.

the criticisms that have bearing upon my particular version of the argument from religious experience. Consequently, the positive conclusion that I reach at the end of this project must be considered to be a tentative one, pending an adequate assessment of the issues I neglect. As I proceed I will point out these criticisms and conditions along with other sources I regard as having successfully responded to them. I apologize for this now, however this topic is a vast one and there are simply too many different issues that could be addressed in the space allotted. As my intention is primarily to provide a novel ARE, much of the space allotted will be used for this aim.

Third, as many authors have pointed out there is a great diversity when it comes to different types of religious experiences.[8] In order to do full justice to the question of the evidential value of religious experiences we must take this diversity into account. Ultimately this would be a desirable goal for it would greatly enhance the cumulative case that could be provided. However, I will not be able to pursue this goal to its proper end in this project. Space will simply not permit a detailed analysis of the many varieties of religious experience and the mutually supporting roles that each type may play in justifying religious beliefs. Consequently, we will limit our focus to those experiences that count as carrying the greatest evidential force and consequently form the core evidential base of the type of ARE that I am concerned with.[9] As such, this account will exclusively concentrate on assessing putative religious perceptual experiences. And we shall leave an assessment of the many other varieties of religious experiences to a latter project.

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[8] The classic examples of works showing the diversity of religious experiences include James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*; Also see Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*.

[9] The varieties of experience I will be considering are much narrower than those considered in the accounts provided by Swinburne and Franks-Davis. This is problematic if what I have to say is incompatible or conflicts with the other varieties of religious experience. But given what will be said below, I see no reason to suppose that this would be the case. If this is correct an expanded version of this work can be produced so as to include these other varieties under the relational model that I employ.

Chapter 1

I. The Religious Experiences in Question

The focus of this first chapter will be to hone in on the religious experiences that will be assessed for their evidential merit. As such, I shall begin by considering the broad categories of religious experience from which I will be drawing my data, as well as elucidating one of the central assumptions of this work. With this in mind, I will move on to a detailed consideration of the experiences themselves, insofar as they can be understood under a perceptual model. The third section of this chapter will consist of a brief discussion concerning the very possibility that such experiences can occur as subjects describe them. In this section I will point out another key assumption of this work that is needed in order to get any ARE of the ground.

That there are many varieties of religious experience, with a host of different purported objects and surrounding beliefs, has been well documented within the literature.[10] Many authors have attempted to conceptualize the diversity of these experiences by categorizing them in terms of the various characteristics they display. Of course, a number of different proposals have been advanced as to what the appropriate criteria for carving up the terrain should be. However, broad recurring themes range from the relatively mundane experience where something supernatural is observed through an object that would normally not be taken to be supernatural, as well as quasi-sensory visions and revelations, all the way to the extraordinary rapturous and unifying experiences of the great mystics.[11] The religious experiences considered in this thesis are

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[10] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It is odd that earlier philosophical assessment of the evidential value of religious experiences tended to neglect this well documented diversity. Rather, they focused on exceptional instances of religious experiences—namely the quasi-sensory or mystical variety—and treated these experiences as being exhaustive. See for instance, MacIntyre, "Visions," 254-260.

[11] An identification of the many varieties of religious experiences has led many authors to attempt to provide exhaustive or at least working categories of these experiences. Swinburne defines a religious experience as one where the subject seems to be aware of God or some supernatural being. On the basis of this definition he has proposed an exhaustive categorization of the reports of religious experiences along three lines of thought; namely the manner in which they occur (publicly or privately), the object that is perceived and they way that the experiences are described. Swinburne, *Existence of God,* 298-301. The

typically categorized into two different working categories. These are the regenerative and numinous types of religious experience respectively.[12]

By way of a very brief description, we can say that under the working category of regenerative experience fall the most frequently occurring types of religious experiences. Subjects who would not properly be considered to be mystics, psychics, or prophets typically undergo them. Often, they lead to a renewal of faith as well as producing an improvement, and at times a radical change, in the subject's spiritual, moral, and psychological dispositions. They can be understood as a central element in what makes for a 'living religion', allowing the subject to go beyond the mere acceptance of doctrine and membership in a certain community. Insofar as we are concerned with the content of these experiences, a considerable diversity is manifested. Subjects can experience a sense of sustaining hope, strength, comfort, joy, peace, as well as being guided, loved, forgiven and saved by what is taken to be an external divine power. These passions and beliefs may be elicited in conjunction with a sense of presence of the divine. The experiences themselves are often viewed as religious because they occur during religious activity such as prayer or engagement in ritual.

Religious experiences of this sort can be distinguished from those that fall into the category of numinous experiences.[13] This can be done in terms of the way the subject feels the experience is undergone and subsequently describes it. Unlike regenerative experiences, which involved the loving and comforting aspects of the divine, numinous experiences involve the subject experiencing the terrifying and unapproachable nature of the divine. The subject, upon having an encounter with a majestic holy presence, undergoes a sense of extreme insignificance and fragility and possibly even a sense of unworthiness. Further, they may experience a sense of awe and dread before this numen that is taken to be 'wholly other'. As well, they may experience a sense of being

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problem with this approach is that it excludes a variety of experiences from eastern religious tradition that can still appropriately be called religious.

[12] For a good summary of these categories see Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experiences*, 44-65.

[13] For a detailed description of numinous experiences see Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,* 5-23.

completely overpowered by this presence. And upon contact with it, subjects may experience a sense of rapture or intense and unbearable urgency and energy.[14]

Before a detailed specification of the experiences that I shall be concerned with is made, let me state one of the central assumptions of this thesis. As I noted in the introduction, this thesis is a theoretical assessment of the evidential value of certain religious experiences. It simply does not meet the constraints of this project to engage in a comparative empirical analysis of the numinous, regenerative (and mystical experiences) found across religious traditions. For this, I shall be relying on Caroline Franks-Davis account. Her well argued position is that upon an inter tradition comparison of reports of these experiences, what one finds when they are divested of their highly ramified and tradition specific content is that they form the basis of several relatively un-ramified religious doctrines. These doctrines can subsequently be synthesized into a consistent account or "common core".[15] And it is this account that manages to capture, at a very basic level, the diversity of ways in which experiences of the divine or ultimate reality can be understood. The features she purports to discover are the following:

> i) The mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centers of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.
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> ii) In particular, the phenomenal ego of everyday consciousness, which most people tend to regard as their 'self', is by no means the deepest level of the self; there is a far deeper 'true self' which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality
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> iii) Whatever is the ultimate reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything depends on it.

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[14] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experiences*, pp. 54-65.

[15] Ibid. 166-192. One argument that is often presented against the claim that religious experiences could count as good evidence for religious beliefs is the conflicting claims challenge. This challenge maintains that the diversity of content found within religious experiences indicates that they are nothing more than cultural and tradition specific interpretations. This is because a variety of different beings are believed in on the basis of the experiences, many of which would contradict or conflict with the existence of the others. Thus the justification or evidential value that may accrue from the experiences of one tradition are defeated by the conflicting experiences found in another. Franks-Davis's account forms the basis of her response to this conflicting claims challenge and this seems to me to be essentially correct. Her view is that there are four irreducible types of numinous and mystical experiences. However, at relatively un-ramified levels they can be synthesized into the coherent system of beliefs outlined above. Of course, this is a controversial matter. For a presentation of the conflicting claims challenge see Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 126-127; and Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 181-184. For a criticism of the "common core" approach see Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," 22-74. For other accounts favoring the synthesis view see Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*; and Smart, *Reason and Faiths,* 79-159.

> iv) This Holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence, to whom they are profoundly attracted, and on whom they feel utterly dependant; it may be described positively in terms of goodness, wisdom, and so forth, but all descriptions are ultimately inadequate.
> v) Though introvertive mystical experiences cannot in themselves show that union with something else has been attained, since only the unity is experienced, the evidence of numinous experiences and the fact that experiences of awe before the numen and love of the numen can easily slip into mystical experiences when all sense of the self has been annihilated make it probable that at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power, however that is spelled out. (Other mystical experiences may nevertheless be no more than the integration of or purification of the meditator's mind).
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> vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being's summum bonum, one's final liberation or salvation, and the means by which one discovers one's 'true self' or 'true home'.[16]

Franks-Davis's empirically based account forms the general background to my study. However, I shall be specifically addressing issues surrounding the fourth doctrine that she proposes. The broad question I will be addressing is whether or not those who undergo religious experiences relevant to the fourth doctrine (which will be spelt out in more detail below) would have grounds for postulating that their experiences were veridical. As a matter interrelated to this, I shall also be addressing whether or not there is at least prima facie justification for beliefs that are relevant to the fourth doctrine; namely beliefs concerning the relational nature of the divine and its corresponding interaction with a variety of subjects.

As noted above, I will be considering certain religious experiences from the numinous and regenerative categories. The reader will readily come to see that the experiences I have in mind are those that best support the fourth doctrine. They are, what I shall refer to as, *religious perceptual experiences*. Insofar as a general description of these experiences is concerned, remarks made by William James and Swinburne will be helpful, brief though they might be. James's provides a very succinct summary of the experiences in question. As he notes:

> It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there," more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses" by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.[17]

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[16] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 190-192.

[17] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 67.

Following in James's footsteps, Swinburne claims that religious perceptual experiences involve a subject purportedly apprehending a divine being or state as a private phenomenon. The subject will have "sensations" of the divine that have much in common with the sensations we have during our standard sensory experiences. However the similarity must be considered to be one of analogy for the subject will lack the language to fully describe them. As a further remark, he notes that if these religious experiences were publicly available then they might be described as occurring through some sixth sense.[18] What both of these authors do not point out, but what is captured in Franks-Davis's fourth doctrine is that subjects do not merely sense a presence when they putatively perceive the divine. Rather, subjects experience the divine in a diversity of ways. That is, subjects sense the presence as being a certain way, performing a certain action, having certain dispositions, and possessing a certain nature. Furthermore, subjects sense that they are in a particular relation to this putative object that they seem to perceive. It is the specific nature of this putative relational interaction that allows for them to be classified into the varying categories that we noted above. Here are a few examples taken from the literature:

> 1. "all at once I...felt the presence of God--as if his power were penetrating me altogether...I thanked God that in the course of my life He had taught me how to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on that sinner that I was. I begged ardently that that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will....I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communion with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization...At the bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though, invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him. [19]
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> 2. "There was not a mere consciousness of something there, but fused in the central happiness of it, a startling awareness of some ineffable good. Not vague either, not like the emotional effect of some person, or scene or blossom or music, but the sure knowledge of the close presence of a sort of mighty person, and after it went the memory of it persisted as the one perception of reality. Everything else might be a dream, but not that". [20]

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[18] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 301. It is also worth consulting Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 141-50. Gutting restricts his assessment in a similar manner by concentrating on the religious perceptual experiences that being considered in this work.

[19] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 68.

[20] Ibid. 69.

> 3. "I did not really know that God is present in all things; and when He seemed to me so near, I thought that it was impossible. Yet I could not cease believing that He was there, since I seemed almost certainly to have been conscious of His very presence."[21]
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> 4. "I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling onto deep—the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible to fully describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen." [22]

As far as this project is concerned, and for that matter Franks-Davis's as well, the crucial point that we must keep in mind is that these subjects all claim to have directly perceived what they take to be a holy and divine presence.[23] It is in this regard they are distinct from experiences of mere feeling-states in a religious context. Furthermore, they cannot appropriately be considered as visions, mental images other quasi-sensory experiences of saints and the like. In the cases where one only feels a certain passion elicited in a religious context, there is no precept to be perceived. In the cases where one sees a vision or mental image, the alleged percept of their experience is privately apprehended by one of the five standard sense modalities. By way of contrast, the experiences that we are going to assess are perceptual, allegedly being of an external object. Furthermore they are reported to be non-sensory where the alleged percept is considered to be immaterial, and not observable by the standard senses. But here we must ask what exactly is meant by this notion of a religious perceptual experience?

II. The Perceptual Model

As William Hasker points out, at a general level, the answer to the question just posed lies in the specific model or framework employed to conceptualize and assess

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[21] Ibid. 70.
[22] Ibid. 76.

[23] Franks-Davis, The Evidential Force of Religious Experience, 53.

evidential value of the experiences in question.[24] The model that authors like Swinburne utilize is the perceptual model. Under this model, the religious experiences I have just canvassed are understood as being one kind of perceptual experience amongst several others; the sensory-perceptual type simply being the one we are most acquainted with. As such, Hasker is certainly correct in pointing out that, "since sense-perception is universally regarded as one of our best accredited modes of belief acquisition, it is clear that the perceptual model, provided its claims can be made good, promises important benefits for the rationality of belief".[25] The benefits that Hasker refers to can be clearly seen as they pertain to the issue of justification. Justification with regards to these experiences is held to accrue in the same way that it does for beliefs based on inferential sensory-perceptual experiences. We shall come to see in the second chapter that rather than being a matter of non-inferential self-authentication, both modes of perception are considered to be the proper subjects of a certain principle of rationality. It is the applicability of this principle that confers prima facie justification on both modes of experience.

Insofar as certain regenerative and numinous experiences are assessed under this model, the primary concern is with putative claims to have directly perceived the divine.[26] The emphasis on these types of religious experiences is relatively straightforward. As proponents of ARE's have repeatedly noted these are the only types of religious experiences that might have any legitimate claim to offer *direct* evidence for a reality appropriately understood as religious, beyond the mind of the believer[27]. Three

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[24] Hasker, "The Epistemic Value of Religious Experience," 150-69.
[25] Ibid.150.

[26] They must be considered putative perceptual experiences for the obvious reason that they do not entail the existence of the percept.

[27] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 296; Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 22; Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, 48-50. The claim that these types of religious experiences offer direct evidence for the existence of the purported percept is intended to be analogous to the notion that sensory perceptual experiences offer direct evidence for the existence of some purported object. We shall delve into this issue in more detail when we discuss the principle of credulity in chapter 2. However, as a general remark, that some state of affairs offers direct evidence for the existence of some percept is closely bound up with our direct perception of that percept. When we directly perceive some percept we identify that thing as being in our immediate visual field, and this counts as positive evidence for the existence of that thing. Here, direct perception is being contrasted with indirect perception (for instance seeing a tree as opposed to seeing that same tree on T.V.) in such a manner that in the latter,

conceptual issues must be addressed in order to understand the manner in which the model accounts for religious perceptual experiences. First, we must consider what it means to refer to such experiences as experiences at all. Second, something must be said about why such experiences are considered to be perceptual experiences. Third, we must explicate the conditions under which religious perceptual experiences can be considered to be veridical.

Insofar as these religious experiences are experiences at all, they will be mental event(s) that subjects are consciously aware of. In part, a conscious awareness of the experience will be what appropriately allows it to be referred to as a mental event. As such, subjects will undergo the experience in a certain way. That is, they are undergone in the sense that the *having* of the experience will come about in a non-intentional manner. Further, because subjects undergo the experience, they will be able to identify being in two other states aside from the experience itself. Subsequent to the experience, they will be able to identify that they were in a state where the experience had yet to occur. And they will be able to identify when the experience has ended. Of course, as is the case with many other perceptual experiences, there is a fuzzy border concerning the precise time for when such an experience begins and when it ends.

That these experiences are undergone in a specific manner is important, for it allows us to distinguish them from mental activities. Here I have in mind the various forms of thinking and reasoning processes that are self produced and directed. The religious experiences under consideration should not be construed to be a self-directed mental process initiated, carried through, and terminated solely by the subject. This is not to say that the subject is in the position of merely being a passive recipient of the experience. In order for a person to become aware of, and undergo, the experience there must be considerable interaction between it and their background set of experiences and beliefs. Further, as Franks-Davis has persuasively argued for, unconscious interpretation must play a crucial role in the formation of such experiences and for that matter,

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but not in the former, the object is being perceived through another object. For a discussion of this matter see Alston, *Perceiving God*, 20-22.

perceptual experiences in general.[28] In chapter two this issue shall considered in more detail.

Turning to the question of the way in which proponents of the model consider the experiences in question to be perceptual experiences, it must be pointed out that they understand the notion of perceptual experience in wide sense. As Swinburne notes, 'perceive' is to be understood as the "general verb for awareness of something that is apart from oneself which may be mediated by any of the ordinary senses…or by none of these".[29] Here the central concern is what *seems* to a person to be the case or what the person takes himself to be *aware* of. Consequently, perceptual consciousness will consist of something seeming to present itself to a person in a certain manner.[30] Thus, insofar as the subject undergoes the experience, something will be given to his awareness. For the experiences in question, the subject must take it that he is undergoing an experience where it seems to him that the alleged percept of his experience is external to his mind. It must seem to a subject that he is experiencing an object or state of affairs external to his own mental states even though the experience itself will consist of one such state. Specifically, it must seem to the subject that the alleged percept of his experience is a divine being or reality.

The notion of something seeming a certain way to the subject has two components. The first component involves the subject becoming aware of the phenomenal content of their experience. The second component has to do with the beliefs that arise in conjunction with having the experiences in question. Following Chisholm, proponents of the perceptual model treat the notion of something *seeming* to be a certain way, in an epistemic sense.[31] A person's use of notions such as, "seems", "appears" or "awareness" in a report of her experience indicates what that person is inclined to believe on the basis of her experience. What seems to the person to obtain will generally produce the belief for that person that it does obtain. For the present purpose we are concerned only with

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[28] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 143-55.
[29] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 296.

[30] Ibid. 294-98.

[31] Chisholm, *Perceiving,* 43-54; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 295; Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 21.

beliefs regarding an alleged external percept that is presenting itself to a person in a certain manner.

It also is important to note that perceptual experience, so conceived, will admit of a distinction between private and public perceptual experiences. We can take a public perceptual experience to be one where an external percept would be perceived by anyone in roughly normal circumstances with the requisite properly functioning sensory apparatus and conceptual scheme. Our sensory experiences of standard, medium sized dry goods will fit the criteria of being public perceptual experiences nicely. However, on the conception of perceptual experiences that the proponent of the model utilizes, not all perceptual experiences will be public. That is, they admit of the possibility and actuality of private perceptual experience. These will be experiences where it seems that there is an external percept presenting itself to a subject's awareness. Nonetheless, another individual who has the same functioning perceptual apparatus and conceptual scheme will not undergo such an experience even though they are in the same environment at the same time as the subject.

To end our discussion on the primary structural characteristics of these experiences are, we musk ask what would it take for the subject to be right? What would it take for the experiences in question to be veridical? These religious experiences can be veridical perceptual experiences only if certain internal and external conditions are satisfied. The internal conditions are the ones we have just canvassed. The subject must undergo an experience whereby it seems to them that they are aware some divine being or state as an alleged external percept. Furthermore, they must believe on the basis of this experience that, in fact, they are experiencing such a being or state; that the being exists or the state obtains. The external conditions will primarily involve three things. Starting with the most straightforward, the event, state, or object of the experience must actually exist or obtain and be present at the time and place of the experience.

Second, it must be the case that the event, state, or object was present roughly in the way the subject experienced and understood it to be. That is, so long as the properties being experienced and ascribed to the object roughly correspond to the way the object actually is, the subject can be credited with perceiving that object.[32] The term 'roughly' is

[32] For a discussion of this matter see Alston, *Perceiving God*, 60-62.

used here because the there is a grey zone as to what will constitute being sufficiently accurate when it comes to property identification and ascription of the objects and events purportedly experienced. Franks-Davis makes an excellent point concerning this matter. As it pertains to the content of reports, veridicality is not an all or nothing affair. This is because there is no single "right way" to describe a particular experience.[33] In many cases, even if the experience turns out to be non-veridical on one description, it will be possible to provide another description under which it does in fact turn out to be veridical.

Take, for instance, someone who claims to see a rabbit at night. Upon investigation, however, the purported object perceived turns out to be a rock and not a rabbit. The experience would be considered to be a misperception on the description the subject has provided. However, it would be considered veridical on a less detailed or ramified account. For instance it would be considered a veridical report if the experience were described in terms of seeing a rabbit sized object. Thus, any given misperception of an object can be still be considered veridical so long there is a description of the experience that is more moderate in its degree of ramification and detail. The relevance of this issue to the assumption of this work that was stated above should be clear. Doctrinally laden and tradition specific reports of numinous and regenerative experiences may be misperceptions in this highly ramified form. Subjects could be mistaken about perceptually experiencing the specific God of their religious tradition along with the highly specified properties that are ascribed to it. However, they may potentially be veridical experiences under more moderate descriptions that conform to the general doctrines of the common core.

Turning to the third condition, the divine being must be amongst the causal conditions that led to the occurrence of the experience. That is, it is a necessary condition for the subject to perceive the divine being in question, that the experience be caused by the presence of the divine being. Of course, this being need not be the sole causal condition. Clearly not every facet of the casual chain leading to a person's experiences will be perceived. We do not see the medium through which the stimulus affects the

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[33] Franks-Davis, *Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 25-28.

various mechanisms of sensory perception, nor do we see the inner workings of the mechanisms themselves. However, the situation with religious perceptual experiences is complicated by the fact that we cannot specify what the physiological mechanisms are through which these experiences occur or exactly what the stimulus is and the medium through which it is conveyed. Perhaps this divine being intentionally presents to the subject's awareness bypassing the normal processes of perception. Or perhaps our apprehension of such a being does require the same perceptual and cognitive processes used to perceive the natural world.[34] The proponent of this model will not be able to specify exactly what the right kind of causal relationship is in great detail. They will simply have to say that it must be an appropriate or right one. However, one can be justified in the belief that the appropriate causal condition obtains without being able to specify precisely what that condition is.[35]

III. The Possibility of Religious Perceptual Experiences

It was noted above that proponents of the perceptual model understand the concept of perception in a wide or general sense. This is what allows them to claim that the religious experiences in question ought to be considered perceptual type experiences; for the experiences in question display the perception-making property of something (a divine being) seeming to present itself to the subjects awareness in a certain manner (powerful, loving etc). Of course, one would be correct in pointing out that the proponents of the model are assuming that it is possible for such a being to be present to ones awareness in this way. But is such an assumption warranted?

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[34] For a description of a non-crude interventionist account see Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience,* 226-228.

[35] If there is a divine being of the sort that we are concerned with, then there is no reason to think that it is impossible for such a being to contribute to the production of the experience. This is so, because of the nature and capabilities of purported being in question. Further, as Alston points out, the relevant causal contribution required for perception of an object is different for each sense modality. It does not seem that we have any a priori insight into what it should be for each modality. As such, we must first determine what it is that is perceived, and then determine the distinctive causal contribution that the object makes to the experience. Religious perceptual experiences then are to be treated no differently. As he notes, we will only be able to determine how God is causally related to an experience, "if we can first determine in a number of cases that God is being perceived". Providing grounds for justifiably believing that this is the case is what ARE's are generally aimed at. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 64-67.

This is a very contested issue within the philosophy of religion. Several authors have argued that religious experiences cannot be considered perceptual experiences because the purported divine being cannot be a substantive, enduring object of perception.[36] Other authors argue that it is impossible to experience the dispositional properties of a disembodied agent.[37] If what these authors have said is sound, then any ARE cannot get off the ground. Of course, responses to these criticism have been offered by proponents of ARE's.[38] Here, I shall mention the second main assumption of this work. For the sake of argument I shall be assuming that responses offered by various theistic philosophers are successful in rebutting the criticisms.

Consequently, following Alston, I will maintain that very few a priori considerations constrain the possibility of what one could become experientially aware of. These a priori considerations will largely consist of logical constraints giving us reason to think that it impossible to perceive objects embodying contradictory states. On this assumption, for the most part, our ability to understand what one can be experientially aware of must be learned from experience itself. As such, apart from any empirical considerations, we will have very few means of assessing whether any particular sort of object or state of affairs can be present to one's experience. Consequently we will largely have no basis or reason to think that it is impossible that any particular sort of object or state of affairs can be experienced perceptually, baring logically contradictory states of affairs.

As far as this discussion is concerned the relevant empirical data will be the very experiences under discussion, of which there is a very sizable body of reports. And clearly the number and consistency of such reports will favor the notion that it is at least possible to perceptually experience a divine holy being. Of course, it has been argued that the notion of divine being who essentially possesses the various omni properties is

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[36] Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 326-343; Forgie, "Pike's Mystic Union and the Possibility of Theistic Experience," 231-242.

[37] Zangwill, "The Myth of Religious Experience," 1-22.

[38] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 35-63; Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, 13-41; Oakes, "Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Un-Observability," 357-367; Corcoran, "Is Theistic Experience Phenomenologically Possible?" 449-461.

contradictory.[39] Consequently, some maintain it is impossible that anyone perceive such a being. However, these sorts of objections aside have little relevance to my account. We are assuming that the purported divine being is one captured by the doctrines of the common core as stipulated above. As the doctrines indicate, the divine being need not be one exemplifying the omni-properties that are typically ascribed to God in theistic traditions.

Now, it will not do to say that such experiences are impossible because we do not know how one could be aware of such a being. It is true that we will be largely ignorant about many factors concerning how such a being might present itself to a subject's awareness. These factors will include such things as the physiological mechanisms that allow for the operation of this mode of perception, the way the divine being brings about the experience of itself, and the appropriate causal relation between subject and object. However, our ignorance concerning the means by which such a perception can arise in a subject psyche by no means entails the impossibility of such perceptual experiences. And a subjects' capacity to become aware of such a percept by no means depends upon their, or our, ability to understand how this experience is effected.

Further, it will not do to maintain that the experiences are impossible since there is no distinctive way a divine being could appear to one's experience. To the extent that the objection is grounded in our familiarity with sense perception it would be a circular objection. That is, if the objection maintains that there can be no distinctive way a divine being could be apprehended by a subject because there are no sensory perceptual modes of perceiving such a being then it clearly begs the question; it assumes that the only modes of perceiving objects are the sensory modes. Further, as assumed above, if there are very few a priori constraints on the possibility of what one can become aware of, then there will be very few a priori limits on the features that could manifest themselves in the phenomenal content of one's experience. We must learn what these limits are from experience. But of course, the subjects we are considering all consistently maintain that the phenomenal content of their experience involves it seeming to them that a divine presence is before them in various manners. And since these reports are grounded in their

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[39] See Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers,* 15-120.

experiences they must be taken seriously as reports of normal sensory experience. As Alston notes, "Who is in a better position to determine whether S is having an experience as if something's presenting itself to S as A than S?"[40] And while it is true that the subject's own assessment of the phenomenal character of her experience is not immune from error, this obtains for our standard cases of sensory perception as well.

However, one may have strong doubts over there actually being any phenomenal content involved in the experiences in question. To the extent that there is not, one may legitimately maintain that they must not be considered to be perceptual experiences. Typically when we perceptually experience other objects we conceptualize that experience in terms of objective properties the object possesses. Take any experience of a medium sized dry good presenting itself to our awareness. In the overwhelming majority of cases we will conceptualize that experience in terms of the continuing dispositions, powers and capacities that the putative object possesses. That is, we go beyond the sensory data presented to us. Not only would the phenomenal representation of this object consist of a conceptual grouping of various patterns of phenomenal qualia. It would also involve the incorporation of a series of concepts in terms of which the object is typically understood. Nonetheless, the various patterns of phenomenal qualia will form the basis of construing our experiences in this objective manner. Furthermore, to a large extent we are capable of enumerating the basic phenomenal features of our sensory experience. As Alston correctly points out, this is because we are aware of the "elementary prerequisites" for such sensory perception to arise. To a large extent we know a lot about the interaction between the various physiological and psychological mechanisms that allow for the production of sensory perceptual awareness. In part, this knowledge is due to the regularity of the sensory experience to occur under normal circumstances. This in turn allows for us to understand, catalogue, and create an inter-subjective language for the phenomenal content of the various types of sensory experience.

Of course, as was pointed out above we are largely ignorant of the mechanisms involved in religious perceptual experiences. Furthermore, aside from general considerations, we cannot identify any regularity insofar as the occurrence of these experiences is concerned. Consequently we lack the means by which to catalogue and

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[40] Alston, *Perceiving God,* 36.

create an inter-subjective language for the phenomenal content of the experiences. After pointing out our deficiencies with regards to experiences sufficiently similar to the ones we are considering Alston notes:

> The reason this is good news is that it explains why we would be in a position of almost complete ignorance here even if there are basic phenomenal qualities that make up the intrinsic character of divine appearances. Thus our deficiencies in this regard give us no reason to doubt that divine appearances do have distinctive phenomenal features.[41]

We may grant the point that, even on the supposition that there are such basic phenomenal qualities for the religious experiences in question we would be largely ignorant of this fact. However, contrary to Alston, one may believe that it is precisely because of our ignorance concerning the mechanisms involved in the experiences that doubt would arise over the issue of there being any distinctive phenomenal content. What Alston should have said in reply to this is that our ignorance surrounding this matter does not give one reason to think that it is impossible for these experiences to have phenomenal content. Because of our ignorance, we could not say whether these experiences objectively have this content or not. Thus ignorance alone would not provide grounds to maintain that it is impossible for the experiences to have such content. Of course, one would be correct in pointing out that while our ignorance does not show that it is impossible for religious perceptual experiences to have phenomenal qualia, it does nothing to support the possibility of there being such content. In order to see how our ignorance on the matter fails to be a problem for the proponent of an ARE, we must consider the merits of the Principle of Credulity. This will be a topic of discussion in the second chapter.

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[41] Ibid. 54.

Chapter 2

I. The Principle of Credulity

Thus far I have provided an account of the religious perceptual experiences in question. Essentially, they are experiences whereby a person undergoes a mental event where it seems that some divine being is present before them in a certain manner. On the basis of such experiences a person may come to believe that a divine being exists objectively, in a manner external to their minds. But even if what was said in the last chapter concerning the possibility of such experiences occurring veridically is correct, this possibility does nothing in terms justifying beliefs and claims concerning the existence of such a being. The issue that must be addressed is whether religious perceptual experiences provide any sort of justification for the religious beliefs that arise on the basis of them. This issue will preoccupy us for the first section of this chapter. In lieu of what will be said, I shall move on to providing my modified version of an ARE in sections two and three. Sections four and five will be devoted to addressing two types of criticisms that are presented against ARE's like the one I shall be developing. The first objection is aimed at barring the application of the principle of credulity to religious perceptual experiences. The second objection attempts to account for religious perceptual experiences wholly in terms of interpretation. The response that I offer against the second objection may be considered the foundation upon which one can respond to the various criticisms maintaining religious perceptual experiences are best explained in terms of natural causes.

The answer to the issue of how religious experiences can provide any sort of justification for religious beliefs lies in a common sense understanding of the evidential role that perceptual experiences play in the justification of existence beliefs. A perceptual experience of a purported percept does not entail the existence of that percept. However, we generally think that perceptual experiences provide a person with good evidence for the existence of a given purported percept. When it seems to us that we are seeing a standard medium sized dry good or state of affairs (tables, cats, people etc.) we typically

think that we have good evidence for believing that the dry good or state of affairs exists or obtains.

Our thinking that this is the case stems from an implicit acceptance of a certain principle of rationality. For our standard perceptual experiences we implicitly appeal to a principle or rule that allows us to rationally connect experience with reality. This principle has been labeled 'the principle of credulity' by a number of authors.[42] Richard Swinburne's formulation of the principle is as follows:

> It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so. [43]

As it stands, however, this formulation of the principle is somewhat vague. It does not clearly express what its intended scope is to be, what type of justification it allows to be conferred to beliefs, and what role it plays in an ARE. Here, some comments can be provided that may help to clarify some of the confusion surrounding this principle.

Regardless of how it is phrased, the principle is not meant to be limited in application to perceptual experiences alone. It is also intended to cover or apply to our memory, rational inference, and other sources of justification.[44] So alternative formulations of the principle can be presented. For instance we may say that, "If it seems (epistemically) to a subject that an object is present or was present, an event is occurring or has occurred, and a state of affairs obtains or has obtained then what seemed to the subject to be the case was probably so". Alternatively, one could say that, "What seems (epistemically) to the subject to be the case is probably the case, unless certain defeating conditions override it". The main point that any alternative formulation must communicate is that the principle is intended to confer a presumption of innocence to our experiences of the world and the beliefs based on those experiences. That is, we are to initially accept as being the case what seems to us to be the case, barring considerations to think otherwise.

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[42] Swinburne develops the principle that C.D. Broad's argument depends upon. See Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," 197.

[43] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 303. Also see Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification*, 141-149.

[44] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 303; and Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 96-97.

In order to understand why authors like Swinburne take the principle of credulity to be a fundamental principle of rationality we can consider an objection that may be raised against it. It might be said that the principle of credulity is not a fundamental principle of rationality. One can be warranted in accepting such a principle only if there are good inductive grounds for accepting it. Thus one may wish to claim that a person's perceptual experience provides evidence for the existence of the purported percept only if in past cases, similar perceptual experiences of similar purported percepts proved to be veridical or at least that the veridicality of these past experiences proved to be a good pragmatic assumption to work from. So our experience of any medium sized dry good can provide evidence that such a good exists only if we have seen such a thing in the past and our past experiences have not been misleading.

However, as Swinburne correctly points out, the problem with this objection is that it relies on a person's ability to recall successful past experiences and infer to the success of their present experience.[45] This is because in some sense the person must "have the evidence" at their disposal in order to be justified in making the inference. But in doing so, they must rely on the principle of credulity. This is because in order to "have the evidence" of past experience, those experiences must be remembered and recalled correctly. But there will not be any inductive grounds for the reliability of memory for an inductive justification for the reliability of a person's memory would rely on memory itself and as such be blatantly circular. As such we must rely on a basic principle that grants an initial presumption in favor of taking what seems to be the case as being the case. In this context the application of the principle will be for claims based on memory. Thus, we can give an inductive justification for the principle of credulity on the basis of past experience only if the experiences themselves are held to be trustworthy on the basis of the principle of credulity.

More generally, the reason that proponents of the principle of credulity think that it must be admitted as basic principle of rationality is due to our epistemic plight if such a principle is rejected. Franks-Davis captures the heart of the worry in noting that, "no philosopher has yet managed to provide (non-circular) inductive justification for our confidence in our reasoning processes, experiences, memories, and assertions of

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[45] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 304-306.

others".[46] But if it is not within our ability to provide this inductive justification and we have no other basis from which this confidence can arise then it would appear that we are lead to a throughgoing skepticism with regards to the reliability of these basic epistemic sources of justification and knowledge. If what seems to us to be the case is not admitted as being good evidence for that thing being the case, all things being equal, then we appear to be trapped in a solipsistic world where we really cannot know or be justified in very much other than what we have direct access to.[47]

However, this position hardly seems acceptable. Most of us do think that the basic epistemic sources of perception, memory, inference and testimony do yield knowledge and justification. Furthermore, most of us think that we are perfectly rational in taking this to be the case. Thus, if we wish to avoid what proponents have referred to as the "skeptical bog" and embrace this non-skeptical stance we must adopt the principle of credulity and allow it to have considerable force when it comes to determining and justifiably believing when objects are present, what states of affairs obtain and which events are occurring. However, we cannot expect that any inductive proof of the principle can be provided, for as we have seen such a proof would be viciously circular. Such a "proof" would presuppose the reliability of the very experiences it purports to demonstrate. Thus the principle must be accepted as a basic rule governing our rational judgments on matters concerning the connection between experience and reality.[48]

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[46] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 100.

[47] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 303-310; and Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Value of Religious Experience,* 100-101.

[48] Jonathan Kvanvig has presented an interesting argument against the principle of credulity. Kvanvig adopts a falliblist stance with regards to justification and rationality. As such, he maintains that the principle of credulity is a good principle, insofar as it does not provide any guarantee that the belief forming mechanisms to which it is applied will form true deductively based beliefs. However, he argues that the adoption of the principle commits one to an infaliblist position. The intent behind the application of principle is to confer justified probabilistic beliefs regarding the objectivity or truth of some thing or state of affairs beyond the subject's mind and at an intra-subjective level. But he thinks that the only way it could do this would be if it were a true epistemic principle. It must be a principle, which guarantees that beliefs concerning putative states of affairs are probably true. Thus, if the credulist desires to justifiably and intra-subjectively connect beliefs about the world to objective states of affairs via the principle of credulity, then she is committed to infallibly maintaining that the principle of credulity is a true and intra-subjective principle of rationality. However, as Kvanvig thinks that infalliblism is false, he does not think that there can be any legitimate grounds to maintain this. The determination of "correct" or "true" will be a wholly subjective matter. Consequently, adopting the principle of credulity does not provide a secure basis to maintain that our beliefs about the world are probably true. See Kvanvig, "Credulism," 101-109. By way of

Nonetheless, the manner in which it is to be granted considerable force in our rational determination of objects and states of affairs must be properly understood. The use of the word 'probable' in Swinburne's formulation of the principle (as well as in the alternative formulations I have provided) can easily be misinterpreted, so as to make the principle appear to provide much more support than it actually does.[49] Here 'probable' is not to be understood as being 'very likely to be true' or in a manner that one ought to believe that the percept of their experience exists. Rather, 'probable' is to be understood in terms of being more probable than not. It is more probable than not that what seems to one to be the case, is the case. The notion of 'probable' being employed here is one akin to that used in civil law. The probability that gets accorded to an existence or memory claim is greater than the probability that its opposite is true, though not necessarily much higher (at least it does so in the absence of successful challenges). It is greater, though not necessarily much greater, than fifty percent. Furthermore, the justification concerning existence or memory beliefs that the principle allows for is only prima facie and defeasible. As such, the principle can be understood as saying that when something seems (epistemically) to an individual to be the case, that individual is prima facie justified in believing that it is more probable than not that it is the case.

Understood in this manner, we can see that the principle provides no guarantee that an experiential claim based on a perceptual or memorial experience can be considered highly probable.[50] It simply accords such claims an initial attitude of credulity or

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response, however, credulists can accept that they will need to maintain that the principle is a true principle of rationality. But this acceptance need not commit them to an infalliblist position. They can maintain that it is an intra-subjective firmly held view that our beliefs and experiences about the world do connect to that world. This requires the postulation of certain principles, which people think are rational and true. Nonetheless, at the most basic level, maintaining that these principles are true principles is done on a pragmatic basis. We have no choice but to accept them as true (even thought they may very well not be) for they best explain our total picture of the world and our relations to that world. This is also the approach Alston takes in arguing for the second order epistemic question concerning the acceptability of firmly established doxastic practices. See Alston, *Perceiving God.*

[49] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 102-105.

[50] At a generalized level the principle of credulity is intended to extend in an unqualified manner to positive seemings of the apparent existence of some object. Michael Martin, however, has objected to this notion. He maintains that in our day-to-day interactions with the world, an experience of an apparent absence of a medium sized dry object in a certain context, counts as good evidence for it not being there. So we can construct a reverse principle of rationality, which maintains that all things being equal, if it seems to the subject that something is not present then probably that thing is not present. The application of this principle to the experiences of subjects who do not undergo religious perceptual experiences would result

presumption of innocence. In turn, this does not ensure that the probability conferred to such claims is to be considered sufficient to warrant a strong belief in existence of the purported percept or that some state of affairs obtains. Several other factors will have to be taken into account in order for an experience to be considered sufficient evidence to adequately warrant a perceptual belief. These factors will include the importance of the claim being made and the extent to which the "special conditions" or "challenges" posed against the claim can be defeated. Where the claim is very important (as it is for cases of religious experiences we are considering) the degree to which one can be confident in their perceptual claim will rise in proportion to the thoroughness of the investigation they carry out. As the quantity and severity of possible challenges posed against a perceptual claim are defeated, the probability of the truth of the claim will increase beyond the initial amount allocated to it by the principle of credulity.

Briefly, the challenges that can be raised against a perceptual claim can be broken down into two rough categories. Under the first category we find subject-related challenges where one may argue that the experience in question was of a sort that produced unreliable or non-veridical perceptions in the past. This could be due to the conditions under which the perception was undergone or alternatively that the subject(s) themselves were generally unreliable. Perhaps this could result from a deficiency in the training required to have a veridical perception or because the circumstances under which the perception occurred would generally lead to non-veridical perceptions. The second

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in the justified belief that (probably) there is no such being. Martin, "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience," 79-93. The first thing to note about this argument is that Martin appears to confuse the difference between having an experience of absence with the absence of having the experience of some object. Certain religious experiences can be considered to be experiences of an absence where the ultimate reality is apprehended as consisting of nothingness. However these experiences are fundamentally different from not having an experience of some object. For instance, an inability to perceptually experience a chair that has gone missing from one's office would be considered an absence of experience. While the former kind of experience may very well fall under his principle, the latter may not. Nonetheless, it is intuitive to think that Martin is correct about the absence of an experience of a dry good counting as prima facie evidence for a belief that this state of affairs obtains. But this is only in a limited and qualified sense. It must be limited and qualified because the parameters of the cases that Martin envisions are quite specific. The absence of a given dry good in a room counts as good evidence that that thing is not in that room. But it does not count as good evidence that such a good does not exist anywhere. In order for the absence of an experience to count as good evidence for the non-existence of some object either one of two additional factors must be the case. First, there must be good reason to believe that the subject in those circumstances would have experienced the object, were it to exist anywhere. Second, there must be good reason to think that all subjects have failed to perceive the object in all contexts and circumstances in which it should have been perceptible to them, were it to exist. Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 98.

type of challenge that can be raised against a perceptual claim are object, or percept, related challenges. Here one may attempt to show that the alleged percept of the putative perception was probably not present, or, even if present, did not cause the subject's experience to occur. I shall address some of the subject related challenges directed at the veridicality of putative religious perceptual experiences throughout this chapter.[51]

The relationship between the principle of credulity to an ARE such as the one Swinburne and Franks-Davis propose is relatively straightforward. The religious experiences that they canvass satisfy the criteria for being a perceptual experience. That is, they satisfy the criteria of something epistemically seeming to be the case to the subject. As such they are properly understood as a type of perceptual experience amongst others. Since the principle of credulity is a fundamental principle of rationality and the religious perceptual experiences in question can be considered to be a type of perceptual experience, the onus is on the skeptic to provide sufficient reason to think that the principle should not be extended to cover these experiences. Assuming for the moment, that all such attempts are inadequate, the subjects of these experiences are granted an initial presumption of innocence when it comes to their perceptual claims. That is, they are to be considered prima facie justified in believing that the purported percept of their experience probably exists. And more specifically, that the phenomenal content of their experience objectively is as it appears to be.

This, however, is only the first step in the argument. Thus far consideration has only been given to an isolated experiential claim. If the argument were to end here then it would obviously not be very persuasive. First, no one other than the subject in question has been given reason to accept the subject's experiential claim as prima facie justified. Second, even if the experience in question were to be granted an initial presumption of innocence, it would be quickly overridden by challenges from improbability on

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[51] As I mentioned, this thesis is one that would find its proper home in a cumulative case argument. This point is relevant to the object related challenges just mentioned. Typically, what one finds is that arguments from evil, arguments for the contradictory nature of the concept of God, and arguments to the meaninglessness of religious language, are appealed to in order to show that it is highly improbable that such a being exists. It is beyond the scope of this work to address these matters. Nonetheless, such an assessment will be crucial to our final assessment of the issue. Thus we will have to understand the positive conclusion that is reached at the end of this work to be tentative and contingent on the outcome of such an assessment. For a good example of the kind of cumulative case that I rely on, see Swinburne, *The Existence of God.*

background evidence. That is, when the experience is considered in isolation against the weight of the background likelihood of its occurrence and that likelihood is not very high (or no higher than its non-occurrence) then we have good reason to suspect the veridicality of that experience.

As an example we can think of a person who reports having seen a strange animal that has never been seen by any of her contemporaries or by others in the past. Let us suppose that this person does not have a subsequent perceptual experience of the purported animal again. Furthermore, after others carry out a careful search for that animal, it still remains the case that no other person has a sufficiently similar experience of the reported animal. Now, the background probability that the perceptual claim is veridical (that such an animal exists to be perceived and in this case was perceived) will be quite low. This is because no other person has ever reported seeing such an object in the past. As such it would seem that the subject would not have sufficient reason to have great confidence in the perceptual claim that she makes. There is no good reason to think that a veridical experience of the sort she had would take place. Furthermore, as no other person has a similar perceptual experience after the investigation was completed, there would be strong reason to believe that the presumption of innocence granted to the perceptual claim is overridden. This is because there would be no supporting evidence from other subjects.

As Swinburne and others are willing to admit, a cumulative case that can be constructed in favor of theism (without considering the evidential value of religious experiences) can only show that the prior probability of the existence of a divine holy being is "not very low" though not very high either.[52] As such, the prior probability of an isolated religious perceptual experience occurring veridically fares in a similar manner to the animal case just presented. If we consider only one perceptual claim in isolation, the background prior probability of such an experience being veridical would seem to quash the initial presumption of innocence. There would be no reason to think or expect that such an experience would occur veridically prior to it happening. In order to overcome this challenge what is needed is evidence supporting the initial perceptual claim. This

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[52] Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 95; and Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 328-345.

evidence would come in the form of corroborating reports of similar experiences had by many different subjects in a variety of contexts. In the animal case, if a number of other individuals report having similar experiences of the purported animal, we would think that the initial presumption of innocence would hold and prima facie justification granted to the initial perceptual report remains.

In order to secure this for the religious cases, Swinburne and Franks-Davis propose another basic principle of rationality called the principle of testimony. This principle stipulates that in the absence of special considerations, it is reasonable to believe that the experiences of others are probably as they report them. I shall be dealing with this issue of testimonial based justification in the third chapter. However, temporarily assuming that this principle is correct, when it is combined with the principle of credulity, it arrives at the notion that other things being equal, what other people report to be the case is probably the case.[53] Again, the term "probably" that is being used here is to be taken as meaning more probable than not. However, as reports of experiences are at least one step removed from a first hand experience, the probability that would be accorded to these reports via the principle of testimony must be less than the probability that would be accorded to a first hand experience via the principle of credulity. Nonetheless, Swinburne and Franks-Davis maintain that a presumption of innocence is granted to the reports others make and this gives us prima facie reason to accept them.[54] The consequence of this is that the combined evidential weight of the host of reports of perceptual religious experiences allows for the challenge of prior probability to be overcome. Broad captures the intuition behind this idea when he notes that:

> When there is a nucleus of agreement between the experiences of men in different places, times, and traditions, and when they all tend to put much the same kind of interpretation on the cognitive content of these experiences, it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective aspect of reality unless there be some positive reason to think otherwise.[55]

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[53] The term "probably" is being taken in the Swinburnian sense of being more probable than not.

[54] A detailed assessment of testimony pertaining to religious perceptual experiences shall be provided in the next chapter.

[55] Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," 197.

Thus these authors maintain that on the basis of the two principles of rationality, a subject can become prima facie justified in believing that it is (at least) more probable than not that a divine holy being has presented itself to a great many people.

II. An Embedded Relational Model

I have argued that the account of the principle of credulity that Swinburne and Franks-Davis provide is correct. I think it is clear that we do in fact need to employ such a principle if we are to avoid a thoroughgoing skepticism, while still desiring to rationally connect our experiences to the world in which we live. And given that it is a fundamental rule of rationality, the onus must be on the skeptic to show that it may not be permitted to cover the putative religious perceptual experiences. I shall be considering what I take to be the most serious response to this position below. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the evidential value of the experiences in question can be understood and assessed in a much more robust and holistic manner.

We have seen that it is essential to Swinburne and Franks-Davis' ARE that many putative religious perceptual claims be granted the status of being prima facie more probable than not in order to overcome the challenge from background prior probability. On this basis they can claim that any of these experiences provide prima facie justification for the belief that they are veridical. Nonetheless, there is still a problem with their particular version of the ARE. As we saw, they have taken into account the evidential value of single putative religious experience and the evidential value of a great number of different people having a similar experience in different contexts and backgrounds. But we must notice two interrelated facets of the assessment they provide. First, primacy is still given to single isolated occurrences of the relevant experiences even though they are assessed in a collective manner in order to over come various challenges that can be brought against them. Second, their efforts (at least with regard to the positive argument that they offer) are primarily focused on attempting to provide conditions and principles whereby the isolated experiences in question provide good evidence that the purported divine being exists.

While focusing on these two facets may lend itself well to justifying existence claims and beliefs regarding the veridicality of the experiences, it is unnecessarily restrictive. By pursuing the second facet, as stated above, justice is not done to the diversity of relational content that is being reported by the subjects. It was pointed out in the first chapter that the putative religious experiences in question are undergone in a manner where the purported divine percept does not merely seem to exist. As even our short list of examples indicated, it seemed to these subjects that the purported percept was interacting with them in a variety of different ways. The purported percept was apprehended as being a certain way, doing or performing certain actions and generally communicating certain messages to the subject. As such the subjects all understood that they stood in relation to the purported percept and that in some sense the experience was directed at them. While both authors do recognize these features of religious perceptual experiences, their assessment of these features is left implicit in their accounts.

By pursuing the first facet, little importance has been granted to evidential value concerning the manner in which various subjects can undergo the experiences in question throughout their lives. What was not pointed out in our assessment of these experiences in the first chapter is that the putative religious perceptions happen to greater or lesser extents to certain subjects. What I mean by this is that some subjects undergo such experiences a number of times throughout their lives where it seems to them that a diversity of different messages are communicated by the divine. That is, on different occasions the purported divine percept seems to be, or do, different things in different ways as it stands in relation to that subject. This in turn gives rise to the belief that the purported being in question stands in some form of relationship with the subject. Many examples of such reports exist in the literature:

> 5. "I have on a number of occasions felt that I had enjoyed a period of intimate communion with the divine. These meetings came unasked and unexpected, and seemed to consist merely in the temporary obliteration of the conventionalities which usually surround and cover my life"[56]
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> 6. "There are times when I seem to stand in his very presence, to talk with him. Answers to prayer have come, sometimes direct and overwhelming in their revelation of his presence and powers."[57]

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[56] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 80.

[57] Ibid.83.

> 7."I have the sense of a presence, strong, and at the same time soothing, which hovers over me. sometimes it seems to enwrap me with sustaining arms"[58]
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> 8. "whenever I had any trouble, especially when I had conflict with other people, either domestically or in the way of business, or when I was depressed in spirits or anxious about affair, I now recognize that I used to fall back for support on this curious relation I felt myself to be into this fundamental cosmic It. It was on my side, or I was on its side...in the particular trouble, and it always strengthened me and seemed to give me endless vitality to feel its underlying and supporting presence. In fact it was the unfailing fount of justice, truth and strength, to which I instinctively turned at times of weakness"[59]

By giving only an implicit treatment of these two dimensions of religious putative perceptions—the diversity of content and multiple occurrences—Swinburne and Franks-Davis have neglected the various sorts of beliefs that certain subjects would be prima facie justified in believing in addition to the existence of the purported being.

In part, the reason that these authors have neglected these two dimensions is due to the model of assessment that they employ. Under the perceptual model, perceptual experiences of a purported object can count as evidence for the existence of that object. However, there will be a great diversity when it comes to the types of objects that can putatively be perceived. Consequently the model's criteria of assessment must be kept as general as possible to accommodate for the diversity of experiences that fall under it. As such, criteria to assess the multiplicity of ways in which a subject can experience a single purported object, insofar as the purported object interacts with the world, need not be included in the model. Such criteria would be far too specific and extraneous for the model's intended purpose. Because of this, the perceptual model as it stands, does not allow for a proper treatment of the dimensions of the religious perceptual experiences that I am interested in; at least not beyond the evidential value that they may contribute to the existence of a purported being. What is needed is a better means of assessing the specific kind of thing—its character, dispositions and ways of interacting—that is purported to exist.

As a means of resolving these problems, I propose that the putative religious perceptual experiences in question be assessed under a more narrow and specified version

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[58] Ibid.83.

[59] Ibid. 84.

of the perceptual model. This model shall be referred to as the care relational model.[60] As a variant of the perceptual model, it will utilize the same principles of rationality to assess the evidential value of putative perceptual experiences. However, the appropriate data that will fall under its scope will be a specific subset of perceptual experiences. This subset will consist of putative perceptual experiences of a certain type of thing; namely perceptual experiences of other persons whether they be human or otherwise. More specifically, it will have application to reports where it seems to a subject that they experience a being who is relating to them in some manner. That is, experiences where the purported percept directly communicates and interacts with the subject in a dynamic manner over time. In order to develop this model and the epistemic criteria that it postulates, we must address the central question the model proposes to answer: When is a subject sufficiently warranted in believing that she is in a genuine care relationship with another person?

To begin to answer this question, it must be pointed out that the notion of a care relationship is not a precise one. There are, of course, many varieties of relationships. We have different sorts of care relationships with our friends, our family, and acquaintances. All of these different relationships exhibit varying characteristics and displays of interaction and communication. Furthermore, the quality of a relationship will vary in degrees. We interact, communicate and care for other persons and these persons reciprocate this towards us in varying degrees and in different ways. As such, the notion of a care relationship is something of a cluster concept encompassing many varieties of relationships all of which bear family resemblance with one another. But of central importance is the existence of an actual person on the receiving end of the subject's affections. Furthermore, this actual person must reciprocate affections of his or her own towards the subject over time.

At a very general level the paradigm examples of care relationships—those had with family and good friends—indicate to us the kind of content that can be expected to be incorporated into the communication and interaction had between the parties. First, we

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[60] The inspiration for this model stems from various authors writing on feminist ethics and epistemology. See Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account"; Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity"; Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge".

learn from these paradigm cases that there must be an earnest communication of the kinds of persons that we are. That is, the persons with whom we take to be in a care relationship must communicate their character and attributes, as well as their thoughts, fears, hopes, aspirations and the like. In turn, we must reciprocate this. Second, there must be messages of considerable interest in who the other person is and what the other person has to say. This is typically done by responding to what was said by the person as well as enjoying the others person's presence. Third, we should also expect that both parties would demonstrate interest in the circumstances or states of affairs that they find themselves in. Perhaps one party finds themselves in circumstance where they are grieving or elated or anything in between. As such we would expect that the other party in the relationship would communicate an appropriate message of care for that context. Fourth, we would also expect messages of concern for the relationship as a whole concerning its development and progress. Perhaps these may include messages of accountability as well as expectations that one has for the individual with whom they are in that relationship with.

However, a problem presents itself in determining whether one is in such a relationship. The problem is a localized version of the skeptical bog problem considered above; namely the problem of other minds. We each have access to our own sensations, perceptions, and beliefs. However, given the kind of limited beings that we are, we do not possess the ability to access the mental states of other persons. We have no direct means of perceiving what they perceive, feel or believe. As such, we cannot demonstrate that there is an actual person on the receiving end of our affections; one who reciprocates their own affections towards us. A partial solution to this problem presents itself by way of the principle of credulity. On the basis of this principle we can say that, all things being equal, each individual isolated of-relation experience provides us with prima facie evidence that the purported percept of the experience exists and is communicating the particular message on that occasion. However in order to have sufficient warrant for believing that one is in a genuine care relationship with another person other conditions will have to be satisfied.

The first condition has already been alluded to. What an individual requires is a cumulative set of diverse of-care experiences. That is to say one must have experienced,

over a substantial duration of time, not only a number of of-relation experiences but various kinds of these experiences. We need only consider a straightforward case in which one was not justified in believing that he is in a genuine care relationship to get clear on the necessity of this condition.

Consider a case where one person, D, is hopelessly in love with another, call her E. However, E could care less about D. D spends his days trying to demonstrate his care for E by showering her with gifts, communicating to E that he cares for her, and regularly performs actions selflessly done on E's behalf. On the basis of these actions D believes that he is in a genuine care relationship with E. Nonetheless, E does not reciprocate any of these affections. Furthermore, E does not hold the same belief that D does concerning their interactions and finds D's persistent shows of affection to be rather annoying. Furthermore E's actions and behavior would indicate this to D if he were not so smitten.

Surely in this case D would not be warranted in believing that he is in an enduring relationship with E. Why? It is because D lacks the evidence to ground his belief. He lacks having had the of-relation experiences that would indicate to him that his feelings are reciprocated. But clearly it would not be enough for him to have one or two of these experiences. That is, say E hugged D on one of the occasions that D did a selfless action for E. He could not say, on the basis of this one of-relation experience, that he now was in a care relationship with E. This is because a few experiences of limited variety are insufficient to provide a total picture of how another person is disposed towards the subject. Again, not only would D require a number of such experiences. He would also need to undergo experiences of differing kinds that incorporate the various messages appropriate to such a relationship as discussed above.[61]

Even though the satisfaction of undergoing a diversity of of-relation experiences would go a long way towards justifying a person's belief that they are in a genuine care relationship, it alone would not suffice. There are still concerns surrounding the genuineness of the experiences themselves. We need to be justified in believing that the

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[61] Now it might be asked just how many diverse experiences would one need to be warranted in believing that they are in a genuine care relationship. To this question we can provide no clear answer. We simply cannot provide any hard and fast number which if attained satisfies the requirement of possessing such a set. However, it strikes me that we have an intuitive idea of when this requirement has been amply satisfied. We need only to consider the paradigm cases of care relationships in our own lives to realize this point.

purported person is one that could stand in relations with other persons as well. To see why this is necessary let us consider another straightforward case where a person would not be justified in believing that they were in a genuine care relationship. Take a delusional person, F, who has a series of of-relation experiences with Elvis at the supermarket. He believes that he has had several 'meaningful' conversations with Elvis concerning both of their lives, the weather, and the successes and failures of his musical career. Furthermore, he believes that he has seen Elvis perform certain displays of physical behavior that indicated to him that Elvis was caring for him. In this case F would not be warranted in believing that his of-relation experiences were veridical and as such that he is in a genuine enduring relationship with Elvis. F would be in a situation where a great amount of evidence would be available to him that could disconfirm the validity of his experiences. For instance, others around him could report that they saw F talking to himself every time he thought he was talking to Elvis.

Part of the reason that F finds himself in this epistemic plight stems from the fact that no other person could have the of-relation experiences of this supermarket Elvis that F had, and this is so even in principle. The actual situation F finds himself in, of having deluded experiences, does not allow another person under normal circumstances to come along at a later time and have sufficiently similar of-relation experiences of the purported Elvis. But the obvious consequence of this is that F could not have external evidence that his experiences were veridical. No one could provide him with corroboration that his of-relation experiences match up with the way things actually are. We see from this case that even if an initial presumption of innocence is granted to the subject's relational experiences via the principle of credulity, that presumption is quickly overrun. The similarity between the defeasibility of hallucinatory cases and the inability of a single perceptual experience to overcome the challenge from background improbability should be clear. If only a single person undergoes the experience(s) in question then grave doubt is cast upon the veridicality of that subject's experience(s). This points to a need to recognize a community dimension when it comes to being sufficiently warranted in believing that one is in an enduring relationship that is genuine or actual.

As a means of fulfilling this we can postulate two separate conditions that must be satisfied in principle. The first, to be referred to as the numerousness condition, provides

direct evidence that the subject belongs to a community of experiencers. It stipulates that the subject who has a cumulative set of relational experiences must be able to accumulate evidence indicating that the purported percept is of a sort that can be experienced in a relational manner by others. This will consist in the initial subject acquiring evidence, (via other relational and perceptual experiences) that various persons have had sufficiently similar experiences of the purported percept. Satisfaction of this condition provides the initial subject with corroboration that her cumulative set is veridical and as such that the relationship is genuine.

The second condition that we must include in our model is the repeatability/predictability condition. This condition involves the broad expectation that subjects will continue to have varied relational experiences of the purported person. In our paradigm cases of enduring relationships there is an expectation that both parties will continue to develop their relationship over time through varied means of interaction and communication. This expectation arises from the perceived importance that both parties assign to the relationship itself and to the other person with whom they are in that relationship. And this perceived importance is revealed through either party's cumulative set of relational experiences. Thus, for those who take themselves to be in such a relationship, the track record that the subject has of undergoing diverse relational experiences builds the expectation that this interaction will continue. However, the expectation that the purported person will continue to interact with the subject must not be too stringent.

With objects like standard medium sized dry goods—chairs, Kraft dinner and the like—we can, and do, make relatively precise predictions about when we would be able to observe them again. Not only can we predict that a subject would have further experiences sufficiently similar to his initial experience of a given object. We can also predict that other people would have similar experiences of that same object. So when a person leaves her office, a precise prediction can be made indicating that she would observe the same chair upon returning to the office at a later time. Furthermore, we can predict that were other people to go into the room, they would also see the same chair. However, the predictions that we can make concerning our of-relation experiences cannot be as precise. Standard objects tend to remain relatively constant in the various situations

that we find them in. Our chairs remain chairs even when we close the door on them; they don't have the means—the power and propensity—to interact in dynamic ways with the environment that they are found in.

However, persons do have these means. The behavior that a person displays constantly changes as different situations arise. Furthermore, a person can be disposed to act in variety of ways. This will be contingent on the circumstances they find themselves in and the beliefs they hold at the time. But this presents a problem for making predictions on two fronts. First, other than having a very broad idea of the kinds of situations persons might find themselves in, it is nearly impossible to predict the specific circumstances that a person will encounter. And, second, given that we cannot access the mental states of other persons, we cannot know what temperament they are in and how they are disposed on that occasion. At least we cannot have a good idea of this without first observing their behavior. As such, even if we could predict the situations they would find themselves in, we could not precisely predict how they would respond to it. This means that no precise prediction can be made concerning a third party's relational experience of a purported person. That is, we cannot say whether or not a third party's experience will be sufficiently similar to the one undergone by the initial subject or even if a third party will have any such experience at all.

Take three people A, B and C. Suppose that A has a series of of-relation experiences with B. Let us say that A has a conversation with B about their recent trip to Vancouver. This conversation primarily consists of B informing A about how much she enjoyed spending time with A. Here we could not say if another person, C, at a later time, will have sufficiently similar of-relation experiences of B as those undergone by A. That is we could not say if B is willing to have a caring conversation with C. Perhaps this will happen or perhaps it will not. It would seem to depend entirely on the way in which B chooses to interact with C given a whole range of complex circumstances. Perhaps B does not like C and refuses to talk to him. Or perhaps B is simply too busy to talk to anyone else on that day.

III. Religious Perceptual Experiences and the Relational Model

I take it that the satisfaction of the conditions and criteria just stipulated are sufficient to provide prima facie justification to standard cases where we believe that we are in a genuine care relationship with another person. But application of the model and its conditions should not be restricted to these standard cases alone. As was accepted in the first chapter, there are few a priori constraints on which characteristics and properties a subject can directly perceive. In particular, I have accepted that there are no particular a priori constraints on the properties and characteristics of an object that a subject can or cannot perceive. The constraints that can be placed on perceivable properties or characteristics will have to be determined a posteriori. Now, as we have seen, many people report that they perceive a divine being. And what is of importance is that particular manner in which the divine being purportedly appears to the subject; that is, the multiplicity of ways in which the purported object appears as doing something, being something or generally appearing as something, all of which is directed towards the subject. These reports indicate that the purported being has engaged with various subjects in a relational manner. As such, I take it that it is legitimate to apply the conditions of the model to such reports.

What we find when we do so is that certain subjects satisfy the conditions of the relational model. As was mentioned above there are a number of subjects who report having had diverse cumulative sets of religious perceptual experiences within the total body of those who have the relevant experiences. These subjects take it on the basis of their set of experiences that there exists a holy divine being with whom they are in a relationship. What these sets indicate is the satisfaction of the first condition of our model. For these subjects, each particular experience of their cumulative set was such that the purported being was interacting and communicating some particular message directly to them. And the messages of care that they report are precisely those that we considered earlier. Certain subject's have experienced the divine as having earnestly revealed the type of person that it is. It seems to them that at times this person has communicated that it is a being with tremendous power, as well as having a benevolent,

good, or holy nature. Furthermore, at other times they take it that this being has communicated its hopes and aspirations and perhaps even fears for that subject's life. Also, they report experiencing the divine as genuinely interested in the kind of person they are and furthermore that it desires to be in and develop a relationship with them. As an example we may think of one experience in a diverse set whereby it seemed that the divine has communicated to them that it desires a person to lead a particular sort of morally upstanding life. In addition, they report having experiences where the divine being responded with messages of care appropriate to the context. Perhaps one was grieving over a death and felt this being comforting and soothing their pain. Thus, the first criterion, the criterion of having a cumulative set of relational experiences would be satisfied.

Of course, one might object to the idea that a subject's experiences could satisfy the first condition on the grounds that there is no body to be perceived. The objection could go along these lines: In our standard relational experience we can observe a body performing various behavioral displays. Being able to observe the behavioral displays and actions of a purported person is what allows us to infer, via the principle of credulity, that the purported person possesses various character disposition and beliefs. For instance, it is because I can observe a person's caring behavior that I can infer that the person actually cares for others or myself. However, unlike our standard relational experiences, religious perceptual experiences do not involve experiencing a body. Because this is the case, subjects cannot perceive any behavioral dispositions and actions of the purported divine being. Consequently, any character dispositions or actions that are attributed to this purported percept, is done so wholly on the subjective basis of how the subject reacts to, or is affected by, the experience itself. However, attributing specific character dispositions, beliefs, and actions on this subjective basis would stretch the principle of credulity beyond its limits. Subjects cannot infer that a purported percept possesses certain properties and dispositions merely from feelings that arise from the experience of the being's presence. As such, subjects cannot legitimately maintain that they satisfy having any genuine relational experiences of the purported divine being.[62]

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[62] For instance see Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers,* 121-127.

This objection, however, rests on a mistaken view of the way many religious perceptual experiences are undergone and understood by the subjects who have them. In many cases subjects do not undergo an experience of a purported presence that is absent of content, then react or feel a certain way in relation to the experience, and subsequently make attributions of dispositions to the purported percept on the basis of these feelings. Rather, the feelings that arise from the experience do so precisely because of the content of the experience itself. That is, certain feelings will arise in the subject because the purported percept directly appears to be a certain way or in a certain manner. For instance, during a particular religious perceptual experience it may seem to the subject that the purported percept appears to have a loving nature that extends to all things including the subject. Furthermore, given the context of the experience, it may seem to the subject that she is undergoing this presentation in a privileged manner or that it was directed at her. As such, feelings of being loved by the purported being on that particular occasion may arise within the subject. As a consequence of this the subject may report that she experienced the divine loving her on that particular occasion.

Rudolf Otto has expressed the point that in a numinous experience of the divine, priority lies with a subject's experiencing the percept in a particular manner rather than the feeling states that emerge within the subject. In relation the feeling of creature consciousness that may accompany a numinous experience, he notes that:

> The 'creature-feeling' is itself a first subjective *concomitant* and *effect* of another feeling-element, which casts it like shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self...For the 'creature feeling' and sense of dependence to arise in the mind the 'numen' must be *experienced as present*...There must be *felt a something 'numinous'; something bearing the character of a 'numen'*, to which the mind turns spontaneously (my italics).[63]

The attribution of various dispositions and properties to the purported percept may result from a subject's feelings or reactions to the experience. However this will occur because the dispositions that are attributed are understood to best express the manner in which the purported percept seemed to appear to the subject.[64]

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[63] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10-11.

[64] Of course, the attributions of dispositions that are made need not, and likely will not, completely express what subjects seem to have experienced in religious perceptual experiences. There will be deeper aspects of the experiences that subjects will only be able to gesture at given the limitations of language. For an in-depth analysis of such aspects see Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

There will still be a gap between the dispositions that are attributed to the percept given what seemed to the subject to be the case, and the actual state of affairs. However, it must be noticed that this situation is sufficiently similar to that of standard relational experiences. In these standard cases, we observe a body performing various physical displays. Strictly speaking, there is nothing about the physical behavior, in and of itself, that would indicate that it is of a caring nature. The expression 'I love you' or a kiss can communicate very different things depending on the context and person who performs such displays. Further, there is nothing about the displays themselves that necessitates or guarantees that the perceived individual performing them is, in fact, disposed to care for us or intends to communicate a particular message of care via physical behavior observed.

Nonetheless, in the right circumstances the physical behavior that we observe will seem to us to be of the caring sort. And given the context and manner in which we undergo what we take to be a relational experience, it will seem to us that the behavior was conducted or performed for us. In turn, there will arise in us subjective feelings that the purported person, with whom we are interacting with, is in fact disposed to care for us. The attribution of various character dispositions on the basis of observing various physical displays and the feelings that consequently arise in us, will be made because we take what we attribute to the purported percept to best express what seemed to us to be the case. When a close family member hugs us and tells us that he loves us, we infer that he actually does feel disposed to us in this way. This inference is made on the basis of this seeming to us to be the case, as we experience how the family member interacts with us.

Hence, aside from not being able to observe any physical behavior, I take it that there is no relevant difference between religious relational experiences and regular relational experiences when it comes to the manner in which subjects attribute dispositions to a purported percept. In both types of experience, various character dispositions will be attributed on the basis of a combination between the manner in which the purported percept seemed to appear to the subject, the context of the experience and the subjective feelings that emerge within the subject. Thus, so long as we grant the assumption that the constraints on the manner in which a percept can appear to a subject

are to be determined a posteriori, there will be no reason not to extend the principle of credulity to religious perceptual experiences. If this is the case, subjects may take it that they undergo putative relational experiences of a purported divine being.

Turning to the numerousness condition, we find that it can be satisfied as well. Recall that this condition is satisfied if the subject who undergoes a cumulative set of relational experiences can, at least in principle, become aware that others have had sufficiently similar experiences as those had within that subject's cumulative set. If this condition were satisfied, the subject would have external verification that his relationship is veridical. It has been pointed out many times, both in this chapter and the last that numerous people throughout history earnestly report having similar religious perceptual experiences of varying kinds. Furthermore, within this body of subjects, there are those who report having similar cumulative sets of experiences. So if something like the principle of testimony obtains, there is no reason to think that a given subject could not satisfy this condition. With relative ease, any given subject who undergoes the relevant religious perceptual experiences should in principle be able to gather external evidence that other subjects have had sufficiently similar experiences at different times and places.

For those who have undergone cumulative sets of religious perceptual experiences, the predictability/repeatability condition fairs in much the same manner as the numerousness criterion. To see this, let us first recall that through the principle of credulity and testimony subjects who undergo such perceptual experiences are prima facie justified in believing their experiences to be, more probable than not, veridical. In fact the probability of this being the case will be significant because of the corroborating evidence of other reports. So let us assume that this is the case. On this assumption there probably exists a very powerful, very wise and holy immaterial being. As such we would, in principle, expect that the subject would undergo further relational experiences of this divine being.

There are two interrelated reasons for such an expectation. First, as Gary Gutting points out, the expectation follows from the nature of the supposed being insofar as its character has been revealed by the experiences of various subjects.[65] Given that various subjects experience this being as good, holy, loving and so on, we can assume that these

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[65] Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 151-152.

character dispositions are held by the purported being via the principle of credulity. As such, having communicated and interacted with the subject (who undergoes a cumulative set) on a number of occasions we would expect that this being would continue to do so in appropriate circumstances.

Second, the subjects we are considering have already experienced a cumulative set indicating that they are in a genuine care relationship with such a being; that is, a series of caring experiences that seem to be initiated by this being. Thus, under the notion of a enduring relationship that we are discussing in conjunction with the assumption that such a set of experiences is probably veridical, it is reasonable to expect that this being would continue to develop this relationship seeing how he went to the trouble of developing this set in the first place. Now, we will not be able to make any precise predictions about what kinds of further experiences those with such a set will have. But as we saw earlier such precise predictions cannot be made in our standard cases so we should not expect them for our religious perceptual experiences either.

This situation has considerable implications. That certain paradigm cases of cumulative sets of religious perceptual experiences satisfy the general conditions of the relational model calls for an amended view of how we are to understand the evidential value of these experiences at a general level. Given what was said above, those subjects who have paradigm examples of cumulative sets of religious perceptual experiences are not only prima facie justified (all things being equal) in believing that each of their isolated experiences are veridical and as such that the divine being in question exists. They would also be justified in believing that they are in a genuine care relationship with the purported being. This would be so primarily on the basis of the diversity of relational content found in each of their individual religious perceptual experiences, though taken as a whole. The various ways in which the subject experiences the object as being some ways or doing something that is directed towards them, and not simply as existing, collectively support the notion that the subject is dynamically interacting and communicating with the purported being on a continued basis. Such cases, then, are to be taken as central to the care relational model.

Of course this will only be so for those subjects who have a sufficiently diverse set of experiences. There will be many cases of reports of religious perceptual experiences

that will be on the periphery of satisfying the conditions of the model and many that will not. As such, those who have only one or a few religious perceptual experiences or a series of such experiences where the relational content is not diverse would not be warranted, on the basis of experience alone, in believing that they are in a genuine care relationship with the being in question. However under the relational model, and in conjunction with the credulity and testimony principles, such subjects are prima facie justified in accepting that they belong to a community of individuals who have undergone similar experiences. They will be prima facie justified in believing that the purported being of their experiences exist on the basis of the various isolated experiences undergone by themselves and others. But more importantly, on the basis of those who undergo diverse cumulative sets of experiences, they are prima facie justified in accepting that the purported being with which they have had isolated experiences of, is a relational being.

On a purely experiential basis, they can accept that this being is one who interacts and communicates in various and complex ways with the different members of the community to which they belong. For some members of the community, the being in question has developed experientially based care relationships. While for others, the being has interacted in a relational manner to varying lesser extents. Given what has been said concerning the predictability/repeatability criterion, to some extent, they can expect that they will undergo further relational experiences of the being. Consequently, they will have some reason to think that there is the potential for them to develop an experientially based care relationship of their own with the purported being.

IV. The Checking Procedure Challenge

In this section I shall be considering the main objection against permitting the principle of credulity to cover religious perceptual experiences. The grounds for postulating this objection concern some of the obvious differences between putative religious perceptual experiences and sensory perceptual experiences. While we are awake, we are continuously having a rich variety of sensory experiences. At least this is the case so long as we have properly functioning perceptual organs and are in normal

conditions. Furthermore, these experiences are vivid, richly detailed and loaded with information. Religious perceptual experiences, however, lack these characteristics. In the majority of cases they are a rare phenomenon, occurring at infrequent and unpredictable times. And as reports indicate, the experiences themselves tend to be much less detailed in information. Further, the sensory type of experience is public in the manner outlined above, whereas the religious type is private. These differences form the basis for the most striking dissimilarity between the two types, namely the "checking procedures" or criteria for veridicality that each kind of perception offers.

Clearly our sensory experiences can be delusive at times. However, our understanding of how this mode of perception operates has led to the development of various criteria, the satisfaction of which can generally confirm, as well as disconfirm, the veridicality of a particular instance of this type of perceptual experience. Though many lists have been offered, there are typically two primary checks that are appealed to.[66] The first is the notion that people of sufficiently similar competence (possessing the physical and cognitive prerequisites for veridical perception) will report having sufficiently similar experiences in sufficiently similar contexts. That is, there must be unanimity in perceptual reports. The second criterion is that the predictions made on the basis of past experiences will generally be born out as specified. Take my sensory experiences of seeing and hearing a cat in my house at this moment. We understand quite well how these tests apply to my experiences. We know that if another person were in the room I was in, at roughly the same time, they too would see that cat. Further, we can predict that were anyone else to come into the room, they too would see the cat (assuming that they had functioning eyes and the like). We know this to be the case because we have a good idea of what the normal conditions are required in order to successfully make such perceptions.

The point, the objector maintains, is that for the sensory perceptual cases, but not the religious cases, we can generally specify conditions and circumstances under which the sensory perceptual experiences of *other subjects* are relevant to the *testing* of a given perceptual claim. On the confirmatory side of sensory perceptual experiences, we know

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[66] For a detailed list sensory perceptual checking procedures see Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 301-303; and Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 71-72.

which conditions and circumstances will allow for other subjects to see the cat in my house when I see the cat in my house (proper lighting, appropriate distance, working and open eyes, relatively the same time and place etc). On the disconfirmatory end of things, if I continue to insist that there is a cat in circumstances and conditions under which no other person could see it then there is little reason to think that I can rationally maintain that my experience is veridical. Religious perceptual experiences are held to differ in this regard. They are not subject to the requirement of community consensus in the same way. That is, there are no specific and clearly identifiable conditions and circumstances under which we can say that a subject veridically perceives a powerful, loving and holy being if and only if other persons in those conditions are more or less guaranteed to experience and perceive that being.

Two distinct, yet interrelated, criticisms that have been presented on this basis. William Rowe has suggested that part of our ability to assess a perceptual experience, or type of experience, as veridical will depend upon being able to identify conditions under which the experience or type of experience might be considered to be probably delusive.[67] However, he notes that:

> Since we don't know what circumstances make for delusive religious experiences, and we don't know what the conditions are in which, if satisfied, one would have the experience of God if there is a God to be experienced, we cannot really go about the process of determining whether there are or are not positive reasons for thinking religious experiences to be delusive. [68]

Here, Rowe is to be understood as referring to our ignorance surrounding the "bodily and mental" circumstances and conditions that would lead to veridical or non-veridical religious experiences. And, I take it that Rowe intends these two points to imply that we are unable to acquire good reason to believe that religious perceptual experiences are non-veridical as opposed to being veridical. Since we are not able to check or test whether they are non-veridical as opposed to being veridical, such experiences are epistemically worthless.

Anthony O'Hear has objected to the applicability of the principle of credulity on slightly different grounds. He maintains that if we are not able to engage in a process of

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[67] Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," 90.

[68] Ibid. 91.

assessing perceptual claims on the basis of community consensus, we cannot extend the principle of credulity. If any given perceptual claim is not subject to the sensory perceptual processes of confirmation and disconfirmation, that claim cannot be conferred the status of being prima facie justified. This is because the processes or checking procedures of sensory perception are central to our assessment of whether or not a given perceptual claim is veridical or not.[69] I shall respond to O'Hear's criticism first, as it will provide us with a basis from which to respond to Rowe's criticism.

The first thing to be said is that there is a good explanation for the inability of religious perceptual experiences to satisfy the checking procedures of sensory perceptual experiences. We noted above that the main checking procedures of sensory perceptual experiences are unanimity and predictability. A given perceptual claim could, in-principle, satisfy these conditions in a specifiable manner when the object that is being perceived exhibits known regularities. But as was already pointed out, such conditions are not specifiable and understood in the same way with regards to religious perceptual claims. The reason for this stems from the nature and dispositions of the being in question, as it is understood and experienced by a multiplicity subjects over time.

Setting aside the highly ramified or doctrine-laden conceptions of this purported being, it is experienced immaterially in a variety of manners, whereby it displays relational and personal characteristics with various subjects. Insofar as it is an immaterial and personal being—in conjunction with the other attributes experienced, such as possessing vast power and holiness—it has the capability to choose the context, circumstances and subjects that it wishes to interact with. It is held that such a being is present everywhere, in an immaterial manner, if it is present anywhere. And as it is held to possess power great enough to communicate and interact with persons, there are no restrictions on the contexts, subjects and circumstances under which it can choose to do so.

Furthermore, as this purported being displays personal characteristics, there is no reason to think that it would exhibit highly specifiable regularities regarding the subjects and contexts within which it interacts. That is, there is no reason to think this anymore than we think that there are regularities in the manner in which we interact with other

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[69] O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation, and Faith*, 45-48.

persons. And as we saw in the second chapter, we can provide only the most general details and conditions when it comes to this issue. This is especially the case if, according to some authors, such a being makes its manifestations rare, selective and ambiguous in order to maintain a freely offered reciprocation of care and love from the subject; for it is held that were such a being to grace everyone with such experiences in a perfectly clear manner then we would be forced into a relationship and any freedom we had in this regard would no longer exist.[70] Now, these considerations should lead us to think that such a being cannot be experienced in an automatic fashion, upon the performance of spiritual rituals or request of the subject. And as such, a highly specified and defined form of the criteria of universality, unanimity and predictability, could simply not be satisfied by experiences of such a being. This should make us at least suspicious about the appropriateness of assessing religious perceptual claims on the basis of such tests.

With this in mind, a response can be offered against the argument that O'Hear presents. His argument maintained that in order for the principle of credulity to be applicable to a claim about the world—and hence for prima facie justification to accrue—that claim must be subject to the appropriate kind of inter-subjective validation by members of the community. Now, recall that throughout this work we have been arguing that religious perceptual experiences are one mode or kind of perceptual experience amongst others. But given this, what O'Hear unjustifiably assumes is that reports of the religious mode of perception should be treated in the same fashion as reports of sensory experiences. That is, if the former type of experience cannot be validated by the tests that are applicable to the latter type, they cannot have the same epistemic standing as the latter. In order to see why we have reason to reject this, we must consider how the checking procedures of sensory perceptual experiences are formed.

Alston makes some insightful comments concerning this matter and I will modify what he has to say to suit the present context. As he points out, the subject matter that is relevant to the checking procedures of sensory perception is understood and developed on the basis of what is learnt from the mode of sensory perception itself. We come to

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[70] These considerations typically stem from the freewill defense against the problem of evil. See Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 236-272; and Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 136-155.

discover, by relying on the deliverances of this mode of perception, the very conditions that make for accurate and inaccurate perception. As Alston notes:

> How could we know anything about what makes for accurate perception of the physical environment except by using perception to determine what that environment is actually like at a given time and place, what a given subject perceives it to be then and there, and how it is with that subject at that time. If we couldn't rely on sense perception we could never find anything about these matters.[71]

As such, there is a legitimate circularity involved in judging the appropriateness of sensory perceptual testing procedures. Both the subject matter and the determination of the appropriate tests are supplied by the same mode of perception. One must rely on the mode of sensory perception and its tests in order to determine that these tests are the appropriate ones to employ.

All of this points to how the determination of the appropriate tests is largely a matter to be decided "internally" through the use of a specific mode of perception. It is through relying on sensory perceptual experiences that we come to gain empirical knowledge about the physical conditions required to perceive through this mode of perception (i.e., it is dependent on proper lighting, distance from object and the like). We have come to learn from this mode that there are specifiable regularities in the behavior of physical objects in relation to our perceptual apparatus. As well, we learn that there are determinable states of affairs under which physical objects will be seen. But it is because we come to be aware of these regularities through our sensory perceptual experiences, that we can precisely specify the conditions under which another observer can verify a given perceptual claim. The point is that, it is on the basis of what sensory perceptual experiences has taught us, that we learn about its proper subject matter and that this subject matter is assessable in terms of the specifiable observations of others.[72]

But when it comes to the religious mode of perception, subjects who undergo these experiences have not discovered any dependable regularities and conditions under which such experiences occur. Further, as we saw above, there is little reason to expect that there would be any such regularities and conditions due to the experienced nature of the being in question. As such, what these subjects have learnt from this mode of perception

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[71] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 217.

[72] Ibid. 209-219.

is that there are no means by which to assess their experiences in terms of the relevant observations had by others; they have learnt that the decisive tests of unanimity and predictability are simply not available in the manner that they are for sensory experiences. Thus to require of this mode of perception that it conform to the tests of sensory perceptual experiences is, what Alston calls, epistemic imperialism.

To demand of religious perceptual experiences that they satisfy these requirements in order for the principle of credulity to be applicable is no more appropriate than requiring that memory, inference and introspective reports meet them in the specific manner that sensory experiences do.[73] As we pointed out in the first section of this chapter, each of these sources of belief can rightly have the principle of credulity applied to them. However, each of these sources has been allowed to generate their own independent checking procedures. And these checks have been determined on the basis of the deliverances of each source respectively. Insofar as religious perceptual experiences occur through their own mode of perception, they should be treated no differently.

At this stage a reply can be made to Rowe's argument considered above. Recall that the first two premises of Rowe's argument go as follows: P1) We cannot specify mental and bodily conditions which, if satisfied, would result in a subject undergoing a delusory religious perceptual experience. P2) We cannot specify mental and bodily conditions which, if satisfied, would result in a subject undergoing an experience of the divine. As I mentioned above, on the basis of these two premises, Rowe appears to infer the conclusion that we do not have good reason to believe that any religious perceptual experience is veridical as opposed to non-veridical. With regard to this argument, there is

[73] For instance, veridical introspective reports will not need to have the unanimity condition satisfied in the same way that it can be for sensory perceptual reports. I can have a veridical experience of pain and be able identify it as such. This will not require that another person have a sufficiently similar experience of pain in order for my experience to be veridical. Likewise, memory claims will not be able to be tested for veridicality according to a precise specification of unanimity or predictability. What we remember of our sensory experience tends to be quite selective. Two individuals who undergo similar experiences may "record" very different aspects of that experience into their memory. As such, it seems unlikely that we can make precise predictions indicating the aspects of the experience that these individuals will recollect. Furthermore, upon corroborating their experiences, these individuals may come to realize certain aspects of the experience that they have forgotten, or even disagree over. Nonetheless, in a broader sense they may still be credited with having remembered the "same" experience. The unanimity condition will have to be specified in a looser manner to accommodate for factors like this.

one main issue that must be assessed. This issue concerns the basis for the inference from P1 and P2 to the conclusion.[74] In order to address this issue, I shall consider P2 first. It seems to me that P2 is more or less correct. Unlike certain sensory perceptual experiences, it does not seem that we can specify precise conditions, the satisfaction of which, will guarantee that a subject has a religious perceptual experience. But as I have already argued, this is to be expected if any of the experiences are veridical. If the purported divine being exists and is causing the experiences to occur, then they will only occur according to the being's purposes and initiatives.

Rowe might maintain that our ignorance concerning the precise mental and bodily conditions that would lead to a religious perceptual experience, calls into question the possibility of distinguishing between the experiences that are veridical and those that are not. As he mentions:

> Most existing objects are such that there are conditions which, if satisfied by the subject, the experience will follow. This is an important point we often rely on in judging whether a particular perceptual experience is veridical or delusory.[75]

This, as we have noted, results in a relevant difference between experiences of standard dry goods and religious perceptual experiences. There will be certain checking procedures that will be available for the sensory cases that will not be available in the religious cases. Through our perceptual experiences of material dry goods, we come to see that these goods display certain regularities. On this basis we can determine that tests like predictability and unanimity make it possible to distinguish between veridical and non-veridical sensory experiences of these dry goods. Consequently, Rowe could maintain that because religious perceptual experiences do not satisfy checks like predictability and unanimity in the manner that most sensory perceptual experiences do, it is impossible to distinguish between veridical and un-veridical religious perceptual experiences. This might be Rowe's grounds for making the inference from P1 and P2 to the conclusion that we are not able to acquire good reasons for determining whether the experiences in question are veridical or not.

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[74] Rowe does not clearly express what his grounds are form making this inference.

[75] Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," 90.

Notice, if Rowe adopts this basis for making the inference to his conclusion, it will be very similar to argumentative strategy utilized by O'Hear. Consequently, the response against it will be similar to the one offered against O'Hear. Two things must be noted about making this inference on the basis of a failure to satisfy the sensory perceptual checking procedures. First, the inference is legitimate only if religious perceptual experiences can be appropriately assessed according to these criteria. Second, the inference will be legitimate only if it can be shown that there are no other means (other than the sensory perceptual means) for distinguishing between veridical religious perceptual experiences and those that are non-veridical. There is reason to think that the inference fails both of these conditions.

Concerning the first condition, I have already pointed out that the checks or tests that are appropriate for assessing the veridicality of a given experience generated by a particular mode of perception, will be determined internally through the use of that particular mode of perception. As such, it is inappropriate to require of experiences generated from one mode of perception, that they satisfy the precise conditions and tests generated from another mode of perception. For the religious cases, we should not require that they satisfy the conditions and tests generated from sensory perceptual experiences. Rather we must allow for those who engage in the religious mode of perception to generate checks and tests that are appropriate for determining which religious perceptual experiences are veridical.

Concerning the second condition, criteria for distinguishing genuine from delusive religious experiences have been offered. I have argued, that there is a sense in which the criteria of agreement amongst experiencers, and to a lesser extent predictability, can play a role in supporting the veridicality of religious perceptual claims.[76] Furthermore, if Franks-Davis's account of the common core is correct, then one could argue that conformity with the tenants of her account is another criterion of veridicality for mystical and numinous experiences.

In addition to this, the tests that have typically been offered by the great mystics include coherence with regards to the concepts utilized in the description of the

[76] Of course, these tests will not be as robust as their sensory perceptual counterparts. This is for the obvious reason that they cannot be satisfied in a public manner.

experience as well as with the general pattern or cumulative set had over time. Further, and perhaps most relied on, is the "spiritual fruits" criterion. The idea here is that veridical perceptions of the divine will lead to a transformation in the subject resulting in a more virtuous and holy life in regards to personal conduct and community interaction. As well, there is the criterion of consistency with orthodox doctrine, which of course will vary from tradition to tradition. Here, I have not mentioned these criteria with the intention of claiming that they are as robust as their sensory perceptual counterparts. Nor am I suggesting that the religious tests are sufficient to determine if all, or many, religious perceptual experiences are veridical or not. I simply wish to point out that they give us reason to think there are means to distinguish between some veridical instances of the relevant experiences as opposed some instances that are non-veridical.

Returning to P1 of Rowe's argument, the first thing to note is that its truth is not clear. Rowe maintains that we can have no idea of the mental and bodily conditions that lead to delusory religious experiences. However, if any of the experiences are veridical, a divine and holy being exists. But given this being's supposed character dispositions and properties, it seems a stretch to maintain (in any form other than a logical possibility) that, in the majority of cases, it would bring about a subject's religious experiences through some morally questionable, devious or ignoble means like drug induction, excessive alcohol consumption or through other circumstances that generally lead to hallucinations. Consequently, it does not seem unreasonable to postulate the requirement that in order for a veridical religious perceptual experience to occur, the subjects must be in something like a healthy or "normal" psychological disposition directly prior to the occurrence of the experience.

Rowe would certainly reject this response. He maintains that any appeal to "normal" mental conditions would be arbitrary. In order to support this claim, Rowe approvingly quotes Broad who suggests "one might need to be slightly "cracked" in order to have some peep-holes into the super-sensible world". The general point Rowe intends to make is that for all we know, if there are veridical religious experiences, then they may only be those that occur under abnormal conditions. However, simply to raise the possibility that a subject may need to be "slightly cracked" in order to have a veridical religious experience, does not give us reason to think that this is the case. This line of

reasoning is no more convincing than supposing that we should not believe in the existence of the external world due to the possibility that we might be under the grand deception of an evil genius.

However, let us suppose that Rowe's first premise is true, the consequence being that we cannot come to know what the mental and bodily conditions are that would lead to delusional religious experiences. It seems to me that this would not provide him with adequate grounds for inferring his conclusion, that it is beyond our ability to acquire good reasons for distinguish between veridical and non-veridical religious perceptual experiences. First, if P1 is true, this will likely be a result of our inability specify any mental and bodily conditions that would guarantee the occurrence of a religious perceptual experience, veridical or otherwise. This, as Rowe grants, is no reason to think that veridical religious perceptual experiences do not, or cannot, occur.[77] The issue, after all, is about whether we can identify any of these experiences as being non-veridical as opposed to veridical.

In order to satisfy the challenge presented by premise one, we need to identify criteria or conditions, the satisfaction of which will give us "positive reason" for thinking certain religious perceptual experience are non-veridical. Rowe, of course, maintains that we can come to know what these conditions and criteria would be for sensory perceptual experiences but not in the case of religious perceptual experiences. This may be his basis from making the inference from P1 to P2 to his conclusion.

But let us consider the case of sensory perceptual experiences. I noted above that the appropriate checks and tests of sensory perceptual experiences are determined internally through use of the sensory perceptual mode of experience. This determination gives us an idea of how to assess instances of sensory experiences as veridical or otherwise. However, there is an issue interrelated with these considerations, the assessment of which was left implicit. What needs to be pointed out is that, in most cases, we determine what these conditions and criteria are—and subsequently the experiences that are non-veridical as opposed to veridical—by *assuming* that a number of other experiences of the same mode of perception are veridical. The experiences that are

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[77] Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," 90.

assumed to be veridical can be other experiences the initial subject undergoes, or they may be experiences had by other individuals. As Peter Losin notes:

> Identifying and dismissing a particular sensory experience as non-veridical often (if not always) involves assuming that another sensory experience is veridical. Why? Because without such an assumption—which need not be groundless or arbitrary—it is hard to see how we might recognize what it is about the first experience that makes it non-veridical.[78]

This last point is crucial. Consider the case of the supermarket Elvis presented above. Recall that in this case, the subject had hallucinatory experiences of Elvis caring for him in a variety of ways. However, unless we assume that the perceptual experiences of other individuals in the proximity of the subject were veridical, we will not have an adequate basis to determine if the subject's experiences are merely hallucinations. By assuming that the experiences of the other individuals are veridical, we are able to determine that the appropriate tests to which the subject's experience should conform are predictability and unanimity. On this basis we can determine that the subject's experiences fail these criteria (none of the other individuals who are assumed to have veridical experiences, observe that the subject is interacting with the supposed Elvis), and should consequently be considered hallucinatory experiences.

It does not appear that we are constrained by any a priori considerations to think that the sensory perceptual experiences of certain subjects must be accepted as veridical. It is, after all, possible that all sensory perceptual experiences are hallucinations produced by an evil genius and that we could never discover this fact. Consequently, it does not seem that we will be able to demonstrate that a particular sensory experience is non-veridical, independent of an appeal to other sensory experiences. Rather, we argue that the assumed veridicality of a particular set of experience shows some other experience to be non-veridical. It is on this basis that we come to have an idea of how to identify non-veridical instances of sensory experiences.

These considerations have great relevance for religious perceptual experiences. I have already argued that these experiences are to be considered as a one mode of perceptual experience. But if this is correct, what prevents those who undergo religious perceptual experiences from applying these considerations to the religious mode of

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[78] Losin, "A Reply to Rowe," 64.

perception? Why could these subjects not appropriately assume that some set of religious perceptual experience is veridical, in order to identify appropriate checks and tests along with non-veridical instances of these experiences. As Peter Losin points out, this assumption, like the one made for sensory experiences, need not be groundless or arbitrary. Further, we are not required to make it on the basis of logical considerations anymore than we are for sensory experiences. "It is logically possible that no veridical experiences of God occur and that we be unable to discover this unfortunate fact".[79] But why, then, could we not conclude, as Losin does, that:

> It is open to the theist to claim that the kind of reasoning we typically engage in checking particular sensory experiences can perform a similar function in cases of experiences of God. We can assume, if only provisionally, "for the sake of argument," that some experience of God or other is probably veridical; on this basis other experiences of God can be identified and dismissed as non-veridical. [80]

This appears to be the very basis from which the religious checking procedures (as mentioned above) are made from.[81]

Rowe might have made the inference from P1 and P2 to his conclusion, on the basis of his belief that we have an idea of how to determine which experiences are delusory for the sensory cases but not for the religious cases. However, as Losin points out, underlying this inference is the assumption that "experiences of God cannot themselves

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[79] Ibid. 65.

[80] Ibid. 65.

[81] Still, it may very well be the case that the checks and conditions determined on this basis, will not give us a good idea of which experiences are veridical as opposed to being non-veridical. After all, regardless of which checks and conditions are proposed, they will still lack the community consensus and publicity aspects of sensory perceptual experiences counterparts. However, Swinburne's comments regarding a related matter seem appropriate if this situation obtains. As he notes, "clearly, in so far as some do have the requisite experience, that makes it likely that x is there, even if some others do not have the experience, and we do not know why they do not have the experience…if we do not know which observers could have been expected to have had an experience apparently of x if x had been there, that somewhat lessens the evidential force of an apparent perception—but only somewhat…I stress the word's 'only somewhat'. For clearly, if three witnesses saw the man in the distance, or the rainbow, or heard the high note…and three did not, that is substantial evidence in favor of the occurrence of the object reported, even if we don't know why others were unable to detect it". Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 313. The general idea is that a positive experience of some purported object carries considerable evidential force in its own right. So even if the religious checks do not allow for a precise determination of the veridical experiences as opposed to their non-veridical counterparts, this will only diminish their evidential value to a limited extent. The very fact that these experiences occur counts heavily in favor of the notion that there probably (in the Swinburnian sense) exists such a being.

provide a (fallible and provisional) means for critique of other such experiences".[82] But if such means are permitted for the sensory cases, and religious perceptual experiences are a mode of perceptual experience, then the onus is on Rowe to show that subjects who undergo the religious type of experience could not appropriately assume some set of experiences to be veridical in order to identify that other experiences of this sort are non-veridical.

V. The Interpretation Challenge

The second objection that shall be considered against granting religious perceptual experience the status of being prima facie justified is the interpretation challenge. Though this objection has been presented in many forms we shall couch it in the following manner: Religious perceptual experiences, unlike sensory perceptual experiences, are laden with interpretation in terms of religious doctrines and concepts. The consequence of this is that the experience itself is only seen to be of a divine being of a certain sort due to the interpretation that is given to it. The experience is understood in this manner because a tradition specific religious interpretation has been subjectively imposed upon a 'given' core of the experience. Now, the 'given' core of a perceptual experience involves certain phenomenal content that can be perceived by the five senses. Further, it does count as being good evidence in favor of beliefs based upon it.[83] However, all interpretive elements of an experience must be justified by evidence independent of the experience before the interpretation is warranted. As such, what the proponent of an ARE must provide is independent evidence that these concepts and doctrines are instantiated and the beliefs involved therein are probably true. Without this evidence the ARE must be considered to be circular, for it purports to justify certain religious beliefs on the basis of experiences, the interpretation of which involves the very concepts and doctrines that are

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[82] Losin, "A Reply to Rowe," 68.

[83] Many different proposals have been put forth for what the "given " or "real" core amounts to. A few examples are Locke's 'primary' qualities Chisholm's 'sensible' characteristics and relations. For the former see Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding,* 409-420; and for the latter see Chisholm, Perceiving, 83.

involved in those beliefs. It is on grounds like this that objectors like Anthony Flew maintain that, "the whole argument from religious experience must collapse into an argument from whatever other credentials may be offered to authenticate the revelation supposedly mediated by such experiences".[84]

We must, however, notice the main assumption of the argument. The assumption is that we can distinguish between a 'given' core of a perceptual experience that is free of interpretation and the subsequent interpretation that is laid upon this core. This is maintained in a manner such that the given is the 'real' basis of sensory perceptual experience. And further, religious perceptual experiences are merely a matter of interpretation in a manner unlike sensory perceptual experiences. However in order to ground this assumption, the objector needs to adhere to a particular view of how perceptual experiences are undergone, concepts are formed and how our noetic structure stands in relation to these concepts. The objector needs to maintain that subjects who undergo perceptual experiences do so in a passive manner.

Roughly, when a subject encounters certain stimuli in the environment, she must be taken to be a passive recipient regarding the representations of the 'given' elements in that experience. As such, concrete concept formation is merely a matter of the subject recalling these experiences, noting the common features and resemblances between the various representations, and designating them in some way with a name or description. Once a sufficient number of concrete concepts are formed, the subject is then capable of forming abstract concepts on the basis of the concrete ones. Furthermore, the subject's belief structure is understood in a similar linear and hierarchical manner. Direct sensory experience forms the basis of basic beliefs, which in turn form the basis of inferred beliefs. This structure corresponds to the hierarchy of concept formation where what is given in an experience forms the basis of concrete concepts, which in turn allows for the abstraction of concrete concepts.

However, the main assumption of the challenge and the general picture of a corresponding linear and hierarchical model of concept formation and beliefs structures that it rests on are simply inadequate. What it fails to take into account is what modern psychology has taught us about perception generally; namely that our ability to perceive

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[84] Anthony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 139.

the world and the concepts that we generate from it are interrelated and develop together. Environmental stimuli that the subject is presented with interact with their past experiences, beliefs, concepts, reflective ability and other cognitive systems to produce the perception of a particular object. And interrelated with this process is the process of concept formation. Concept formation is not merely a matter of identifying commonalities in the passively acquired representations of something that can be readily presented to the subject. Rather, it involves the active participation of subjects' cognitive faculties as they represent the various ways in which the subjects organize the experiences they undergo.[85]

Franks-Davis has persuasively argued for this in terms of Johnson-Laird's notion of mental models.[86] The mental model theory stipulates that the world is mentally represented to us, not only in terms of propositions and images, but also in terms of "structural analogues" or conceptual frameworks of the world. Each of us subconsciously constructs such models on the basis of our past experiences and background beliefs and they are continuously being modified and revised as the subject undergoes new experiences in new contexts. Furthermore, these models incorporate and best explain the innate and learned 'rules' that guide the processing, storage and responses to sensory stimuli. It is these models that a subjects mind actively (both unconsciously and subconsciously) employs to represent, apprehend and interpret the world, both in thought and in conscious experience. Franks-Davis aptly summarizes the consequence of this in noting that:

> Perception of any type is never a purely physical activity; it involves the whole person. We are not passive recipients of readymade representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance us, and constitute a perceptual experience (as opposed to mere sensation). Such an experience is thus the product of a complex intellectual activity in which we have...'gone beyond the information given'.[87]

The interpretation of any perceptual experience that results from the deployment of these mental models is often carried out even before the subject is aware of there being

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[85] Carlson, *Psychology; The Science of Behavior*, 200-232.

[86] Franks-Davis, Evidential Force of Religious Experience,147-155.

[87] Ibid. 148.

anything to perceive. And it is not a process that proceeds on the basis of conscious and rapid inferences that subject makes. That is, interpretations made from mental models are not a matter of consciously inferring highly detailed and ramified beliefs from some un-detailed stimulus as the challenge maintains.

Rather, the way things seem goes beyond what is presented in the stimuli on the basis of information contained in the mental model that we employ. As this process is largely unconscious, what appears to the subject to be the 'given' core of the experience is something that has already been interpreted. It is something that his cognitive process have already applied and incorporated a mental model to. Thus, as Franks-Davis points out, interpretation is far from being an extraneous element produced or applied from without. In fact, it is absolutely crucial to the occurrence of a perceptual experience at all.

This of course presents a considerable problem for this objection. If all perceptual experiences involve interpretation and we adhere to the conditions of the challenge then we would be forced into the skeptical bog that we considered above. The challenge maintained that any interpretive elements of an experience must be justified by independent evidence before their application is warranted. However, as even the 'given' elements of an experience are laden with interpretation our beliefs regarding these elements would require independent justification as well. But what justificatory grounds could be provided for these supposed basic elements of a perceptual experience that is independent of other perceptual experiences and claims?

Our mental models will surely include beliefs and an ontology concerning what populates the external world. And these concepts and beliefs will form the basis of how we subconsciously interpret our sensory perceptual experiences of objects in that world. However, on the objector's own criteria, we would then have to perform the impossible feat of acquiring grounds for adopting these ontological beliefs independent of our sensory perceptual experiences.

The only alternative to being forced into skepticism concerning our perceptual experiences and the beliefs based on them is to take a credulist's approach to these interpretations. We must grant them the prima facie status of being acceptable unless there is strong reason not to. We can see from all of this that it will not simply do to object to the veridicality of religious perceptual experiences on the basis that they are

interpretations. Sensory perceptual experiences are no different in this regard. What the objector must demonstrate is that the model employed is inappropriate in one relevant respect; namely that it leads to misperceptions. However the onus is squarely on the shoulder of the objector to show that this is the case.

Of course, there have been many attempts to meet this challenge. One could argue that religious perceptual experiences can be reduced to, or best explained in terms of, "pathological" mental states or abnormal physiological processes. The processes mental states or processes that are appealed to include, hyper-suggestibility, deprivation, maladjustment, and mental illness. Alternatively, one could maintain that while religious experiences do not result from any of these abnormal processes, they do result from wholly naturalistic causes. For instance, one could maintain that religious experiences are nothing but a result of the interpretation imposed upon them. Through normal social processes, like membership in a religious community, a subject can acquire the beliefs and conceptual scheme of the community to which they belong. Consequently, this conceptual scheme may lead a subject to have a religious experience in accordance with that scheme, regardless of whether it was a divine being that caused the experience to take place.

Obviously these objections are very relevant to the issue of whether or not religious perceptual experiences can provide justification for the religious beliefs based on them. However, as I have already pointed out, it is beyond the scope of this project to assess these arguments. Here I can only refer the reader to various accounts that attempt to address these claims. [88] It is my belief that they have persuasively argued against the notion that religious perceptual experiences can be wholly explained in terms of naturalistic processes. I leave it to the readers of this project to determine if they agree with assessment.

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[88] For detailed responses to these criticisms and explanations see, Franks-Davis, The Evidential Force of Religious Experience, 193-238; Gellman, Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief, 122-149; Gutting, Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism, 153-177.

Chapter 3

I. Swinburne's Principle of Testimony

Thus far, we have developed a modified ARE relying on an embedded relational model. This was done in order to understand how, and in what manner, a subject who has undergone religious perceptual experiences could become prima facie justified in believing that the purported object of their experience exists. As we have seen, individuals who undergo diverse cumulative sets of such experiences could become prima facie justified in believing in the existence claim they make. Furthermore, these subjects could also be justified in believing that they are in a genuine care relationship with the being that they purport to perceptually experience. And largely as a consequence of the experiences undergone by these individuals, many other subjects who have not undergone the requisite cumulative sets could nonetheless become prima facie justified in believing that the purported object of their experiences was a relational being. That is, they could rationally accept that the being they experience is one that wishes to be in an experientially based relationship with many other members of the community they belong to.

As I noted above, in order for this account, or any other ARE, to have any force whatsoever, the testimony of other subjects must be allowed to play a considerable evidential role. Sufficiently similar experiences undergone by other people must be allowed to count as supporting evidence for the original subject's perceptual claim. This must be the case if that initial claim is to have any evidential merit. And since the initial subject's only access to the experiences of others is through testimony, he must be allowed to accept those reports as evidence favoring his perceptual experience(s).

In this chapter I shall address the issue of testimonial based justification as it pertains to reports of religious perceptual experiences. I will begin by explicating Swinburne's position, as it serves as a useful example of what one typically finds in the literature. This will be followed by a summary of the traditional options that one can adhere to on the matter; namely the Jamesian, Optimist and Skeptical positions respectively. With this in mind we shall consider the arguments that optimists like Swinburne have offered in favor

of their position over the Jamesian position. I shall be arguing the accounts optimist authors provide fail for three interrelated reasons. And upon an examination of the current literature being written on testimony, we shall see that there are ample grounds for defending an alternative position that I shall develop below. To this end then, let us turn to what Swinburne has to say on the matter.

Swinburne's explicit (and very short) construal of the proper role of testimony goes as follows: Other things being equal, we believe that what others tell us they perceived probably was as they perceived it to be.[89] In order to support the notion that the things people report have (probably) happened, appeal is made to two different principles of rationality. The first is the principle of credulity where things, objects, states of affairs and the like are probably as a subject believes to have perceived them to be. The second is the *principle of testimony* whereby, in the absence of special considerations, the experiences of others are probably as they report them to be. The specific grounds that he presents for adopting the latter as a true principle of rationality are similar to the grounds presented in favor adopting the principle of credulity. He claims that this principle must be adopted due to the importance that testimonial evidence plays in our everyday life.

Clearly, the vast majority of beliefs are acquired on the basis of the testimony provided by others. Our beliefs about the world, science, geography, history and the like all have their basis in what others have perceived or reasoned through and subsequently communicated to us. For the overwhelming majority of these beliefs, we are not in a position to corroborate if they are true or if the witness of the events is reliable. Consequently, he maintains that we must adopt the principle of testimony, for otherwise our knowledge base will be limited to what we can immediately experience. Because this principle is purported to be a fundamental principle of rationality, it is meant to extend to the religious cases as well. As such all subjects, regardless of the context they find themselves in and the background beliefs they hold, are permitted to rationally accept the testimony of those who undergo religious perceptual experiences as probably occurring in the manner in which they are described.

However, though he does address the issue of testimonial based justification for the religious cases, one is struck by how little he has to say on an issue that plays such an

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[89] Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 322-323.

essential role to his argument. Unlike his assessment of the principle of credulity, he does not consider any general constraining factors on religiously based testimony. While he does mention reasons that may bar specific reports from being accepted as probably occurring in the manner reported (ex. subjects may be known to be liars, exaggerate reports or often misremember their experiences) he notes that this is not the normal situation. Subsequently, he simply states that, "In general there are no special considerations for doubting what subjects report about their religious experiences".[90] As we shall come to see, the issue is far more complex than Swinburne, and others who embrace this assessment, have given it credit.

II. The Jamesian Position

We can start to draw out the complexity of the issue of testimonial justification, in relation to the experiences that are being assessed, by pointing out the various positions that could be adhered to. Upon consulting this literature, one quickly gets the impression that many authors seem to think that there are only three positions on the matter. The first is the classic position typically attributed to William James, and is to be found in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.[91] In this work he offers two epistemic theses with regards to certain Religious Experiences stated as follows:

J1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and *have the right to be*, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.

J2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

Now for the sake of simplicity and clarity I would like to suggest that we understand these two theses in terms of justification and not authority.[92] But in doing so I do not

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[90] Ibid. 323.

[91] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 413.

[92] Part reason I wish to reformulate his position is because there are two issues that arise from his comments that I do not wish to deal with. First, his comments seem to suggest that one can will what one

think we would stretch the points beyond the limits of their intended meaning.[93] So let us reformulate these theses in light of the preceding discussion:

N1) The subject P, who undergoes a religious perceptual experience, is justified in believing that a divine holy being exists on the basis of their experience.

N2) No one other than P would be justified in believing P's report. Everyone other than P would not be justified in believing that P's experience was veridical.

I shall be referring to the conjunction of these two theses as the Jamesian position. Since James' time this position has drawn a considerable following amongst philosophers of religion with many older accounts of the epistemic value of religious experiences firmly embracing it [94].

Of late, however, it has all but disappeared from the table with many critics arguing that N2 is not compatible with N1.[95] As such, the remaining two positions can be understood as being at opposing ends of a spectrum with the Jamesian position being in the middle. At one end is the optimist's position, which can be construed as follows:

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wants to believe. And second, it is a debatable issue as to whether one has a duty to believe only what has been subject to critical scrutiny.

[93] Concerning the first point James notes, "Our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which the mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of facts; but the mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensation ever were for us". Thus, James claims that the mystic who believes that they are experiencing God is just as justified as one who believes that they are experiencing the external world. However, when we turn to comments he makes concerning the second thesis it becomes clear that he does not think that the non-mystic would be justified in believing in God in virtue of the mystics claim to have experienced Him. "But I now proceed to add that mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverances of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto." James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 413-417.

[94] Regarding the Jamesian position Rowe notes that, "it is unlikely that the studies of mysticism over the intervening years have invalidated these conclusions". See Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, 75. George Mavrodes also argues in favor of a view similar to the Jamesian position. He holds that mystical experiences provide one with a certainty similar to that of the certainty one would have concerning some argument being of the form of modus ponens; a certainly which stems from some direct intuition produce by God. But he also holds that this justification could not extend beyond the individual who has this experience. Mavrodes, "Real v. Deceptive Mystical Experiences," 256.

[95] For two clearly presented examples of this trend see Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 322-323; and Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 184.

O1) P's belief in a divine holy being is prima facie justified on the basis of P's religious perceptual experience.

O2) All things being equal, all other people are justified in believing subject P's report and as such are justified in believing that P's experience was veridical and consequently that the purported being, experienced by P, exists.

We can see that this is essentially Swinburne's position as stated above. Now, at the opposing end of the spectrum is the skeptical position. This position postulates two theses that are simply the negation of O1 and O2:

S1) P's belief in a divine holy being is not prima facie justified on the basis of P's religious perceptual experience.

S2) As a consequence of S1 all other people would not be justified in believing that P's has made a report of a veridical experience

I shall be assuming that what was said above concerning my theoretical account of the evidential value of religious experiences is correct. Thus we shall not be addressing the skeptical theses' in any detail. Rather our focus here will be to assess whether those who embrace the optimist position have provided adequate reason for rejecting the Jamesian position and consequently adequate reason for embracing their own. In order to do this we shall consider two standard attempts to refute the Jamesian position, as presented by William Alston and Richard Ketchum. [96] It strikes me that their argument against James's original position is correct. However, I contend that they would not be entitled to accept the optimist's position on the basis of the analysis that they offer. As I shall argue, they fail to realize that there are a number of other positions that could be adopted regarding testimonial based justification. Second, they have not provided an adequate account of how justification arises in testimony. This is primarily because they fail to consider recent developments in the epistemology of testimony. Finally, they do not consider a crucial element of our common sense understanding of how testimony

[96] Ketchum, "The Argument from Religious Experience," 354-367; and Alston, *Perceiving God*, 279-284.

produces justified beliefs. These elements could ultimately bar the non-mystic from becoming justified in believing that any particular mystical report is veridical. Each criticism corresponds to sections four, five and six, respectively.

III. The Current Opposition

From what I can tell, the current opposition to the Jamesian position rests on one main criticism. Broadly, they argue that since a hearer can become justified in believing what a subject has told them about seeing normal medium sized dry goods, the same must obtain in cases where a subject justifiably testifies to having perceived God's presence. Let us begin with what Richard Ketchum has to say on the issue. The main thrust of Ketchum's work is to argue that the Jamesian or liberal position is untenable, with the consequence that only one of the conservative positions could be correct.[97] To show this he offers what he takes to be the correct principle for of testimonial justification articulated as follows:

> P: If S is justified in believing that T is justified in believing that p on the basis of some experience and S has no justified belief, q, such that were T to be justified in believing in q T would not be justified in believing that p, then were S to believe that p, S would be justified in believing that p.[98]

But what can be said in favor of adopting principle P as a correct principle of testimonial justification? The argument as he presents in favor of it goes as follows:

> To believe that another is justified in believing something, for whatever reason, is to believe that the belief has something to be said for it, it passes muster. Furthermore there is enough to be said for it to be able to conclude that the holder of the belief is justified, with in his rights, in holding it. Now suppose that S has no reason or evidence to doubt that p which is not also possessed by T and that S justifiably believes that T is justified in believing that p...Under these conditions S justifiably believes that there is enough to be said for p to justify T's believing it and nothing to be said against p not already taken into account in assessing T's justification. Though it does not follow logically that S would be justified in believing that p were he to believe p, it is difficult to see how he could fail to be[99].

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[97] Ketchum, "The Argument from Religious Experience," 354.

[98] Ibid. 359.

[99] Ibid. 361.

The point Ketchum is trying to make here can be explained in a somewhat simpler manner if we take what he means by reasons that "pass muster" as reasons that make it probable or likely that some belief is true.

Suppose that my reasons for holding a certain belief x are of the sort that indicate, or at least likely indicate, that x is a true belief. If you have a good reason to think that this supposed situation is the case—that my reasons indicate the truth of x—then you have good reason to think that I am right about x being true or obtaining. Consequently, you will have good reason to think that x is true or obtains. We can see the obvious problem that this principle would pose for the Jamesian. As it stands, the dual thesis of the James' position can be read as implying both that:

I1) Those who have religious perceptual experiences are justified in believing their experiences to be veridical and also;

I2) Those who have not had such experiences could accept I1 as being the case and yet not be justified in believing that the divine being, which subjects report as having experienced, exists.

Thus on Ketchum's account the Jamesian would be committed to holding that a certain subject has good reason for thinking that their religious perceptual experiences are veridical. This would entail having good reasons that indicate the belief *x*, that a divine holy being exists, is probably true. Furthermore, a hearer of the subject's report, could have good reason for thinking that the subject is correct in maintaining that their experience was probably veridical and that their belief *x* is likely true. Yet, nonetheless, the hearer would not be justified in believing that this divine being probably exists. This of course, is a puzzling position to maintain at best.

Turning to the second critic, William Alston, we find a very similar line of argumentation. Regarding what he refers to as the "transference of justification" via testimony he notes:

> It has been contended that it is not sufficient for my believing that p justifiably that (1) X is justified in believing that p and (2) X tells me that p. In addition I have to have sufficient reasons for trusting X. I have to have sufficient reasons for regarding X as sufficiently competent, reliable or authoritative. This could be neatly summed up in a further condition: (3) I am justified in supposing

> that X is justified in believing p...Let us accept the additional condition, and let us agree that it is frequently satisfied in the case of secular testimony. But then why shouldn't it also be satisfied in the religious case? I have presented reasons for supposing that CMP (Christian Mystical Practice) endows it products with prima facie justification. Assuming that my reasoning has been sound, why shouldn't a third party have good reason for supposing a mystical perceiver to be prima facie justified in her perceptual beliefs? ...I have also presented reasons for supposing that mystical perceivers can be justified, all things considered, in their perceptual beliefs; and so, again, a recipient of testimony could have those reasons for supposing that [condition 3] is satisfied. So if these conditions are sufficient for the generation of justification by testimony in the secular cases, why not in the religious cases?[100]

Alston's answer to the question he poses at the end of this quote is that conditions 1 through 3 are sufficient for the generation of justification for a second party in the religious cases. And it is clear from what he says in this quote that he takes something very much like Ketchum's principle of testimonial justification to be the correct principle.

At this point one should wonder if either author has considered possible ways in which the religious cases might differ from standard visual cases such that Ketchum's principle P may not apply to the former. Ketchum does not offer us any discussion on this matter. Alston's, however, does consider such conditions. He points out that some have tried to appeal to the "private" character of mystical experiences to defend treating the testimony concerning religious experiences in a different manner.[101] Traditional attempts to do so have stressed two factors about religious experiences. First, they are not universally shared. Second, there are no 'tight' conditions to test the veridicality of these experiences inter-subjectively. However, he points out that he accepts these two factors as being true and believes that he has adequately responded to them as they pertain to first person justification concerning religious experiences.[102] So at this point he presents the reader with another rhetorical question. If his reasoning has been sound, why should the 'private' character of these experiences prevent the "transfer" of justification via testimony in those cases where the recipient is justified in believing that the testifier is justified?

Notice, though, that his strategy here is to reiterate the implications of Ketchum's principle P as it pertains to religious testimony. He might have offered good reasons for

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[100] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 280.

[101] Ibid. 282.

[102] Ibid. 184-225.

thinking that the private nature of religious experience does not prevent the subject from acquiring justification. However, no mention is made of how this feature of the experiences may affect the transference of justification to a second party. The general idea is that if a person has grounds for thinking that a subject is justified then that person will have grounds for thinking that the privacy of the experience does not affect the subject's justification. At a later stage, the parameters of the discussion shall be changed and the relationship of the private nature of religious experiences to second party justification shall be considered. We shall come to see that this characteristic could ultimately prevent certain individuals from becoming justified in accepting a subject's report, while not doing so for others.

IV. The Diversity of Positions

If we frame the discussion in the manner that both critics do, then their position appears to be quite strong. If we assume that there are only three positions one can adopt on the matter, exclusively consider testimonial justification in light of standard visual reports and construe a principle of testimonial justification on the basis of these reports, then what Ketchum and Alston have to say is quite persuasive. When considered in this abstract sense, if we are justified in believing that a subject's belief x is justified, it is hard to see how we would not also be justified in believing x. However, the issue is far more complicated than they make it out to be.

The problem emerges when a consideration is made of the way Ketchum and Alston have simply and uncritically followed James's construal of the issue. It will be recalled that the dual theses of the Jamesian position maintain that while mystical experiences would justify the mystic's belief in the divine, "those who stand outside of them," that is, everyone other than that mystic, would not be justified in believing that the mystic's experience was veridical on the basis of the mystic's report. The obvious intent behind this postulation is to identify two categories of individuals who stand in fundamentally different epistemic positions to one another. One category consists of the individual who has the experience and the other category consists of everyone else. Following suit, Ketchum formulates James' position as follows:

a) Those who have had religious experiences are indeed justified by virtue of having had such experiences alone, and not by virtue of any argument, in believing that God exists, nevertheless
b) the testimony of such people does not justify *others* in believing that God exists.[103]

While Alston's formulation is as follows:

1A) Beliefs formed directly on the basis of mystical states by the subject of those states are thereby justified.
2A) *One* is not justified in believing that p just because a subject who has become justified in believing that p in the way indicated in (1A) has testified that p.[104]

Based on their discussion of testimonial justification, Ketchum and Alston's respective use of "others" and "One" is clearly meant to refer to everyone other than the mystic who makes the report. Thus it is clear they intend the second thesis to be read as saying that *everyone* would not be justified in believing what the mystic does, on the basis of the mystics testimony. Hence they employ the same distinction in categories as James.

We must, however, notice that all three authors have neglected to address a crucial issue. What initially led James to place the individual mystic into his own category involved viewing that mystic as being in a significantly different epistemic position from everyone else. The grounds for making this distinction rested on the mystic's religious experience. But within the second category that consists of everyone other than that initial mystic, there will be those who take it that they have undergone sufficiently similar experiences as that initial mystic. More specifically, within the second category there will be a subclass of subjects who take it that they have had sufficiently similar experiences to those of the mystic. There will also be another subclass of individuals who have not had any mystical experiences at all. If the initial subject's experiences warranted placement into a separate category, then we may think that those individuals in the subclass of having had sufficiently similar experiences should be placed into the same category as that subject.

But none of the three authors have addressed whether the individuals in the two subclasses stand in a different epistemic position regarding the initial mystics report. They have simply combined the two subclasses together in their assessment of the issue.

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[103] Ketchum, "The Argument from Religious Experience," 355.

[104] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 279.

By combining the two subclasses together and subsequently rejecting the Jamesian position, Alston and Ketchum make two critical assumptions that are left unaddressed. First, with regards to the second thesis, they are assuming that a person who belongs to one subclass would or would not become justified in much the same manner as person who belonged to the other subclass. They assume that there is no significant epistemic difference between the two subclasses when it comes to being justified in believing in mystical reports.

The second assumption is that from someone believing there is a theoretical sound account whereby religious experiences could potentially provide justification, it follows that the person is justified in believing any given subject's report to conform to, or satisfy the criteria of the theoretical account. I will call the truth of these assumptions into question in a later section. Here it is only important to note that by making these assumptions, Ketchum and Alston oversimplify the issue by neglecting a number of other positions that one could adhere to.[105] The following options open up to us if the first assumption is false:

1a) Religious perceptual experiences provide P with prima facie justification in believing that probably x (that some divine being exists).

1b) Those who have had sufficiently similar religious experiences as P would also be prima facie justified in believing x on the basis of P's testimony. However, any given non-experiencer would not be justified in believing x on the basis P's testimony.

2a) Religious perceptual experiences provide P with prima facie justification in believing x.

2b) Those who have had sufficiently similar religious experiences would not be justified in believing x on the basis of P's testimony. However, any given non-experiencer would be prima facie justified in believing x on the basis of P's testimony.

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[105] My use of the term 'mystic' is merely for the sake continuity and simplicity. What I have in mind is still the class of subjects who undergo religious perceptual experiences as they stand in relation to the class of people who have not. As such, throughout this chapter mystic will be used to refer to those people who have undergone religious perceptual experiences.

In light of the assumption that what was said in the preceding chapters is correct, these two options can be further refined if a simple distinction is employed. The distinction is being in-fact justified in holding a belief as opposed to being justified in-principle.[106] The former concerns only those actual instances of justification whereby a person does possess good reasons for holding the beliefs they do. The later however only concerns the possibility of the former obtaining. That is, it concerns the possibility of being in-fact justified in holding certain beliefs. For instance, suppose that I produce a sheet of lines of code that is actually the code for a particular computer program. Upon examining this sheet, a computer scientist with adequate background knowledge could be in-fact justified in believing that the sheet contained the complete code for that particular program. They would be in-fact justified because they know the criteria by which to assess those lines of numbers to see if they were actually were the codes for that program. As well as this, they possess knowledge concerning what the specific numerals that compose the lines of code represent.

However, suppose that there is a computer enthusiast who understands the appropriate criteria by which to assess lines of code. Nonetheless, she does not know what the particular numerals on the sheet represent; she is simply unfamiliar with the specific symbols I used to compose the code. Consequently, she does not know if the symbols I utilized are sufficiently similar to those she is familiar with such that she could assess them under the appropriate criteria. In this case, she would not be in-fact justified in believing the sheet contained the code of the particular program. Not being able to engage in the process of assessment prevents her from being in possession of good reason to think that they are the codes for the given program. However, because she does possess the background knowledge concerning the criteria by which to assess the numbers, in-principle she could be justified. All that prevents her from being in-fact justified is the lack of understanding that the symbols I used are sufficiently similar to the ones she is familiar with.

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[106] I am indebted to Jack Macintosh and Nicole Wyatt for their helpful suggestions concerning this distinction.

The relevance of this distinction to the present discussion pertains to the second assumption that Ketchum and Alston made as outlined above. An individual could accept that there are correct epistemic criteria for assessing perceptual experiences, such that if the individual were justified in believing any given religious experience could satisfy them then she would be justified in believing the subject's experience was prima facie probably veridical. If an individual actually did possess good reason to think the religious perceptual experiences in question satisfy the appropriate criteria then she would be in-fact justified in believing that the subjects experience was probably veridical. If that individual does not have, or could not obtain, good reason to think that the experiences were applicable to the criteria, then she would not be in-fact justified. However, because this individual is aware of the appropriate epistemic criteria, in-principle she could be justified. If both the first and second assumptions that Ketchum and Alston make are false, the application of this distinction generates three further positions that could be adhered to.

3a) *P*'s experience actually conforms to the appropriate epistemic criteria in which case she would be prima facie justified on the basis of her experience in believing probably x.

3b) Other individuals within the subclass of non-experiencers and the subclass of experiencers could accept that there are appropriate epistemic criteria for assessing perceptual experiences. If these individuals could acquire good reason to believe that P's experience could satisfy those criteria then they would have good reason to accept P's report. However, the only individuals who could acquire good reason to believe this are those *belonging to the subclass of experiencers*. As such, they would be in-fact justified in believing that P's experience is probably veridical. Those in the subclass of non-experiencers could not acquire good reason to accept that the criteria are satisfied. They would not be justified in-fact in accepting that P's experience was probably veridical. They could only be justified in believing this, in-principle.

4a) P's, experience actually conforms to the appropriate epistemic criteria in which

case she would be justified on the basis of her experience in believing x.

4b) Other individuals within the subclass of non-experiencers and the subclass of experiencers could accept that there are appropriate epistemic criteria for assessing perceptual experiences. If these individuals could acquire good reason to believe that P's experience could satisfy those criteria then they would have good reason to accept P's report. However, the only individuals who could acquire good reason to believe this are those *belonging to the subclass of non-experiencers*. As such, they would be in-fact justified in believing that P's experience is probably veridical. Those in the subclass of experiencers could not acquire good reason to accept that the criteria are satisfied. They would not be justified in-fact in accepting that P's experience was probably veridical. They could only be justified in believing this in-principle.

The point of prolonged discussion was to draw out one way in which Ketchum and Alston's assessment fails to adequately address this issue and where this failure stems from. The remainder of this discussion will concentrate on two further problems with Alston and Ketchum's position. Granting the assumption that my account of the care relational model is correct we shall come to see that the third position outlined above is quite defensible.

V. Testimony

Turning to the second worry, we shall come to see that Swinburne, Alston and Ketchum have provided a radically incomplete account of how justification arises through testimony. As Swinburne correctly points out, the vast majority of what we believe finds its basis or grounds in the testimony we have received from other sources, be they verbal or non-verbal reports. Furthermore, testimony plays an extremely important practical role for all of us. As Ernest Sosa notes, "we rely on testimony for our grasp of history, geography, science and more. We stake our fortunes, and even our lives, on our beliefs. Which plane to board, what to eat or drink, the instrument readings to

accept – all decided through testimony".[107] However given this, it is odd that the epistemology of testimony has been a relatively ignored field in western philosophy. It has only been within the last twenty years, that a significant body of literature has emerged concerning this matter.

Many contemporary theorists begin their assessment of the issue by accepting what is referred to as the common sense constraint.[108] One who adopts this position would maintain that testimony does in fact yield prima facie justified beliefs.[109] As Fricker and Audi have pointed out, part of the reason we think that testimony does yield prima facie justified beliefs is because we have a good idea of what the conditions for its successful operation would involve.[110] From personal experience we are well aware that the practice of testimony is a fallible one, and as such yields true beliefs (or at any rate, probably true beliefs) only when certain conditions apply.

Following Fricker we can call such conditions the validity conditions of testimony. As she notes, "in the case of...testimony we know of specific validity conditions for the links operation such that its deliverances are true to how things really are only when these V-conditions obtain". Generally, it is accepted that the first validity condition requires speakers to be *sincere* in their assertions; they must honestly believe what they assert to be the case. The second validity condition is *competence* or accuracy. Under this criterion

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[107] Ernst Sosa, "Testimony and Coherence," 59.

[108] Concerning the acceptance of the common sense constraint see Sosa, "Testimony and Coherence," 59-69: Insole, "Seeing off the Local Threat to Irreducible Knowledge by Testimony," 44-56; Coady, "Testimony, Observation and "Autonomous Knowledge"," 225-250; Fricker, "Against Gullibility", 125-163.

[109] We should take note of Audi's helpful comments with regards to the difference between knowledge transmission via testimony and acquiring justification via testimony. Concerning the former, testimonial based knowledge is received through transmission and consequently depends on the attester knowing the belief that is being transmitted. This can be seen from considering cases where a person does not know a proposition p and nonetheless claims that p. Here we would not say that the hearer would know that p on the basis of attester's testimony. If the attester does not know that p then the hearer cannot acquire knowledge that p from the utterance. Justification differs on this point. Even if the attester is not justified in believing that p another hearer could become justified in believing that p. The attestation alone may provide the hearer with adequate grounds to believe p. Audi, "The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification," 409-411.

[110] Ibid. 407-409. Concerning Fricker's formulation of the validity conditions consult Fricker, "Against Gullibility," 145-148; and Fricker, "Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony," 398-400.

a speaker is competent only if the belief asserted is true or at least likely to be true.[111] We can refer to the dual criteria as the trustworthiness of a speaker.[112]

Any prima facie justified belief produced through the practice of testimony can be defeated if the hearer comes to possess evidence that the validity conditions are not satisfied. For instance, a person could come to possess evidence that the speaker was lying or incompetent in their assessment of a given situation. However, assume for the moment that the hearer does not have any evidence that might defeat a particular piece of testimony. Furthermore, suppose that the attester to this testimony does, in fact, satisfy the validity conditions. The question that must be asked is how would the hearer come to be justified in believing the validity conditions of testimony are in fact satisfied? Two traditions, the anti-reductionists and the reductionists, have emerged with an answer to this question. The ensuing debate that has arisen between these two camps has become highly complex and subtle.[113]

However, it will not be necessary to attempt to settle this debate. For the purposes of this work we only need to consider where the criteria for testimonial justification, as offered by the anti reductionists, converge with the criteria offered by what is often seen

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[111] Fricker labels a particular testimonial attestation as trustworthy when it satisfies both validity conditions. Her more specific formulation of trustworthiness goes as follows: A speaker is trustworthy with respect to an assertoric utterance by her U, which is made on an occasion O, and by which she asserts that P if and only if 1) U us sincere 2) S is competent with respect to 'P' on O, where this notion is defined as 2i) If S were sincerely to assert that P on O, then it would be the case that P. As we can see from this formulation Fricker attempts to relativize trustworthiness to specific instances of a person testifying rather than requiring an over all assessment of their character dispositions. For a detailed discussion of her final formulation of trustworthiness see Fricker, "Against Gullibility," 146-148.

[112] For an excellent discussion on these criteria see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness,* 84-148. Williams takes it that Sincerity and Accuracy (Competence) are "virtues of truth". Sincerity involves truthfully relaying a person's beliefs and developing character dispositions to do so. Accuracy on the other hand, "implies care, reliability, and so on, in coming to believe the truth". As such there are two aspects associated with Accuracy. The first concerns the "investigators will" which involves the person's character, attitudes, desires, wishes and care that they take towards discovering the truth. The second aspect concerns the methods of investigation that the person employs towards discovering the truth. Effective investigation will consist of employing those methods that lead to true belief.

[113] Those with Anti Reductionist leanings include, C.A.J Coady, Michael Welbourne, Michael Dummett, John McDowell, Christopher Insole, and Peter Graham. See Coady, *Testimony: a Philosophical Study*; Welbourne, "Testimony, Knowledge and Belief"; Dummett, "Testimony and Memory"; McDowell, "Knowledge by Hearsay"; Graham, "Metaphysical Libertarianism and the Epistemology of Testimony". For those who take a reductionist stance see Fricker, "Against Gullibility"; Fricker, "Telling and Trusting"; Audi, "The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification"; Adler, "Testimony, Trust, Knowing".

as the most defensible reductionist position; namely the local reductionist position.[114] This is because the areas in which the theories converge reveal to us the problem of testimonial justification pertaining to experiences we are interested in.

Following Thomas Reid, the anti reductionist maintains we are justified in believing in the deliverances of testimony because we have a presumptive right to do so. That is we have a presumptive right to believe what we are told as is, without any further need to possess evidence that would in some sense confirm what we are told. Here we can understand the presumptive right thesis the anti-reductionist adheres to as being a presumptive right to accept that the validity conditions of successful testimony are satisfied. This in turn grants one's testimonial acquired beliefs the status of being prima facie justified. As such, one is justified (all things being equal) in believing that on any particular occasion a particular testifiers specific report satisfies the validity conditions by default, without the need for any positive evidence indicating that this is so. Of course, such a right must be considered to be presumptive, conferring only prima facie justification, for such beliefs are defeasible. And again, this presumptive right is defeated

[114] It strikes me that the case C.A.J Coady and Leslie Stevenson have presented against global reductionism is persuasive. Global reductionists of testimony maintain that in order for any testimonial based belief (past or presently held) to accrue justification, that belief must be based on one of the three basic sources of justification. But when we consider the project that these reductionists would require of us to engage in, there emerges a considerable problem. If we are to maintain that testimony is a source of justified beliefs then we would have to engage in a Cartesian style reconstructive project whereby we suspend all of our testimonial acquired beliefs and accept them only after the sources that they are grounded in have been confirmed. Alternatively, we would have to attempt to verify each and every testimonial belief, one by one, before we could accept it. The second alternative is clearly beyond our capabilities; we could spend our entire lives doing this and never come close to succeeding. The coherence of the first alternative is highly suspicious. First, it is beyond reasonable to suppose that one could gain independent empirical confirmation of the proposition that "testimony is generally reliable". This is because what each individual is capable of observing and confirming, without the aid of testimony, is far too limited. Second, our very framework for conceptualization our commonsense understanding of the world is developed socially during our acquisition of language. Hence even the basic epistemic sources which are supposed to ground testimonial based beliefs are themselves dependant on testimony. Further, what we classify as perceptual knowledge is available only on the basis of background concepts acquired in part from testimony. An example that Fricker uses is an observation that there is Russian soldier marching in a parade. Her knowing that the person is a Russian, a soldier, and in a parade may in fact depend upon testimony acquired in textbooks or newspapers concerning these various concepts. For an in-depth analysis and criticism of the Global reductionist position see Coady, "Testimony", 79-152; and Coady, "Testimony, Observation and "Autonomous Knowledge"," 225-272. As well, see Stevenson, "Why Believe What People Say?" 429-451. For an assessment of Coady's works and more generally why both Coady and Stevenson's positions do not adequately respond to Local reductionist alternatives see Graham, "The Reliability of Testimony", 695-709; and Fricker, "Telling and Trusting," 397-406.

if the hearer has or comes to possess evidence indicating that either the sincerity criterion or the competence criterion are not satisfied.[115]

On the other hand the local reductionist, as represented by Elizabeth Fricker, accepts a presumptive right to the deliverances of testimony relative to one's developmental stage. She maintains that this is the stage in one's life where one uncritically accepts the testimony of others. This, in turn, allows one to develop a common sense worldview and the ability to becoming a competent user of a given language. However, she goes on to deny that there can be a presumptive right with regards to a mature hearer of testimony. For the mature hearer (one who has developed a common sense world view and is already a competent user of language), if she is to be justified in holding beliefs stemming from what others have told her, those beliefs must be inferentially grounded in other more primitive or fundamental epistemic categories.[116] If they are, then they will be inferentially justified. Alternatively stated, the local reductionist maintains that a hearer is prima facie justified in believing what a speaker attests to only when she has positive empirical evidence from other basic epistemic sources. This evidence must indicate the speaker has satisfied the validity conditions mentioned above. The hearer must actively engage in an assessment of whether or not the conditions of trustworthy testimony are satisfied for every case of testimony they are privy to.

The obvious question we need to ask the local reductionist is what exactly this assessment amounts to. The problem, of course, is that in the overwhelming majority of cases we will not have independent knowledge that would confirm that the validity conditions have been satisfied. When I hear over the phone from someone that I take to be a ticket agent that my plane ticket will cost $260.68, most would take it that I would be justified in believing that my plane ticket will in fact cost that much; that eventually

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[115] Given that the anti reductionist maintains that the presumptive right thesis is the correct position to hold they also maintain that testimony is a direct source of knowledge and justified belief.

[116] The question as to what exactly reduction amounts to, makes the most sense on a justificationist account of knowledge. Under such an account a prima facie justified testimonial based belief will be one for which the believer is aware of some set of premises which justify their belief. As Graham has pointed out the Reductionist is committed to two theses. The first is inferentialism where justified acceptance requires positive background beliefs (or premises). The second is epistemic priority, where the background beliefs required to justify, must ultimately stem from the basic sources of perception, memory and reason. Fricker, "Telling and Trusting,"397-398; and Graham, "Metaphysical Libertarianism," 37-38.

that amount will go "missing" from my bank account. However, I have no knowledge of the character dispositions of the person I am talking to on the other end of the line, for I have no idea who they are. I have no idea whether this is a person who is taking their job seriously on the day that I call and will charge my account the correct amount of money. Of course, I might have independent knowledge that the person with whom I am speaking to is an employee of a trustworthy company. But prior to looking at my bank statement I will not have independent confirmation that the ticket agent was sufficiently sincere or competent with regards to my purchase.

In order to address this issue, Fricker proposes that assessing a speaker for trustworthiness involves constructing theory or explanation of why a attestation was made by a particular speaker. This, she holds, will be done by attributing beliefs, desires, and other character attributes to the speaker as well as relying on background beliefs concerning the context and occasion that one finds oneself in.

> The primary task for the hearer is to construct enough of a theory of the speaker, and relevant portions of her past and present environment, to explain her utterance: to render it comprehensible why she made that assertion, on that occasion. Whether the speaker's assertion is to be trusted will generally speaking be fall-out from this theory which explains why she made it; and it is difficult to see how sincerity and competence could be evaluated other than through the construction of such an explanation.[117]

Fricker maintains that in order to construct such a theory the speaker must be assumed, by default, as being sincere in what they say. By default, we must grant to speakers that they earnestly believe what they are saying. Likewise, we are required to grant to speakers, by default, that they are competent with regards to what they say. However, this default presumption with regards to competence only obtains for a certain subclass of tellings. It only obtains in cases where a common sense understanding of the psychology of other persons would lead to an expectation of competence. This point will be crucial to our discussion and I will have more to say on this issue shortly.[118]

Fricker maintains that postulating these default assumptions in the explanatory theory is not to be construed as an endorsement of the anti reductionist position or more specifically a presumptive right thesis. This is because she takes the correct meaning of a

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[117] Fricker, "Against Gullibility,"148-150.

[118] Ibid. 150-152.

'presumptive right thesis', as entailing that a hearer would not be required to monitor and assess a speaker for trustworthiness. On a local reductionist account, however, a default position with regards to sincerity and competence restricted to certain tellings is only permitted if there are no signs that indicate otherwise. A hearer has the epistemic responsibility to be constantly scrutinizing the speaker for telltale signs that they do not satisfy the conditions of trustworthiness.

Nonetheless, we might think that Fricker's notion of constructing a mini explanatory theory of an utterance by granting the default positions of trustworthiness to the speaker, straightforwardly commits her to an anti-reductionist position. This can be maintained for the relatively obvious reason that her specification of what a presumptive right thesis entails, is far too stringent. Further, we might think that the anti reductionist's presumptive right thesis could accommodate for the requirement of scrutiny with regards to a speakers attestation.[119] Such matters do not concern the present discussion. Here we merely needed to see that both positions converge when it comes to the requirement of a default acceptance with regards to the conditions of trustworthiness, short of positive reasons to think otherwise.

Fricker's claim that only with regards to a limited range of subject matter can a default presumption of competence be extended, is another important issue on which the two traditions converge. People lie and at times are simply mistaken in what they report. However, the extent to which we receive false or true testimony is not only related to certain types of people but also with topic matter to which they attest. We think we are more likely to receive false testimony on certain subject matter from people who are not competent to be reporting on the given subject than from people who are known to be competent. This is often held, regardless of how honest or deceitful they may be. For instance, we think we are more likely to pay the exact amount that a qualified ticket agent tells us we will be paying as opposed to the amount suggested to us by one who we have reason to suspect has not bothered to check the current prices of plane tickets.

The solution to our diverging intuitions over whether testimony within different content and contexts should be accepted as such or meticulously scrutinized is to not treat

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[119] See Christopher Insole's paper for discussion on why we might think that Fricker's conception of default settings and the need to disaggregate are better accommodated on an anti reductionist account. Insole, "Seeing off the Local Threat to Irreducible Knowledge by Testimony," 50-57.

all testimony as a unitary category. That is, we should not treat all testimony as assessable under a single epistemic principle that allows us to differentiate between trustworthy and untrustworthy reports.[120] The strength and extent to which we should be willing to grant the default positions into our over all explanatory theory of the particular attestation will be a function of our beliefs about the speaker, the topics on which they report, the context in which the testimonial attestation was made, along with our own background beliefs and theoretical commitments. C.A.J Coady (an ardent supporter of the antireductionist position) is worth quoting at length on this matter. Speaking to the very relevant issue of astonishing reports, and after criticizing an overly skeptical view to testimonial justification, he notes:

> Perhaps the most that can be said is that the efficiency in handling of information and advancing knowledge is best served by a lethargic bias in our basic framework of beliefs. Openness to the novel, whether directly encountered or as subject to report, is certainly a virtue...but the wholly open mind is not only unattainable in fact but undesirable in theory. We require a conceptual apparatus and related beliefs in order to construe our experiences at all...Hence the fact that a putatively reliable report clashes, or even appears to clash, with our incumbent belief system gives us some reason for a cautious response to it. This caution will be stronger where we have independent reason to be skeptical about this or that class of witness or the circumstances of their testimony. Nonetheless, the degree of coherence with what we already know or believe about the world always has some role to play in the assessment of the credibility of a particular piece of testimony. This factor, which we might call the plausibility of the reported matter, must always be weighed against the particular circumstance of the report...we must weigh the internal circumstances against the external circumstances, where the internal circumstances concern the probability of the event reported in relation to what we know and the external circumstances concern the credit of the witness, degree of confirmation by other witnesses, internal consistency of the narration, the type of testimony, the interest, relevant beliefs, and purpose of the testifier, and the abilities of the witness in relation to what he narrates. [121]

Now it should be clear that for some speakers attesting to certain subject matter, there should be strong default settings with regards to their competence and sincerity. While in others cases a general attitude of skepticism should be maintained and the default potions will not be granted. In either case, it does not appear that we can specify the precise criteria on granting or withholding the default presumptions; that is, it would appear this granting or withholding could only be done on a case-to-case basis. Nonetheless, there will be rough guidelines we can point to in order to delimit when a

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[120] Fricker, "Telling and Trusting," 406-408; and Insole, "Seeing off the Local Threat to Irreducible Knowledge by Testimony," 50-55.

[121] Coady, "Testimony," 196-197.

default position should be admitted or withheld. Intuitively, the former cases will include normal speakers testifying to relatively mundane "everyday" subject matters where our common sense knowledge of people and their normal capabilities indicate that competence can indeed be presumed; when we ask a stranger for the time, or what their name is or what they had for lunch, for instance.

Furthermore, as Coady's remarks indicate, they may include cases where what the speaker say coheres well with our background beliefs of the context and status of the speaker. For instance, we can grant to one we know to be a scientist a default presumption when it comes to matters of his expertise, if we are aware that the individual is an expert in his given field. On the other hand, a person should likely withhold an attribution of competence when a given report stretches the boundaries of what the person could accept on a common sense level. This will especially be the case when complete strangers attest to matters that we have very few background beliefs from which to assess the likelihood of the report. Take, for instance, a complete stranger attesting to matters of advanced mathematics or astrophysics in a setting that would not normally be thought to be conducive to trustworthy attestations. Unless we have in-depth knowledge of these fields allowing for some sort of corroboration for what they say, we generally think we would not be justified in believing they are providing trustworthy testimony.

The preceding general remarks about testimony and justification allow us to see just how over simplified Swinburne, Alston and Ketchum's assessment of testimony is. Alston and Ketchum's discussion of testimonial justification proceeds by examining a few standard cases where reports of visual experiences are made and the hearer's of these reports would be considered justified in believing what they are told. From these considerations they go on to postulate Ketchum's principle P of testimonial justification. On the basis of this principle they reject the Jamesian position and subsequently take the Optimist position to be correct. Of course, the principle they offer appears to be correct. If S is justified in a given belief x and a hearer Q is justified in believing that S is justified in believing x, then it is hard to see why Q would not also be justified in believing x. At least this is so on the assumption that justification is a matter of being in possession of reasons that one takes to indicate or probably indicate the truth of some claim.

However, their overall assessment simply does not do justice to the complexity of the problem. First, the dichotomy between the Jamesian and Optimist position is a false one. As we saw above there are many other positions that one could adhere to. This is an issue that these authors have completely neglected. Second, Ketchum's principle P alone does not adequately address the issue of when and under what conditions a hearer can become justified believing the reports of others. The authors fail to recognize that acceptance of testimony is a matter of granting or withholding the conditions of trustworthy testimony. Furthermore, they fail to acknowledge that we will often not have independent confirmation of a given speaker's sincerity or competence at the time a report is made. As we shall see below, this point has considerable implications for justifying hearers in accepting the kinds of religious testimony in question.

The third problem primarily concerns the principle of rationality Swinburne offers to address the issue of testimony (The *principle of testimony* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter). From the fact that people accept testimony as a source of prima facie justified beliefs, it does not follow that we can postulate a principle expected to obtain for all reports. Rather, in the majority of cases the reasons we have to accept a given report will be entailed by a fragmentary theory explaining why the specific assertion was made in the first place. And this, as we have seen, will depend on granting a default acceptance that the speaker's testimony is trustworthy. This will be done on the basis of a wide array of beliefs held by the hearer and condition which the testifier and hearer find themselves in. Furthermore, the attribution of trustworthy testimony will be made on the basis of what an individual takes to be a common sense understanding of the world, psychology and behavior of people. This, in turn, will determine i) the types of speaker the hearer is entitled to consider trustworthy and ii) assertions about certain subject matter the hearer can hold speakers to be competent about. Consequently, there may be many cases in which a hearer's common sense worldview would not grant him the right to presume that certain reports are trustworthy. Let us now consider how these considerations can have bearing on the issue of religious perceptual experiences.

VI. Sincerity, Competence and Religious Perceptual Experiences

We are now in a position to see why my third option regarding testimonial justification does in fact have something to be said for it, granting the assumption that what was said in earlier chapters is correct. We shall start to see this by returning to a point Alston made. Alston holds that the private nature of the religious experience does not affect first person justification. If an individual were justified in believing the subject is justified, then by implication of Ketchum's principle P, that individual would have good reason to accept that the subject is justified. As such they would have good reason to believe the private nature of religious experience does not affect the subject's justification.

However, his general strategy only works in favor of showing the incomprehensibility of positions that conflict with Ketchum's principle P. The conflict arose on the basis of the idea that a hearer could accept that a subject was justified, without themselves being justified in believing the subjects report to be the case. However, the options (1-4) that I have provided, do not conflict with principle P obtaining. All of these positions maintain that certain subclasses of individuals would be justified in accepting the religious reports of others while other subclasses would not. As such, principle P can still apply to those individual in both subsections. The central failing of Alston's account is his failure to consider the relevance of the private nature of religious experience as it applies to positions that do not come into conflict with principle P.

Returning to the discussion of the private nature of religious perceptual experiences carried out in the first chapter, there certainly is a sense in which they are no more private than any other experience of a purported object. In either case the phenomenon of having the particular experience will uniquely occur within a particular subject's mind. And though two subjects can have the "same" experiences of the purported object, the experiences they have of the object will not be numerically identical to one another. However there is a relevant sense in which these religious perceptual experiences differ in their privateness from our standard experiences of medium sized dry goods.

This sense of privateness can be captured regardless of whether we consider them to be caused wholly naturalistically, or whether we consider them to be veridical and caused by miraculous intervention. In either case the significant point is that it is the subject who undergoes the experience of the phenomena exclusively. That is, the subject is the only one who is privy to experiencing the purported percept at the time and place they do. Others could potentially be in the contextual vicinity possessing normal acuity and fully functioning senses, nonetheless they would not perceive what the mystic does. At least they will not, insofar as the reported object of experience is concerned.[122] It is this characteristic religious perceptual experiences display that can ultimately prevent the non-experiencer from acquiring justification from the mystic's reports. This is because they may not be admissible under the non-experiencer's common sense understanding of what types of tellings a hearer would be entitled to accept, and hence be justified in believing.

The first thing that must be said is that we cannot conclude that a non-experiencer would not be justified in believing the mystic's report merely on the basis that the report is thought to be strange or out of the ordinary. As we have seen, such an analysis would be radically incomplete. As noted above, we are assuming the non-experiencer accepts that there are correct epistemic criteria for assessing any perceptual experience. And the satisfaction of these criteria would grant the mystic justification. Belief in such an account would form part of that non-experiencer's background belief structure. These constraints must be incorporated into our assessment.

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[122] Of course, if any mystical experiences are veridical as opposed to being wholly explainable in a naturalistic way, there may be another causal characteristic that we could point that would indicate the privateness of such experiences. In our standard visual experiences of material objects, whether they are of people or inanimate medium sized dry goods, these objects cause the person to perceive them when they are perceived. However, when such an experiences does occur, it is not because of a deliberate or intentional act of the object. These material objects did not will that they be seen. Assuming that the perceiver's eyes are functioning properly, once they are open she no choice in the matter; she simply will perceives these material objects. However, if veridical, mystical experiences will be a different sort of experience. It will be one that is caused by an intentional act of a divine being. That is to say, regardless of whether the awareness or perception was produced directly in us or indirectly via our normal cognitive faculties it is still dependant upon another being allowing us to perceive it exclusively. This seems somewhat straightforward as none of the many apparatus that allow us to have normal visual experiences have the means to allow us to perceive an immaterial being of the sort God is supposed to be; at least not without some help.

Likewise, the problem cannot be attributed to the notion that many subjects who undergo religious perceptual experiences fail to satisfy the sincerity component of testimony. Recall, this criterion stipulates that the hearer of the testimony must have no reason not to grant by default that the testifier earnestly believes what they report as being the case. However, it should be obvious that we have every reason to think for many reports, subjects sincerely testify to what they underwent. Often subjects end up leading upstanding moral lives as a result of their experiences and would abstain from any sort of intentional deceit. Thus we can readily include in our mini explanatory theory that they are telling the truth when it comes to having had some phenomenological experience they take to be of the divine.

The problem, at least for some, and perhaps many non-experiencers, would only emerge with regard to the competence criteria. Recall from the first chapter that the subjects we are considering take it they have undergone experiences where it seemed (epistemically) to them that they were perceptually experiencing a divine holy being. Each subject understands and interprets the phenomenon experienced as being of a divine presence. However, even if there are sound epistemic criteria for assessing such perceptual experiences and these criteria were part of the non-experiencer's background belief structure, it does not follow that the non-experiencer could identify any given report of such an experience as having wholly satisfied the conditions of the sound account.

Each non-experiencer (and for that matter, experiencers as well) will have what they take to be a common sense understanding of the world, in conjunction with many background beliefs about which types of reports that they will find acceptable. However for many people, certain beliefs concerning testimony will be shared. It is my contention that one of these beliefs—the satisfaction of which is required for a hearer to attribute competence to an experientially based report of another person—is the intuitive notion that if the recipient of testimony were to have undergone a sufficiently similar phenomenological experience as the subject, then he too would have understood and interpreted that experience in generally the same manner as the subject. He would come to believe he was directly experiencing the object that the subject reports to have

experienced. At least, this would be so in a relatively un-ramified and heavily theory laden sense.

Suppose you are traveling to a place you have never been to before. Here, you meet someone whom you take to be a resident of the area. This person reports something relatively mundane to you. Let us say you pose to this person the question of whether there are any interesting local landmarks in the area. To this question, she replies that there is an old water fountain around the corner of the street. Now, suppose you have never seen this fountain, largely because it is your first time in this particular place. Further, there is nothing about her behavior that would indicate she is lying. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose she would, given the relative unimportance of the question. In this situation, a large part why of many of us would be willing to extend the default presumption of competence to this speaker results from building into our mini-theory of the utterance, beliefs concerning that persons context and situation as a resident of the area who is likely to know about local landmarks.

However, another part of this will involve attributing to this resident the possession of the requisite conceptual scheme needed to have their own perceptual experience of the fountain, as well as the ability to identify it as a fountain in the first place. But this in turn requires us to believe that were we too have been in a sufficiently similar circumstance as the speaker (i.e. standing near this water fountain) and have a sufficiently similar phenomenological experience, we would have understood or interpreted this experience in a sufficiently similar manner. We too would see, at a general level, what they see and in this case understand that it is a fountain that we are seeing. Each of us would believe this for the obvious reason that we think we have the requisite conceptual scheme and physiological apparatus needed to observe a fountain, were there actually a fountain to be perceived there. At a general level then, attributions of competence will require us to theoretically project ourselves into the scenario or situation described in the report.

Cases of religious perceptual experiences, unlike cases of observing fountains and the like, will differ for the non-experiencer. The problem many non-experiencers may very well have with these claims will stem from their lack of means by which to attribute competence to the subject. When it comes to reports of these experiences, there is no means for the non-experiencer to acquire the requisite beliefs from which they might

come to understand what it would be like to perceptually experience a non-embodied immaterial divine holy being, or for that matter, a perceptual experience of any sort of immaterial being. Likely, they have not had perceptual experiences of immaterial objects from which they can form beliefs about what it would be like to undergo and interpret such experiences in the manner the subject does. At least, this would not be the case unless they to were to become an experiencer themselves. And it is hard to see how they could come to possess such beliefs without being in this position.

As we have noted, there is no controllable context or situation from which non-experiencers could come to have a suitably similar experience as the subject. They may even be observing the same physical terrain and nonetheless not see what the subject does. Thus, the non-experiencers will not have within their background beliefs and experiences, a point of reference to understand what it would be like for a subject to undergo and interpret his phenomenological experiences in the manner the subject does. Certainly the non-experiencer will have little reason to doubt that the subject earnestly believes his experience seemed to occur in a certain manner. But as to what such a 'seeming' would consist of or be like, the non-experiencer can have no idea. However, without this point of reference or means of acceptance, he will have no reason to believe he would give a sufficiently similar interpretation and hold the corresponding beliefs to a sufficiently similar phenomenological experience. There will be a lack of grounds from which to theoretically project himself into the situation that is being reported on the basis of a shared conceptual background. Thus, it would be permissible for the non-experiencer to withhold granting the default presumption of competence to the subject.

We can look at the issue from another perspective. Regardless of whether the non-experiencer accepted that there are epistemic criteria to assess religious perceptual experiences the non-experiencer would not be justified in believing any particular subject's report satisfies those criteria.

On my account of the relational model one epistemic criterion that had to be satisfied in order for justification to accrue was that the experience had to seem a certain way to the subject. In particular, it must have seemed to the subject that they were experiencing a holy divine being. This involved there being an accurate description of the experience that could conform to the characteristics of the common core as outlined in

chapter one. The non-experiencer could accept this criterion is correct and as such in-principle could assess the subject's testimony to see if it were satisfied. But the non-experiencer has no background point of reference from which to make an attribution of competence to any report of religious perceptual experiences. He does not understand what undergoing such an experience would be like. Consequently, he has no basis to suppose the subject's interpretation of phenomenological experience would have been one that would have arisen for him had he undergone a sufficiently similar experience. Because this is the case, he does not have any basis for thinking the experience is one that could be accurately captured by a moderate description in conformity with the common core. Without having a basis to make this assessment, he could not be in-fact justified in believing the subject's experience conformed to the appropriate epistemic criteria and subsequently that the subject is justified in his existence claim. This of course supports the latter half of the third position mentioned above.

We must notice that other subjects who undergo religious putative perceptions will not be faced with the same difficulty the non-experiencer is faced with. They have already undergone the requisite phenomenal experience and have understood and interpreted the phenomenological aspects of their experiences in terms of an awareness or seemings of an immaterial divine holy presence. Thus they will have reason to think that they possess the relevant conceptual scheme for having such experiences. As such, they stand in a much better position to understand what any other subject is referring to when they report having become aware of such a presence. Their own experience will form a point of reference from which to comprehend and conceptualize the experiences of others. And this will be part of their background belief set that they will utilize in assessing the reports of other subjects.

Here an analogy can be made to the water fountain case that we considered above in at least one crucial aspect. Subjects who undergo religious perceptual experiences will stand in relation to each other's reports in much the same way we would normally stand in relation to the local who testifies to there being a physical object we have not seen in the vicinity. Like the situation in that case, the reports made by each subject may cohere and appear to have been—at least on a descriptive level—sufficiently similar to their own past experiences. As such, they will have reason to think that someone who testifies to

having had the experience possesses the relevant conceptual scheme needed to have them. Thus, they will have reason to think that were they to have a sufficiently similar experience to that of the subject who makes the report, they too would interpret it, at least at un-ramified levels, in the same manner as the subject.

Consequently they would be entitled to extend an assumption of competence to the subject who makes the report.[123] And assuming that the other conditions relevant to competence (such as the context in which the utterance was made and beliefs concerning the subjects mental state etc.) as well as sincerity were satisfied, then those who have religious perceptual experiences would be entitled to accept each other's reports as being trustworthy (in the sense of trustworthy outlined above), and in-fact justified.[124]

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[123] Because experiencers stand in a privileged epistemic position relative to other reports of religious perceptual experiences, first person justification is not affected by the epistemic situation of the non-experiencer. A subject could become aware that her experience conformed to the criteria of a sound account. Considered in terms of the model that I have provided, the subject can identify that her religious perceptual experience can be described in conformity with the fourth doctrine of Franks-Davis's common core (see Chapter 1). The subject would be in a unique position with regards to identifying if she underwent an experience that could be described in terms of a relational experience of a divine and holy being. She could also come to understand that, in her case, the other criteria of my model are satisfied. Consequently, she could acquire good reason to think that her religious perceptual experience grants her prima facie justification concerning an un-ramified belief in the divine. Furthermore, because she stands in a privileged epistemic position with regards to reports that other subjects make, she could come to justifiably believe that other religious perceptual experiences satisfy the criteria of the sound account. As such, she could come to be in possession of evidence that would overcome the various challenges from background improbability. The non-experiencer's inability to come into possession of this evidence will have no effect on the subject's ability to accumulate this evidence.

[124] There is a further issue that I have intentionally left unmentioned, as I am not yet clear on where I stand on the matter. This issue pertains to non-experiencers who belong to the same religious tradition as the subject who makes the report. Perhaps these individuals possess certain background beliefs based on highly ramified doctrines, such that we may have reason to think that they could understand what it would be like to undergo a religious perceptual experience. If this were the case then perhaps they could make the attribution of competence to subjects who do report undergoing them. In turn they to could be justified in accepting the reports of the subjects (assuming all other factors were satisfied). However, it seems odd at best to think that doctrinal knowledge alone would give these individuals the means by which to understand what it would be like to experience the phenomenological content that is being reported. Even so, if it were the case then our weak Jamesian position would have to be modified further. We would have to exclude from the circle of those justified, anyone who did not possess the relevant doctrinal conceptual scheme.

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