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Spirituality, Expertise, and Philosophers

Bryan Frances

We all can identify many contemporary philosophy professors we know to be theists of some type or other. We also know that often enough their non-theistic beliefs are as epistemically upstanding as the non-theistic beliefs of philosophy professors who aren't theists. In fact, the epistemic-and-non-theistic *lives* of philosophers who are theists are just as epistemically upstanding as the epistemic-and-non-theistic lives of philosophers who aren't theists. Given these and other, similar, facts, there is good reason to think that the pro-theistic beliefs of theistic philosophers are frequently epistemically upstanding. Given their impeccable epistemic credentials on non-theistic matters, the amount of careful thought that lies behind their theism, the large size of the community of philosophical theists, as well as other, similar facts, it would be surprising if all or even most of their pro-theistic beliefs were epistemically blameworthy in some or other significant sense tied to charges such as 'He should know better than to believe that' (so mere false belief need not be blameworthy in this sense; the use of 'blameworthy' will be clarified below). Of course *some* of the pro-theistic beliefs of some theistic philosophers are epistemically blameworthy; the mere large numbers of fallible theistic philosophers almost guarantees it. My point here is that it would be unexpected if most of the pro-theistic beliefs of theistic philosophers were epistemically blameworthy.

But what exactly *makes* their pro-theistic beliefs epistemically upstanding? In virtue of what combinations of epistemic items—arguments, experiences, belief formation facts, even the absences of certain facts—do their pro-theistic beliefs end up epistemically blameless?

Thanks to Duncan Pritchard, Robin LePoidevin, Mark Nelson, Philip Quinn, David Efird, Scott Shalkowski, John Greco, Brian Davies, Matthew Mullin, Jeremy Pierce, Trent Dougherty, Dylan Futter, and Colleen Keating.

I will eventually be arguing that the theistic beliefs of a significant class of philosophers are blameworthy in an interesting sense. Part of what makes the argument worthwhile lies in the theistic claims I assume to be true. For starters, I will suppose that God really exists, created the universe, and is supremely good, loving, powerful, and knowledgeable. Call the latter five features God's 'major properties'. This isn't to say that those are His most important characteristics. If you like, you can make some amendments here (in addition to substituting some other term for 'properties'). For instance, you could add that God continues to create the universe; or you could completely omit the idea that God created the universe. You could add that God is worthy of worship. My argument won't have the same strength when applied to every conception of God. It seems strongest the more person-like God is taken to be; it seems weakest when God is taken to be much more abstract (e.g., divine goo pervading the universe).

The theistic assumptions don't stop there. I will also suppose that people are often divinely 'zapped' in some kind of quasi-perceptual way so that they acquire and retain knowledge of God's existence and major properties—even high-quality reflective knowledge and understanding. If it helps, we can assume the truth of an appropriate kind of substance dualism along with immortality and an appropriate kind of Heaven. I'm happy to assume that there are knowledge-producing arguments for God's existence. Finally, and this will be an important focus of this essay, I will assume that there is some special, relatively calm (as opposed to 'zappy') cognitive state or belief-formation type G that many of us, including philosophy professors, enjoy and which has a pair of enviable properties. First, it produces theistic beliefs with oodles of high quality warrant—perhaps as good as the warrant had by visual beliefs such as 'My socks are blue' that are acquired in the usual, maximally good ways. Second, that warrant is more than sufficient for *knowledge* of God's existence.

I make all those controversial assumptions because I want to investigate the epistemic standing of theistic belief while assuming as much as possible on behalf of the theist. One might think that making all those assumptions would not leave any question regarding the epistemic standing of theistic belief—even the beliefs of contemporary professional philosophers. For instance, the non-theistic philosopher who suspects that there is something epistemically problematic about the pro-theistic beliefs of her colleagues won't be able to mount any decent argument backing up her suspicion if forced to accept all *those* theistic assumptions! Sceptics about the epistemic merits of theistic belief typically argue that there are good arguments against

theism, or that there are no good arguments for theism, or that there are no quasi-perceptual experiences that warrant theistic belief. They usually won't challenge the idea that theistic belief is warranted if forced to assume that such experiences, arguments, and warrants all exist!

However, it is surprisingly difficult to uncover the epistemic items, very broadly construed, that on balance serve to make the pro-theistic beliefs of contemporary professional philosophers epistemically upstanding—even when we grant all the pro-theistic assumptions articulated above. That is, even if *all* those assumptions are true, it remains the case that for many, maybe most, philosophers who have the right background and knowledge (and I think there are lots of us in the relevant category, to be described below), the arguments in this essay suggest that some of the most interesting supports for theistic belief are not actually had, are had but aren't sufficient for epistemically upstanding belief, or are had and sufficient but are outweighed by other epistemic factors that ruin one's chances for epistemically upstanding belief. So, if my argument is sound, it could easily be the case that you once knew that God existed, you still today believe truly and on the very same basis that God exists, but in an important epistemic sense you should no longer believe it; you should now know better than to believe that He exists.

Philosophical investigation into the epistemic status of theistic belief has focused mostly on merely possible or actually available sources of warrant, such as philosophical arguments or miracles or spiritual experiences, thereby often neglecting the actual overall status of particular theistic beliefs. It's one thing to say that theistic belief is epistemically upstanding in some non-actual but close possible world; it's another thing to say that there are ways to have such a belief in the actual world; it is still another to say that the typical philosopher's theistic belief is actually based on some of those actually available means; and, finally, it is yet another to say that the typical philosopher's theistic belief is epistemically upstanding overall. This essay focuses on the last of those four issues.

In §1 I'll clarify what I mean by 'epistemically upstanding' and its opposite 'epistemically blameworthy'. In §2 I'll present reasons why the contemporary philosopher needs to have some impressive epistemic items—reasons, experience, externalist epistemic facts, et cetera—in order for her belief in God to be epistemically upstanding. In §3 we will take stock and summarize what will come next. In §§4–9 I'll clarify and consider two kinds of spiritual experience or mentality: zapping experiences, and states of consciousness that result from G, mentioned above. I will argue that while the first, zappy experiences, may be sufficient for knowledge of God's existence and major properties, almost all of us rightly claim we haven't had those spiritual experiences. I'll then argue that while the second

kind of spiritual mentality, connected to G, may be sufficient for theistic knowledge in many people, and philosophers might have that kind of spiritual mentality (unlike zappy experiences), the warrant provided by G is outweighed or diminished by other epistemic factors had by many although not all philosophers. The conclusion of the essay is that the two kinds of spiritual mentality often do not provide contemporary philosophers with epistemically upstanding theistic beliefs. Of course, this does not rule out those beliefs being epistemically upstanding in virtue of other factors.

A couple points before we get underway. First, a good portion of argument I will use has nothing essentially to do with religious belief. Rather, that part of it came out of other recent work I have done regarding the epistemic position of someone who, roughly put, is no genius but who knowingly disagrees with expert opinion of a certain kind (Frances 2005a, 2005b, 2007, ms). On the face of it, such a person's belief is not upstanding even if true; and yet philosophers find themselves in this position all the time. So the argument should be of general interest. Second, although I'm not a sceptic about the epistemic upstandingness of philosophers' pro-theistic beliefs that are based on spiritual experience—as I do *not* think that there aren't many such high quality beliefs—in this essay I will speak with that voice.

I. EPISTEMICALLY UPSTANDING BELIEF

The argument I'll give concludes that for many typical contemporary philosophers, theistic belief is not *epistemically upstanding* in virtue of facts regarding certain kinds of spiritual mentality. Before I start the argument I need to clarify what I mean by 'epistemically upstanding', which is meant to be synonymous with my use of 'not epistemically blameworthy'.

Suppose professional philosopher Pam became a mind–body dualist based on her acceptance of the following argument: when I know I'm about to touch a hot surface I expect to feel pain; but in these cases I don't expect to have a certain brain process; thus, by Leibniz's Law the pain is not a brain process. Pretend further that dualism is true. Finally, pretend that there are several ways to come to *know* that dualism is true. Here is one way. Intentionally drop a brick on your toe to generate a throbbing pain. Then carefully introspect the throbbing feeling. If you now come to think that that very feeling just couldn't be a physical thing, with any physical properties—if that thought just seems irresistible to you—then you now know that dualism is true (only according to our pretense of course!). Another way is to expertly work one's way through some very sophisticated conceivability argument. Another way: die, go to Heaven, and have God

tell you dualism is true. But Pam didn't become a dualist in any of those ways. She used the simplistic Leibniz's law argument given above, with a few but not many interesting elaborations. She just made a big mistake, something not uncommon in philosophy.

One problem with her belief is that the great majority of professional philosophers who have investigated these issues rightly think that *that* argument is inadequate for endorsing dualism. Most philosophers also think that dualism is false; and in our story they're wrong about that. Most philosophers also think that dropping a brick on one's toe and introspecting appropriately won't produce knowledge of dualism; and (in our story) they're wrong. Most philosophers also think the conceivability argument cannot be turned into a knowledge-producing argument for dualism; and they're wrong once again. Despite all those errors, they are right about one thing: the simplistic Leibniz's law argument is bad and no professional philosopher should be a dualist based on it. That is, any contemporary professional philosopher should not, epistemically, be a dualist based on *those* grounds. Their subsequent belief is epistemically blameworthy. We can suppose that Pam is completely sincere and reflective in holding that the Leibniz's Law argument is sufficient support for dualism. She insists that she's 'done her level best' to arrive at the truth. But she hasn't, not really. We know that she can do much better, as she has been a quality philosopher for years. Not only has she failed to live up to professional standards, she failed to live up to her own standards—standards she has had and lived up to for years. Just because you sincerely think that you've done your level best, and you suffer from no relevant memory loss, does not mean that your belief in your performance is true.[1]

FN:1

When my argument of this essay concludes that many typical contemporary professional philosophers are epistemically blameworthy in having their theistic beliefs, it is making the very same charge as in the dualism case with Pam. Analogous to the dualism story, I'm assuming that theism is true and there are theistic knowledge-producing arguments and (spiritual) experiences readily available. Of course, I'm not *arguing* in this section of the essay that the theist is just like the dualist; I'm just trying to indicate the meaning of my argument's use of 'epistemically upstanding' and 'epistemically blameworthy'. I'm not saying that the theistic belief must be like the dualist belief in being based on a crude argument. The only purpose of the dualist story is to illustrate what I mean by my use of 'epistemically upstanding' and 'epistemically blameworthy'. No *analysis* of 'she shouldn't be a dualist/theist on those grounds' will be offered here; I have to stop

[1] The preceding argument amounts to a criticism of Plantinga's discussion in his 2000, at 99–102.

somewhere. I offer only what is a familiar kind of example. I (i.e., the sceptic I'm pretending to be in this essay) don't think that our theistic beliefs are as bad as Pam's dualistic belief. But both fail to be epistemically upstanding.

Here is another example of the same kind of blameworthiness, one I think is closer to the theist's case. Pam is walking through a forest with a group of friends. One points to a tree in the distance and asks, 'What kind of tree is that one?' Pam replies, 'It is a fir'. And she's right. But two other friends say that it's a spruce. And two more friends in the group say that it's a hemlock. And yet another says that this forest is loaded with spruces and hemlocks in addition to firs, and from their distance to the tree no one can tell firs from hemlocks or spruces by vision alone. Pam knows full well that these people are intelligent, sincere, knowledgeable, and honest (but of course some are mistaken). With the exception of the questioner all of them know about trees; no one is a novice (although they need not be experts). In this situation, in order to have an epistemically upstanding belief that the tree is a fir one has to have some significant epistemic support for one's belief. At least, one has to have significant support provided the alternative possibilities (hemlock, spruce) are 'real, live' expertly endorsed hypotheses, one is aware that they have such endorsement, and one is perfectly aware that those hypotheses conflict with one's belief that the tree is a fir. Perhaps the brain-in-a-vat possibility beloved by epistemologists doesn't pose a significant threat to Pam's belief, but the spruce and hemlock possibilities do. It might be very easy to gather that support (e.g., consult the guidebook, move closer to the tree), but it has to be obtained in any case.

Obviously, we can continue to pursue the matter, trying to further illuminate 'she shouldn't keep her belief in that situation'. I think that we can safely say that Pam is *unjustified* in some important way tied to epistemic blame, despite the fact that she sincerely says that she has tried her level best. The sceptic is making the very same claim with regard to typical contemporary theistic philosophers. However, the complex relations among different kinds of justification and epistemic blameworthiness (not to mention evidence or knowledge) prevent me from discussing the matter further; they are also the reason that I felt it necessary to illustrate rather than define or otherwise characterize how I am using 'epistemically blameworthy/upstanding'. I take it that I have said enough to clarify my use of those terms. I also assume that the clarification (in terms of the dualism-tree-theism comparisons) shows that the charge of failing to be epistemically upstanding is a serious one.[2]

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[2] In §10 I try to soften the blow imposed by my thesis of this essay.

II. WHY EPISTEMIC SUPPORT IS NEEDED

I hold that in order for a contemporary philosophy professor to have an epistemically upstanding belief that God exists and has the major properties, she needs to have some epistemic item that offers *support* for her belief. The claim is exceedingly modest, in two ways.

First, it is not demanding conclusive support. Nothing like proof or conclusive evidence is required. All we need demand of her is that she possess some kind of epistemic item that to a significant extent supports the belief. A simplistic picture will help. Think of the support for a belief on a scale from 1 to 10. At 1, the belief has no or virtually no support and is blameworthy; at 10 it enjoys the highest level of support and is not blameworthy. What we need in order to avoid a blameworthy belief is support to level 7. Conclusive proof and no-reasonable-doubt might come in at levels 8 or 9 or 10, but the kind of epistemic upstandingness illustrated in the previous section is not so demanding, or so I'm willing to assume on behalf of the theist I'm criticizing.

Second, I am being as liberal as possible as to what form the elements of the support have: arguments, pure experiences, testimony, reliability facts, or whatnot. I will call these elements *epistemic items*. Since I'm granting epistemic supporting roles to pure experience (and not merely: to beliefs about or immediately generated from such experience) and many externalist sources of warrant, my argument will not rely on any evidentialist or internalist assumptions (but neither does my argument reject evidentialism or internalism).

Let me elaborate on the 'pure experience' point, as it will be important in the latter sections of the essay. Suppose you have an agonizing toothache. You go to several dentists and doctors and they can't find anything wrong with your teeth or any other relevant part of your body. Eventually you generate enough interest in the medical community that the best doctors in the world spend all their time examining you. They still can't understand what's wrong with you. They say, 'You *can't* be in pain! You're just faking it!' That is the majority expert opinion. You only know so much about pain and nerve endings. Even so, you do *know* that you're in pain, or so I believe. On the doctors' advice you may have given up your belief that it's your *tooth* that's in pain, but you insist—and know—that you are in pain. The hypothesis that you aren't in pain is 'live', you're a typical person with respect to it (meaning roughly that you have no special expertise about pain and nerve endings), you need to have some epistemically impressive item in order to have an epistemically upstanding 'I am in pain' belief, but you *have*

it via some special experiences (the painful ones, naturally). It simply doesn't matter whether your experiences provide you with anything recognizable as a *reason* that supports your belief. The experiences themselves are sufficient support.

At least, I'm willing to allow all that for the sake of argument (in order to give the theist every possible avenue of epistemic support), even if it's false. What is important about the toothache story is this: *it shows that we're allowing that there can be serious expert doubt cast on your belief, you are no genius in rebutting those experts, and yet your belief is epistemically upstanding anyway if it comes from experience in the right way*. Similarly, even if all the experts in philosophy were screaming at you with one voice 'God doesn't exist!', you were an argumentative loser, and you needed something epistemically impressive in order to have an upstanding belief that God exists, you could still *know* that God exists because, for instance, God could zap you appropriately in some quasi-perceptual way (more on that possibility in §4). That would amount to an appropriately strong epistemic item making your belief upstanding. In the interests of giving the theist every opportunity for epistemic upstandingness, I'm willing to allow for that possibility, for who knows the bounds of experience, really?[3]

FN:3

Thus, it should be uncontroversial that a belief needs some support in order to be epistemically upstanding. (Another argument for this claim: some theistic beliefs are not epistemically upstanding; they need something to make them upstanding; call that something 'support' and be almost ridiculously open-minded as to what form the support might take.) However, I'm also saying that we need *significant* support, which is a further and stronger claim (if a vague one) requiring argument.

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One could give several reasons for this claim. I'll give just one.[4] In the intellectual community of philosophers who have thought hard and expertly about the possibility of God's existence, the atheistic hypothesis ¬T ('T' for

[3] This is not to say that the existence of such experiences isn't problematic! If one hasn't been zapped, it might (or even should) sound ridiculous to think that some kind of experience—of any kind—could warrantedly convince someone that some thing exists that: is wholly good, powerful, and knowledgeable; and, especially, is the creator of the universe. However, some theists would insist that even the most amazing religious experiences don't do that all by themselves; they get you part of the way and some additional epistemic items—arguments, testimony, et cetera—provide the bridge to the warranted belief that the universe was created by the object of the experience. But whether there is any such bridge is of course *highly* controversial as well. Obviously, some theists will deny that God created the universe; they have less of a gap to fill.

[4] Many readers will think it's abundantly clear that any contemporary philosopher needs significant support for her theistic beliefs in order for them to be epistemically upstanding. In fact, it's so clear that no argument is needed. They can skip to §3.

theism, the claim that God exists) is a "real, live" socio-epistemic possibility in the sense characterized by (a)–(c).

(a) ∼T has been through a thorough (not to say exhaustive) evaluation by a large group of well informed, well respected, and highly intelligent professional contemporary philosophers over many years. I take it that this claim is perfectly obvious. For instance, it says nothing regarding what conclusions anyone has made. And of course one can be a member of this group even if one hasn't published on the topic!

(b) ∼T is judged actually true or quite likely to be true by a huge number of the well informed, well respected, and highly intelligent professional contemporary philosophers mentioned in (a). I'm not saying that they are right, or that they are the very best judges of those matters, or that their opinion is justified in any way; I'm just pointing out their considered view. This is a perfectly obvious sociological fact.

(c) Those philosophy professors mentioned in (b) typically reached that favourable opinion of ∼T based on ∼T's apparent merits in a familiar, epistemically responsible way. In addition, their opinion typically remains epistemically responsible (that is, it doesn't merely *start off* epistemically responsible).

Claim (c) can be questioned, as it makes a substantive claim about the epistemic quality of the atheistic opinions of philosophers. In fact, it might seem thoroughly unfair: here I am in the midst of presenting an argument against theistic belief and yet I assume without any argument that atheistic belief is perfectly OK!

Well, that's clearly overstated, as I think that the atheistic opinions of *some* philosophers fail to be epistemically upstanding for an interesting reason (I won't go into it here), and more to the point I'm definitely *not* arguing that theistic belief in philosophers isn't epistemically upstanding (I'm merely arguing that if they are upstanding, then often enough it's in virtue of epistemic factors other than the kinds of spiritual mentality I examine in this essay). Even so, I think it's easier to see why atheistic belief among contemporary professional philosophers is epistemically upstanding than it is to see the same result for theistic belief. Atheistic philosophers typically work in the following way. First, as teenagers, they see that lots of people have theistic beliefs merely because they are told theism is true (roughly put). They find this distasteful, which of course is reasonable. Then over many years they look at the evidence for theism that they can understand to any significant degree; they are underwhelmed with its quality. They have sincerely and expertly looked at the epistemic items claimed to support theistic belief, with an open mind, and they just don't think they are any

good. Keep in mind that almost all contemporary philosophy professors have read about and think about theistic belief off and on for *many* years, and they continue to do so on a regular basis, as it is one of the first topics we study as students and one of those topics that comes up all the time in undergraduate classes. It is hard to *avoid* the philosophy of religion if you're a philosophy professor (whereas it is much more common for a professor to not encounter analytic metaphysics or metaethics or nineteenth- century philosophy, for instance, nearly as frequently). If one of these philosophers is any good at philosophy she will admit the *possibility* that theistic people have some kind of special spiritual and epistemic access to God and theistic facts—an access that she lacks or is dormant or blocked in her. But she will think that this possibility is pretty unlikely (more on this in §§4–6). So she settles on atheism as most probable. Her doing so would be epistemically blameworthy if it were *clear* that there was *excellent and publicly available* evidence for God's existence, but I am assuming, without argument, that this isn't the case (I don't think that that's a controversial assumption; neither does it conflict with the other pro-theistic assumptions I have already made and will articulate further in §§4–6).

I'm not saying that the philosophical atheist is right about any of this! I'm just saying that this is a roughly accurate description of many atheistic philosophers and that it is an epistemically upstanding way to go. They really have looked long and hard at lots of evidence they thought had any real chance of supporting theism. That's not enough to *prove* (c), but I'm hoping that the reader will simply go with me here!

One might suspect that it is particularly difficult to think of these weighty religious matters with anything like an unbiased eye; so (c) is false. But keep in mind that all I'm demanding in (c) is a relatively unbiased eye, a standpoint of evaluation about as objective and thorough as those we take towards other hypotheses of contemporary philosophical debate. I don't know what perfect objectivity would be, but for the purposes of this essay I don't care; neither do I care that there certainly are many philosophical theses that are evaluated more objectively than atheism. Premise (c) is actually quite modest.

In endorsing (c) I'm not denying that there is a cognitive capacity that is devoted to experiencing, or quasi-experiencing, God. There might be such a faculty and it might be dormant or blocked or fouled up in atheists. Even so, I don't see any good reason to think that being in such a situation would mean that one's atheism isn't epistemically upstanding in the ordinary sense illustrated in the previous section; the standards for the latter aren't *that* high. I admit that there might well be an important notion of epistemic upstandingness that few or no atheists achieve with respect to their atheism. For instance, perhaps the only way atheistic belief can arise is if one's

cognitive system is damaged in some way, perhaps by sin (of course, this idea will seem ludicrous to most atheistic philosophers). Even so, there is another notion of epistemic upstandingness, an ordinary one, that many atheists, including philosophy professors, do achieve.

In addition to (a)–(c) being true, we know that they are true (set aside forms of general scepticism). For instance, those of us who are theists know perfectly well that loads of very competent and epistemically virtuous philosophy professors think, after much expert reflection, that our theistic belief isn't true. Given that we are perfectly aware of the fact that so many epistemically excellent philosophers disagree with us, it seems to me that if our theistic belief is epistemically upstanding, then it must have some *significant* support. A piddling amount of support won't suffice for epistemic upstandingness. I hasten to add that this claim doesn't imply that it's *difficult* to supply the support. Indeed, I'm assuming on behalf of the theist that for *a significant number of* people it's *very easy* to do so (more on that in §§4 and 5). All the claim says is that there's a need for *significant* support; it says nothing about whether the support is easily had by many people due to their having some heavy-duty epistemic item.

So, my argument thus far runs like this:

1. Hypothesis ∼T (the negation of theism) is live in current professional philosophy as a whole since it satisfies (a)–(c).
2. Many contemporary professional philosophers know (a)–(c).
3. If (1) is true and (2) applies to someone (so she knows (a)–(c)), then in order for her to have an epistemically upstanding belief in T (theism), she must have some significant support for her theistic belief. After all, since (1) and (2) are true of you, it follows that you *know* perfectly well that *lots* of frighteningly smart and epistemically virtuous folks think your belief is just plain false; so *if* your belief is epistemically okay anyway, *then* it must have some pretty good support behind it! And please remember that I'm being as generous as possible with the potential kinds of support and not asking for anything as potent as proof.
4. Thus, by (1)–(3) for many of us contemporary professional philosophers, if we have an epistemically upstanding belief in T, then our belief has significant support.

Let me make it crystal clear that premise (3) is not being defended with the lukewarm 'Well, atheism is contrary to theism; so in order to have a respectable belief in theism one must rule out, to some significant extent, atheism'. That kind of argument is frequently rejected among contemporary epistemologists, and with good reason. It is sometimes said that one need not, in order to know (or have an epistemically upstanding belief in) P,

FN:5 rule out counterpossibility Q provided Q is appropriately 'irrelevant'.[5] For instance, I can know that I have children without being able to rule out (in any sense of 'rule out') all sorts of outrageous hypotheses (e.g., 'I have been a brain in a vat for over ten years'), at least for most contexts of evaluating my true belief. That epistemological claim might be right, but it is hard to see how this would apply if Q were widely endorsed by philosophical experts and you were aware of the inconsistency of Q and P as well as the liveness of Q. Imagine a scenario in which each of the following hold, where you believe the truth P while hypothesis Q is the live contender to P.

(i) virtually everyone believes (correctly) that Q is inconsistent with P;
(ii) you've actually put together P and Q and are aware as anyone is that P is inconsistent with Q;
(iii) Q is a real, live contender in our intellectual community;
(iv) in fact, many if not most contemporary philosophy professors believe Q; and
(v) you're aware that Q is a real, live possibility actually endorsed by plenty of philosophical experts.

It will seem clear to many epistemologists that under these circumstances in order for your belief in P (theism) to be epistemically upstanding you need to be able to rule out Q (atheism); this is what I'll call the 'Ruling Out' claim. Note the significance of (iii)–(v): if we take them out, then the Ruling Out claim is much more doubtful. Arguably, even if (i) and (ii) hold, Q need not be ruled out in order for one to know P. Such a situation may obtain when P is 'I got these blue socks today for my birthday' and Q is 'I became a brain in a vat last year and have remained that way since then, with no birthday presents.' But when we have all five conditions (i)–(v) obtaining, then the Ruling Out claim is plausible. Conditions (i) and (ii) boost the threat posed by Q against P to level 1 out of 10 only; but the remaining three conditions boost the threat to level 8.

Think for a minute about traditional hypothesis-based scepticism. Those of us who take such scepticism seriously typically have two relevant beliefs: (a) it's plausible (even if false) that in order to know that I have hands I have to be able to epistemically neutralize, to some significant degree, some sceptical hypotheses, such as the brain-in-a-vat (BIV) one; and (b) it's also plausible (even if false) that I can't so neutralize those hypotheses. There is no reason for us to also think (c) that the BIV hypothesis, for instance, is *plausible or probably true*. In order to take scepticism seriously it's sufficient

[5] I have in mind contextualist and relevant alternative theories primarily. For an excellent but slightly out of date introduction with references, see Duncan Pritchard (2002).

to hold (a) and (b); one need not hold (c). Indeed, philosophers who accept (a) and (b) *never* endorse (c).

That's one thing that bothers undergraduates in philosophy. They object: why on earth do some philosophers take the BIV hypothesis to pose *any* threat at all to our beliefs given that those very same philosophers think that there's *no* real chance that the BIV hypothesis is true? Sure, the BIV hypothesis is *formally inconsistent* with my belief that I have hands, so if the former is true then my belief is false. But so what? Why should that bare inconsistency matter so much? Is this strange attitude amongst philosophers the result of some logic fetish infecting the philosophical community?

The students would understand the fuss over the BIV hypothesis if there were some decent reason of some kind to think that the BIV hypothesis was really true. If you believe P, a contrary hypothesis Q has some reasonably good backing—perhaps endorsement by many legitimate experts in the relevant field—and you are quite familiar with Q's good status as well as the conflict between P and Q, then the Q possibility *does* seem to mount a threat to one's belief in P, a threat that if left unneutralized does ruin one's chance at knowledge of P's truth. If the BIV or evil demon hypotheses were like Q, then we would have a real threat to our belief that we have hands.

I take it as obvious that atheism is like Q: it's a 'live' hypothesis in a sociological sense. Thus, one would think that we who are fully aware of atheism's highly respected standing among many excellent philosophers would need to be able to rule out the atheism hypothesis. Even so, *I don't need a premise that strong*. All I need for my argument is a *weaker* claim, one that has nothing to do with 'ruling out'. So I do not rely on the Ruling Out claim. All I am claiming, with my premise (3), is that when (i)–(v) hold (as they do when P is theism and Q is atheism) then in order to have an epistemically upstanding belief—in the sense illustrated in §1—one needs significant, not piddling, support for that belief; so I'm setting aside the demand for an ability to rule out atheism (as the Ruling Out claim has it). Obviously, 'significant' and 'not piddling' are awfully vague! But I think the vagueness won't matter to my arguments below.

So the crucial question is now this: what epistemic items do contemporary philosophers *actually* have that *on balance* make their theistic beliefs epistemically upstanding?

III. TWO SPIRITUAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Let's take stock. I have argued that professional contemporary philosophers need some impressive epistemic items in order to have epistemically

upstanding theistic beliefs; that's the inference from the first three premises. In what follows I'm going to focus on spiritual mentality, broadly construed, and completely ignore other potential sources such as philosophical arguments. The structure of the rest of my argument, after claims (1)–(4) given earlier, is this:

5. Our theistic beliefs are not epistemically upstanding in virtue of spiritual mentality.
6. Thus, for many contemporary philosophers, if our theistic beliefs are epistemically upstanding, it's in virtue of something other than spiritual mentality.

Clearly, the interesting part of the argument is the defence of (5); this defence will take up the remainder of the essay. As was mentioned in the Introduction, I will now examine two broad kinds of spiritual mentality. I will grant that the first one provides knowledge of God's existence, but most of us simply don't have it and don't even claim to have it. I will then argue that even if the second one sometimes provides us with *initial* knowledge of God's existence and other features, the warrant it provides us is *then, later on* cancelled out by other epistemic factors so that the belief ends up blameworthy—at least, this is true for many of us philosophers. Thus, if our theistic beliefs remain epistemically upstanding anyway (I won't dispute this assertion), they must be so in virtue of something other than, or in addition to, spiritual mentality.

IV. ZAPPY SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Very roughly: a spiritual experience of and in a sense partially coming from God is *zappy* only if it could only be depicted in a children's animated Walt Disney movie, if it could be put on a screen at all. Being zapped isn't just having a feeling of love or forgiveness that happens while or immediately after 'acting theistic', after prayer for instance. It isn't just a 'voice' that one can 'hear' in one's head accompanied by moving experiences. It isn't merely some life-altering event that gives one's life meaning (although it will probably do that as well). Those are mere *garden-variety* spiritual experiences (if spiritual at all), not zappy ones. A zapping experience is like a mind-blowing miracle that is somehow experientially private. Every zappy experience contains some intense mental fireworks—like the staggering *kensho* in Zen, although I suppose it need not be that intense. Take some public event or series of events that would truly be miraculous in the sense that many atheistic and agnostic philosophers would become theists if they

saw or perceived them. Now somehow make them private experiences. That is the type of thing we mean by a zapping experience.

Obviously, that isn't a very informative characterization; in fact, it's *pathetic*. Without being zapped it's pretty hard for the writer to describe zappiness; without the audience being zapped they have a hard time understanding the writer describe zappiness; and in any case there isn't much non-metaphorical language around to work with.

However, we need not puzzle over zappiness. For the sake of argument I'll admit that it's as easy as pie to demolish the atheism possibility: God zaps you and you're done. I suppose that many theistic philosophers claim to have had some sorts of genuinely spiritual experiences, such as special feelings of love or forgiveness, but nothing out of a Walt Disney movie. If you have, then you're off the hook as far as my argument in this essay is concerned. Of course, if you haven't been zapped but you *think* you have, then my argument applies to you.

V. A SECOND SPIRITUAL WAY

Maybe there's a second general type of spiritual experience, or cognitive state, or cognitive capacity, or belief-formation type—or whatever; *I want to leave open as many possibilities as we can that might be helpful to theistic belief*—that makes the typical philosopher's theistic beliefs epistemically upstanding. For all I've argued thus far, each of the following is true regarding some spiritual quasi-perceptual state of mind or belief-formation type or cognitive capacity or whatever G ('G' for 'God') that philosophical theists sometimes, perhaps even often, find themselves in or employ.[6] FN:6

(i) If you 'use' G to come to believe that God exists, then you at least initially know that God exists (remember that among our assumptions is the claim that God exists).

(ii) G is great (see (i)) but isn't accompanied by cognitive fireworks in the sense that one who has enjoyed G can produce a lot of cognitively illuminating (to people who haven't enjoyed G) descriptions of what goes on when one is in this state or uses it to form a belief. All one can really say about G is that when one is in it one knows, immediately and with perfect clarity, that God is speaking to one, is present, is comforting one, etc. Perhaps one even somehow (although this is

[6] A certain kind of theist might claim that *all* experiences are experiences of God. But G is supposed to be special in that these are somehow "direct" experiences of God that satisfy (i)–(vii) in the text.

much harder to believe) immediately knows that God has the five features mentioned earlier. In any case, no Walt Disney fireworks goes on; this isn't zapping.

(iii) Claims (i) and (ii) show that G is at least a bit relevantly similar to (but don't get carried away with the comparison) the state of 'just seeing' that *modus ponens* is valid, or that 1 + 1 = 2, or that I myself believe P or feel happy. They are similar in this relevant way: no fireworks, but high-grade knowledge nonetheless.

(iv) Coming to believe that God exists based on being in G not only secures knowledge—the belief amounts to knowledge—but upon production the belief is also epistemically non-blameworthy. (I'm not cleverly suggesting that there are cases in which one knows P even though one is blameworthy in believing P; I'm just trying to be thorough in describing G.)

(v) There is no easy to follow set of instructions for getting into or using G to generate theistic beliefs (e.g., drop a brick on your toe while singing *Ave Maria*).

(vi) However, and this might strike an outsider as incredible, being in or using G, even repeatedly, doesn't confer one with any special cognitive or other power or capacity or whatnot that a person who hasn't been in or used G can detect (restricting investigation to mortal life). More to the point, someone who hasn't ever enjoyed the state or belief-formation type can't see any direct evidence that any state or type satisfying (i)–(v) exists. Of course this is annoying to those people. They have some indirect evidence—the considered word of some generally very upstanding philosophical folk who claim to have enjoyed G—that something satisfies (i)–(v), but this testimonial evidence isn't great. This makes G quite different from ordinary cognitive capacities. Blind people can find out that those who claim to have the special cognitive power of sight definitely have some extra power that blind people do not have. Those without the power can definitely detect a big difference between those who claim to have the power and those who claim to not have it. This isn't so for G; that's one reason why it's so odd.

(vii) There is no good reason for thinking that no state satisfies (i)–(vi).

So the theist can always say to the atheist and agnostic,

Well, I hate to tell you this, but there's this special calm spiritual mental state or process or whatever G that has allowed me and millions of others to come to know that God exists, and until you get it you may (just 'may') never find any epistemic item—argument or whatnot—that provides any decent support (evidentialist or

internalist or otherwise) for theism. I know that stinks, from your perspective, and I know it stinks from the perspective of philosophical discussion. In fact, if I were in your shoes I might well find theistic belief positively nuts! But those are the facts about G. I wish I had better news for you. My apologies!

The non-theist can protest that it's hard to believe that anything could satisfy (i)–(vii), but we already know that experience can be pretty amazing, so those objections won't be compelling. This is especially so since there will probably (I'm willing to assume for the sake of argument) be some naturalist premise somewhere in the objections. That is, any prima facie good argument against the conjunction of (i)–(vii) will probably have some naturalist (not to say physicalist) premise. And the only way that that premise could be adequately defended would be to show that the conjunction of (i)–(vii) is false. The circle is vicious.

This would be a truly horrible state of affairs! The theist's claim that G exists and satisfies (i)–(vii) looks like the response of a truly desperate and epistemically vicious person. It seems as though we have arrived at the most absurd defence possible: I have a special way of knowing things that you don't have, and the only evidence you have is my word for it coupled with my good epistemic reputation. How is this different from just saying 'Nyah, nyah'? Imagine trotting out the same defence when challenged on some belief that you can't defend. 'Well, you see, I have this special cognitive access to a realm of facts that you just don't have, and you'll just have to take my word on it.' Think of all the nonsense that would be generated if we took this route generally. Indeed, think of the patent nonsense that *really is* generated by some of the people who take routes similar to this one.

VI. ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUAL HYPOTHESES

At this point in the dialectic I will once again be as accommodating as possible to the theist: G exists, it satisfies (i)–(vii), the theistic beliefs of many, perhaps most, contemporary philosophy professors are based on (come from the employment of) G, and initially at least those beliefs are epistemically upstanding and amount to *knowledge*. My worry now is that there is enough expertly endorsed and highly public (to philosophical theists) epistemic items that go against certain theistic ideas (to be described below) to make the warrant or epistemic goodness produced by G no longer sufficient for epistemic upstandingness. A simplistic but helpful model: G produces 2,000 warrant units for one's belief that He exists (or is speaking to me); one needs 1000 for upstandingness; but certain facts, to be described below, produce 1,500 negative warrant units, thereby knocking the total held to a mere 500.

Some philosophers have mounted similar arguments (e.g., the debate in Alvin Plantinga 1986, Philip Quinn 1993, and William Hasker 1998).[7] They argue that if someone is sufficiently aware of the problem of evil, or contemporary scientific explanations of the origins of humans and the universe, or Freudian or Marxist anti-theistic explanations of the origins of religious belief, or other religious traditions, and yet she can't cast sufficient doubt on those problems or explanations or traditions, then if she persists with her theistic belief she is blameworthy. I won't be arguing that way. To a first and very rough approximation, I'll be arguing that if she is aware of such-and-such views on spirituality, views held by contemporary experts regarding spirituality (who are rarely philosophers), and she can't do anything to cast much doubt on those views, then if she persists in her theism she is blameworthy. I hasten to add that no principle such as 'You shouldn't disagree with people you know full well to be experts regarding the belief in question unless you possess some evidence (including experience) they don't have or have insufficiently appreciated' will be used. There are about a million exceptions to that rule, some of which will be described below. My argument will appeal only to an exceedingly sophisticated and staggeringly urbane principle.

One of the key parts of my argument lies in what the spiritual views in question say about G. The *rough* idea is this. There are spiritual experts who say that your spiritual experiences were not experiences of God even though the experiences are in some sense very advanced, novel, knowledge-producing, not delusional, and deserving of the title 'spiritual'. You are aware that these people are spiritual *experts*, and not mere atheistic blowhards talking out of their hats. Finally, since you can't do anything to cast doubt on their considered opinion on the matter, and you need to cast doubt on their considered opinion in order to avoid blame, you are blameworthy.

Thus, I am *not* arguing this way:

Such-and-such non-theistic explanation of your G-based spiritual experience is true; thus, we shouldn't believe the theistic explanation.

That would be incoherent, as we're assuming your spiritual experiences are G-based and (i)–(vii) are true. Neither will I argue in this coherent, intriguing, but ambitious manner:

Such-and-such non-theistic explanation of your G-based spiritual experience is more likely to be true than (or is otherwise evidentially superior

[7] In this essay I do not address the arguments of those essays, nor the highly relevant work of William Alston (Alston, William P. *Perceiving God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, chapter 7). I do this not out of disrespect but out of the belief that adequately addressing this work would make this already long essay just too damn long.

to) any theistic explanation of that spiritual experience; thus, we shouldn't believe that the theistic explanation is correct.

Instead, to a first approximation I'll be arguing in this way, which is clearly less ambitious:

Your awareness of the expertly endorsed status of particular alternative explanations of your spiritual experiences negates or counteracts or severely diminishes (or however one wants to put it) the epistemic support for theistic belief supplied by those G-based spiritual experiences.

On to the argument.

For the rest of the essay let's pretend that you are the theistic philosophy professor who has employed G in coming to your theistic beliefs. You say to us: 'Through my spiritual experiences or states of consciousness (or whatever you like) it has been revealed to me that P.' What you say is correct: P is true, you *knew* P, and you did indeed acquire that knowledge through G (or some other kind of spiritual experience roughly like G and not like the zappy experiences; I'll omit this qualification in the remainder of the essay). So far, so good.

I assume you are aware of people who are experts regarding spiritual experience who claim that the experiences you had, although genuine spiritual experiences, were not of God at all. I take it the people with the most plausible claim to be spiritual experts are the ones with lots of spiritual experience, especially advanced spiritual experiences, and lots of competent reflection on spiritual experience, usually via helping others develop their spiritual capacities. And I take it that most of those people will be advanced members of meditative disciplines, since these are the disciplines devoted to developing spiritual experience. For instance, the meditation masters/mystics of various forms of Zen, Christianity, Vajrayana Buddhism, and many other traditions or disciplines will count as spiritual experts (I'll partially defend this claim below). These experts are, to all appearances, as epistemically and morally and psychologically upstanding as you like. They say all sorts of very intelligent and informed things about religious experiences or states of consciousness. But *many* of them say, based on their genuine expertise on these matters, that the spiritual experiences you (and many other relatively ordinary people who aren't part of some meditative discipline) have had weren't of God. Instead, these spiritual experts say, the correct explanation of your religious experiences or states of consciousness is non-theistic, and people who form theistic beliefs upon having such experiences are victims of a particularly interesting and pervasive illusion typical for beginners at spiritual experience. The religious experiences or

states of consciousness you had are very advanced, in the evolutionary psychology sense. That is, the spiritual states of consciousness are in some sense more advanced than any of those states of consciousness most of us live through in our ordinary lives. When developmental psychologists make the concerted effort, they will discover that there are stages of psychological development *far* beyond those typically studied in psychology; and it turns out that these stages are the home of spiritual experiences. People who have them, including you, are not deranged in the least; on the contrary, you're evolutionarily advanced in virtue of having those experiences. You are a beginner, yes, but what you're doing is beginning to explore the intricacies of the 'higher realms' of psychological development, not regressing to the womb or other such nonsense that applies to the deranged preachers on television such as Pat Robertson. The spiritual experts in question aren't saying anything insulting or condescending to you! They aren't saying, for instance, that you're really just deluded and deeply yearn for a supreme father figure (although such an explanation does of course apply to many people). But they are saying that those experiences don't signal the existence of any being other than the one having the experience. Given any of a fairly large range of appropriate cognitive backgrounds and expectations, one will have experiences *as if* there is a non-physical and roughly person-like being in their presence; the experiences are 'malleable' as we might put it. And one can eventually realize that fact, but only after one has had more mature spiritual experiences—in fact, this realization almost never happens unless one takes up some meditative practice in a serious way for several years. Eventually, with more advanced spiritual experiences had years later, one can see one's earlier mistakes. Indeed, there are testimonials from spiritual experts describing how their initial spiritual experiences were deceptive in many ways in spite of being illuminating. These experts say that the spiritual experiences you have had are somewhat akin to the visual experiences had by someone who was congenitally blind but who has just had an operation to gain the power of sight. She is having genuinely new and visual experiences. But her experiences are those of a novice, and novices make lots of perceptual mistakes.

Let me make it clear that I'm not picking on spiritual experiences that seemed to be of supernatural entities. Even Zen masters often say that initial 'awakenings', called *kensho*, are typically shallow and highly misleading. The misleading nature of immature spiritual experiences is certainly not confined to experiences that suggest supernatural entities to the experiencers.

This short description is pretty vague, but it can be and has been filled out in detail; and surely as a contemporary philosopher with some knowledge

of spirituality you can't plead ignorance of these ideas,[8] even if you don't know their details![9]

You might say that the spiritual experts are wrong when they claim that your spiritual experiences weren't experiences of God. And I'm assuming that you'd be correct to do so! I'm assuming you have experienced Him, through G, and you know, at least initially, of His existence (as well as other facts about Him, such as the fact that you were in His presence, or He was speaking to you, or that He was comforting you). Even so, the disagreeing experts are spiritual experts anyway. Being wrong, even on some fundamental issues, clearly doesn't make one a non-expert. Whatever we end up saying about these matters, Zen masters must count as experts on spiritual experience if anyone is such an expert! Having fundamentally wrong views does not, of course, preclude one from being an expert.[10] Otherwise, Ted Sider, David Lewis, Timothy Williamson, David Chalmers, and Paul Churchland would fail to count as experts on material composition, modality, vagueness, phenomenal consciousness, and propositional attitudes, respectively (I'm not picking on them; we can make this point by pointing out highly distinguished experts on those topics who have the opposite fundamental beliefs). Perhaps better: just about the most popular view among colour experts is colour eliminativism (no ordinary objects are coloured; more on this theory below), but I think it's not difficult to imagine that that kind of eliminativism is false anyway.

The spiritual experts who offer what I'm calling 'alternative' explanations of your spiritual experiences all hold that your experiences were not experiences of God or any other supernatural being (or 'force', or whatever); that's all I mean by 'alternative' in 'alternative explanation'.[11] And we'll agree that if your experiences weren't of God at all (as those spiritual experts claim but we're assuming to be false) but your belief that God exists is based on those experiences alone (with the possible addition of a trivial

[8] I don't want to overstate the point: I'm certainly not saying that all living theistic philosophy professors are aware of these matters. But surely many are.

[9] For a somewhat dated but still valuable and highly ambitious collection see Wilber, Engler, and Brown 1986. One needs to keep in mind that the people who undertake these studies, like the spiritual experts, aren't philosophers. Some of them, like Ken Wilber, attempt some philosophy, but for the most part don't produce much of value. In particular, in my judgement Wilber is simply horrible at philosophy, even though he is worth studying for philosophically relevant data and ideas.

[10] I don't think an informed philosopher can, today, say that there simply are no spiritual experts. I would even go further, and claim that there are such experts even if God doesn't exist. In any case, one who believes G exists and satisfies (i)–(vii) probably won't say there are no spiritual experts, and recall that we are assuming the truth of that belief.

[11] Once again, I set aside the alleged sense in which every experience, even of backing up one's hard drive, for instance, is an experience of God.

inference, say from 'God has been speaking to me' to 'God exists'), then your belief that God exists is blameworthy. But these spiritual experts need not be atheists; in fact, they can be and actually sometimes are theists—even theists who believe that we can know God through spiritual experiences. Just like we sometimes say to an undergraduate,

> I agree with your conclusion. And I think your argument is sophisticated, illuminating, and worth an A. Unfortunately I also think your argument doesn't really support your conclusion,

some actual spiritual experts will say to you,

> I agree that God exists. And I think one can experience God, come to know God through spiritual experience, and your experience was extraordinary and meaningful. So we agree on some quite fundamental matters. Unfortunately I also think that you have not really experienced Him.[12]

FN:12

Many others will be agnostics who say that your experience was extraordinary and genuinely spiritual but didn't come from God, regardless of whether He exists, because these experiences are indicative of the higher realms of human experience, and not experiences of divine entities. They take no stand on God's existence but just hold that your experiences have non-divine sources and explanations. And of course many of the spiritual experts will be atheists (of a great variety of kinds). But they aren't any old atheists, like the ones you will find down the hall from your office in the philosophy building: they acknowledge the 'legitimacy' and extreme importance of spiritual experience but don't think it is experience of any supernatural entity. Finally, some but not all Christian meditative souls will say that your spiritual experiences were indeed of God (or some supernatural entity); you'll find them to be the agreeable ones!

You might think that you simply can't have any disagreeing epistemic superiors when it comes to certain theistic beliefs generated from certain spiritual experiences. You might think that your spiritual experiences are so epistemically wonderful that you can safely conclude that anyone (short of the divine) who disagrees with the beliefs naturally produced by those experiences is epistemically inferior to you with respect to those beliefs (e.g., Plantinga 1997, 296). You agree that there are lots of spiritual experts, and you agree that many of them know a lot more about God and spiritual experience than you ever will. You are thus immune to certain charges of arrogance. But you hold that there are some 'litmus tests' for determining whether someone is in as good an epistemic position as you with regard to

[12] In making this comparison I am not suggesting that the spiritual expert's disagreement with you has anything to do with an *argument*, either yours or hers. More on this point below.

belief P: if they disagree with it, then you can be epistemically upstanding in concluding, without the slightest investigation, that their epistemic position with respect to P is inferior to yours. This might hold for some experientially based beliefs, for instance the beliefs that I'm hungry and warm. More interestingly, perhaps it holds for philosophically general beliefs like 'No contradictions are true' (but probably not; see, for instance, Priest 1987; Priest and Smiley 1993). Thus, maybe this 'Intolerance' view can hold for certain theistic beliefs generated through something like G-based spiritual experiences.

For the sake of argument I'll admit that the Intolerance view is true for theistic beliefs produced via zappy spiritual experiences (although I don't believe it). Furthermore, I think it's right when a spiritually experienced person encounters 'dismissive' views about spiritual experience. That is, the spiritually experienced person can dismiss without further investigation, Freudian, for instance, views about spiritual experience. So I won't discount the Intolerance view entirely; let's allow that 'intolerance' is permissible in some cases. However, I want to make two points about making the analogous move for non-zappy spiritual experiences. First, if your philosophizing lands you with the view that you can be epistemically upstanding in concluding, without the slightest investigation, that regarding some highly controversial philosophical issue the epistemic positions of a great many contemporary philosophy professors are inferior to yours, then you had better rethink your philosophizing that landed you there. It's extremely unlikely that this behavior of yours is epistemically upstanding. That's just a piece of advice! My second and more important point is that when the people who disagree with you are obviously spiritual experts (some of whom are theists), and you admit that your excellent epistemic position derives from your spiritual experiences, and these spiritual experts are saying things like

> Yes, many of us have had those spiritual experiences too, as have many of our students, and after many years of study and further and more mature spiritual experience we think that those experiences you had don't support what you think they support—even though we're aware that they certainly seemed to at the time,

well, then it's time to forgo the litmus test and start listening.

When made familiar with some of the contents and credentials of these expertly endorsed spiritual hypotheses, what is a theistic philosopher supposed to do? On the face of it, it seems that the considerable support (externalistically construed if one likes) given to her theistic beliefs by her G-based spiritual experiences is severely diminished. She had an epistemic item that strongly supported her theistic belief, and yet she then became aware of many genuine spiritual experts, of a variety of backgrounds and belief systems, who hold that her epistemic item does not support that

belief (whether or not they agree with theism is neither here nor there). Of course, the person might not be able, psychologically, to take the alternative spiritual hypotheses seriously. Her experience was so divinely clear, even if non-zappy, that she is psychologically unable to seriously consider the possibility that those alternative ideas might be right (even though she is aware of them and the superb credentials of their supporters).[13] I suspect that she is not blameworthy for at least the duration of her spiritual experience: it is hard to blame someone who is in the thick of things. However, I think that after she 'sobers up a bit' if she continues with her belief then she is blameworthy in that she should have the good sense or intellectual maturity to take such alternative hypotheses seriously and adjust her beliefs accordingly by withholding judgement (setting aside alternative epistemic supports she may have for her theistic beliefs). Such a requirement on epistemic upstandingness would, I suspect, be inappropriate for most people. But my argument deals only with professional philosophers who have and often use the ability to take seriously expertly-endorsed hypotheses that are quite different from what they're initially inclined to believe. (And if they don't have that ability, then they are blameworthy for *that*.) Furthermore, the alternative spiritual hypotheses are not *terribly* different from the hypothesis that the spiritual experiences are revealing the existence of God. Most philosophical arguments against the epistemic credentials of theistic belief based on spiritual experience are so dismissive of the latter that a person with such experiences has a hard time thinking that those arguments have any plausibility. After all, many such criticisms depict spiritual experience as pure hogwash. Such a sceptical reaction to those criticisms seems reasonable to me.[14] Part of the interest in my argument is that it views spiritual experience in a very favourable light.

FN:13

FN:14

[13] It is easy to be distracted by the doxastic voluntarism issue. But I assume that it is obvious that the epistemic charge 'You should not continue with your belief' is often true. When it comes to scientific matters, for instance, we change our beliefs accordingly all the time when we discover that the experts disagree with us; and if we don't do so we are being epistemically naughty. For instance, on Monday you believe that Jupiter has about twenty moons. You've believed this for years, based on what you read about astronomy a long time ago. Then on Tuesday you talk to your friend the physics professor who tells you that astronomers have now catalogued over forty moons of Jupiter. Obviously, you should give up your old belief; you should know better than to stick with your old belief; if you stick with your old belief then you're blameworthy (unless of course you know the physicist is joking, etc). I will simply assume that such 'blame' judgements are often true.

[14] However, I don't think it's epistemically permissible to automatically discount spiritual experience traditions different from one's own—not if one is a philosophy professor anyway. One looks askance at Freudian explanations of spiritual experience and thinks, in an epistemically upstanding way, that those explanations 'just can't be right' because they leave no room for accounting for the rich, epistemically coherent

And yet, all we have seen thus far is that the blameworthiness of the theistic philosopher is present 'on the face of it'. In the remainder of the essay I will try to determine whether the epistemic goodness supplied by the philosopher's G-based spiritual experience *really is* severely diminished by her awareness of the contents and good credentials of expertly endorsed alternative spiritual hypotheses.

VII. SPIRITUALITY, VISION, AND COLOUR, PART 1

One might think that the reliability of (or other epistemically relevant facts about) G is *so* potent that the theistic beliefs end up with so much warrant as a result of those G-based experiences that the epistemic sin in not having any epistemic item that counters the alternative spiritual hypotheses isn't enough to drop the beliefs down to the status of being blameworthy. The facts about belief production via G supply 4,000 warrant units; the unsavory facts about the circumstances of your belief retention—you're familiar with the alternative spiritual hypotheses, you are familiar with their respected standing among epistemically reputable societies, you have no counteritem to them, etc—take away 1,000 warrant units, thereby producing a net of 3,000 units; but one needs just 1,000 units for upstandingness.

Alternatively, one might think that G is epistemically potent in a slightly different way: true beliefs that come from its operation under the best circumstances are immune to defeat. No matter what information one gathers after the belief has been formed, retaining the belief remains epistemically permissible.

In either case, I take it that G is supposed to be akin to vision under the *best* of circumstances. If in perfectly normal and optimal circumstances I see a blue sock (from just two feet away, in perfect light, I'm sober, I have 20/20 vision, etc.), and I form in the entirely ordinary and optimal way the true belief that the sock is blue, then I know that the sock is blue. If anyone tries to cast doubt on my belief, and I go and look at the sock again under the same optimal circumstances (external and internal), I will be epistemically a-okay if I retain my belief; in fact, I'd probably be a-okay even without the second look. The belief-formation facts are *so* epistemically great that my belief retains its upstandingness even if I can't say anything clever or even mediocre in response to the genius-sophist trying to cast doubt on my belief.

phenomenology of spiritual experience had by adults who are fully functioning, well adjusted, intelligent, etc. One cannot do the same with the alternative spiritual hypotheses we are considering.

I will bend over backward once more: *cognitive type G really is as great as vision in the best of circumstances*. We can construe this as an eighth condition on G, adding to (i)–(vii). However, I suspect that that won't suffice to save the upstandingness of our theistic beliefs, as even the best ordinary colour beliefs can be rendered blameworthy through the addition of misleading evidence from genuine experts.

Consider this example (in §8 I'll look at another that makes the same point). You see a sock in the usual excellent viewing conditions: just two feet away, in perfect light, etc. It looks, and is, blue. But it's your colleague's sock, and his wife is a colour scientist and he insists that he is wearing some of her 'trick' socks she uses in her experiments, in that although they look blue and normal, they're actually very weird and really green. We can suppose that he's made an innocent mistake in that the socks he is wearing are his entirely normal, blue socks. You mistakenly think he trying to fool you even though he's actually a pillar of honesty, so you persist in your belief that the socks are blue. Suppose his wife comes in and says 'Well *there* are those trick socks! We were looking for them all morning in the lab! What are you [your colleague] doing with them on?' Other people concur with her (her lab assistants and children say). She and other colour theorists have created various other strange objects, strange in ways having to do with their colour appearances. You are somewhat aware of these objects, involving rapidly rotating disks with special holes in them, unusual materials, and the like. So you know of the existence of such highly unusual objects. Your blue-socks belief is true and reliably produced in the entirely ordinary way, but is this belief epistemically upstanding once you've encountered the weird-socks story, especially given that you've heard and understood loads of intelligent, sincere, and honest experts saying that the socks are really green—not just his wife, but her assistants, other professors, etc.? Don't you have to rule out, at least to some significant extent (to ask for proof seems to be asking too much) the weird-socks hypothesis to retain the upstanding status of your belief that the socks are blue? I think you would be committing some significant epistemic crimes if you retained your belief. You believe the truth, you acquired the belief in just about the *best way possible*, you initially *knew* that the socks are blue, but in circumstances such as these that isn't enough for upstandingness.

I just described a case with the following features: one acquires a true belief under *virtually the best* circumstances possible, the belief-formation type was nearly the most reliable there is, the belief initially amounts to knowledge, and yet the subsequent awareness of some information that is ultimately misleading but justifiably endorsed by relevant professionals ruins the epistemic upstandingness of the belief (when the belief is retained

even after the additional information has been encountered). The socks case and the spirituality case are analogous in some interesting ways (I'll look at some key ways they are not analogous in §8).

First way. In the socks case, I believe that the socks are blue, and I believe it based on my experience of them. In the spiritual case, I believe that God is here or is speaking to me (or whatever), and I believe it based on my experience of Him.

Second way. In the socks case, the scientists in question say to me things like the following:

> I agree that your experience seemed to be of blue socks. Many, perhaps most, of us (who hold that the socks aren't blue because they are trick socks that are really green) had pretty much the same experience as you did when looking at them. But more careful empirical examination will show that your experiences were misleading in that they were not of blue socks but really of some weird green socks. The experiences you had were genuine visual perceptions, but were somewhat crude. Further visual experience will show you your error!

In the spiritual case, the naysayers in question say to me analogous things such as the following:

> I agree that your experience seemed to be of God. Many of us (who hold that you didn't experience God) had pretty much the same experience as you did at that stage in our spiritual development. But more careful empirical examination (involving more mature spiritual *experience*, which is why the examination is empirical) will show that your experiences were misleading in that they were not of God but instead were the beginnings of some levels of consciousness that are more advanced than those we have in most situations (and that merit the title 'spiritual') but don't call out for the existence of a god. The experiences you had were genuine spiritual perceptions, but were somewhat crude. Further spiritual experience will show you your error!

Third way. In the socks case, as far as I have determined the scientists in question are about as expert regarding colour, bizarre colour illusions, etc., as anyone. Never mind whether there are other colour experts much more expert regarding colour; I don't know about those matters. In the spiritual case, as far as I have determined the naysayers in question are about as expert regarding spiritual experience as anyone. Never mind whether there are other spiritual experts much more expert regarding spirituality; I don't know about those matters.

Fourth way. In the socks case the colour scientists are mistaken; in the spiritual case the naysayers are mistaken. But this stipulation really isn't very important.

Fifth way. Neither the colour nor the spiritual experts are saying that you have gone insane, or that you are temporarily deranged or having a seizure or

anything like that. They aren't saying you are 'screwed up'. Your perceptual and spiritual faculties are working fine; it's just that circumstances are odd and you've erred in coming to the naturally produced belief. The naysayer isn't disrespectful, so to speak, of spiritual experience. I will return to this point later.

Sixth way. In the socks case, you had some utterly typical visual experiences and *immediately* formed the belief that the socks are blue. We can suppose, if you like, that the same happened in the spiritual case. Hence, I'm not saying that the move from the spiritual experience to the theistic belief such as 'God is here' or 'God is speaking to me' amounts to any more of an 'interpretation' or 'inference' than in the socks case. In the spiritual case there is *no more* of an argument to the best explanation or inference than in the socks case.

Let me emphasize that I'm not arguing as follows: (a) the socks case is just like the spirituality case; (b) in the socks case the person who persists in his belief is blameworthy; thus, (c) in the spirituality case the person who persists in his belief is blameworthy. That would be a little too fast for my taste anyway. I think (b) is true, and (a) is true to some extent (the slippery 'is just like' muddles things). My essay's argument concludes that (c) is true (modulo other sources of epistemic support) but it doesn't do so based on (a) and (b). I bring up the socks story for four other reasons.

First, in the socks case one is epistemically blameworthy if one retains one's blue socks belief and has no counter to the contrary experts. Of course, one could easily get a sufficient counter and avoid the blame. For instance, you could observe the main colour scientist discovering the true location of the real trick socks and thereby giving up her belief that your colleague is wearing the trick socks.

Second, through the six-point comparison given above, the socks case helps one *understand* what the spiritual experts are saying.

Third, the socks story shows that a tempting defence of G-based theistic belief in the face of the expertly endorsed alternative spiritual hypotheses is inadequate:

> The reason Fred's G-based belief continues to be epistemically upstanding even in the face of recognized expert contrary evidence is that it is a non-inferentially formed belief that started out as knowledge and was formed in just about the best perceptual circumstances possible.

The reason for the inadequacy: your socks belief was a non-inferentially formed belief that started out as knowledge and was formed in just about the best perceptual circumstances possible and via one of the most reliable belief forming procedures there is, and yet it ended up blameworthy. There might be a perfectly adequate defence of G-based theistic belief held in the

face of recognized alternative expert spiritual opinion, but it will have to do more than what appears above.

Fourth, the socks story helps me motivate a nice, simple, compact principle that will be a focus of the remainder of this essay.

Experiential Expertise: If all the following hold:

(a) You're no expert about X (God; colour),

(b) You have a belief P ('God spoke to me'; 'The socks are blue') about X based at least in part on your experiences E (the ones from the employment of G; visual experiences),

(c) You're no expert about E's genus (spiritual experiences; visual experiences),

(d) There are lots of genuine experts about E's genus who believe ∼P and that E provides insufficient basis for P ('It is not the case that you were being spoken to by God (even though He may exist and can be experienced), and your spiritual experience was illusory in one respect'; 'The socks aren't blue and your visual experience of them was illusory in one respect'),

(e) These experts base these opinions of theirs on their long familiarity with experiences (their own and their students) of the genus of E,

(f) These experts are aware of the E experiences you have had (although they may or may not have personally had tokens of the very same type as you had),

(g) You're aware of their expert credentials and contrary opinion,

(h) and you're a philosopher used to dealing with contrary views in a serious manner,

Then if you don't have some special information those experts lack that in some way undercuts their expert opinion, your P belief is not epistemically upstanding in virtue of E (although of course it might be upstanding in virtue of other epistemic items you have, such as knockdown arguments for P).[15] FN:15

In the trick socks case you may well have some 'special information' the experts lack and that undercuts their opinion: you might see some odd looking socks in a box in the corner of the room marked 'trick socks', and you know that none of the experts has seen that box. In such a case it seems to me that you do know P (the socks are blue) and your knowledge is based *almost entirely* on E (your ordinary visual experiences of the socks), although

[15] I'll be offering a minor amendment to the consequent of the consequent in §8.

of course we must credit an assist to your 'special' knowledge about the box, the knowledge that defeats the testimony of the experts. The upshot is that the antecedent of the consequent of Experiential Expertise is important.

The 'undercutting' of the expert opinion can take a variety of forms. You might have some crucial bit of evidence about E that they lack. Or, you might know of some mistake they made in reaching their opinion. And this might be the case even if (a)–(h) are all true. I'll leave open what forms the undercutting might take by sticking with the highly general 'undercuts their expert opinion'.

Experiential Expertise is false! It has exceptions. We'll get to a couple simple ones in §9. So, I'm not relying on its truth. But it's a pretty good rule anyway; it's almost true. Since you satisfy the antecedent of the rule, or so I believe is the case for an interesting number of theistic philosophy professors, then if you're *not* blameworthy in your theistic belief based on your G experiences then either (i) there is some good explanation of why you're one of the happy exceptions to Experiential Expertise, (ii) your theistic belief is upstanding in virtue of something other than G-based experiences, or (iii) you falsify the antecedent of the consequent of Experiential Expertise. With that said, I can at last formulate the structure of my argument for the crucial premise (5) (but here I ignore the bit about zappy spiritual experiences).

A. Experiential Expertise is true with few exceptions.

B. The antecedent of Experiential Expertise is true for an interesting number of contemporary professional philosophers (with the substitutions for 'E', 'P', and 'X' given above).

C. Thus, if the consequent is false for them, then they must fall into one of the exception classes.

D. But they don't.

E. And unfortunately they *do* satisfy the antecedent of the consequent of Experiential Expertise.

F. It follows from (A)–(E) that they satisfy the consequent of the consequent of Experiential Expertise: their theistic belief is not epistemically upstanding in virtue of G-based spiritual experiences (and we have already set aside zappy spiritual experiences). This is premise (5).

Burden-of-argument moves are for losers. Unfortunately, it looks as though I have to join the group of losers here, because I can't help but think that the burden is on the denier of (5) to show us the error in the conjunction of (A), (D), and (E). I don't see any serious doubt for (B), given that we're assuming God exists, we can experience Him, and G exists and satisfies (i)–(vii). So the critic of (5) has to find a mistake in

[(A) & (D) & (E)]. Showing that (A) is false is tricky for a reason I'll bring up in §9 and that suggests the burden is on the denier of (A). As for (D), if you think it is false then you should be able to show why the spiritual case falls into one of the exception classes: *which* class is it and *why* does the spiritual case fall into it? Otherwise I don't see how your rejection of (D) could be a justified one. As for (E), if you think it is false, then you should be able to *reveal* the 'special information' in question. If you can't, then it doesn't seem to me that you have any case against (E).

I won't defend either (D) or (E). The only way I could adequately defend (D) is list all the classes of exceptions and show that the typical theistic philosophers this essay is about don't fall into those classes. But I certainly don't know all the classes so I won't get very far on that project. The only way I could convincingly argue for (E) is list all the possible kinds of 'special information' and then argue that the typical theistic philosophers in question don't have those kinds of information. But just as before, I don't know all the kinds of special information.

That leaves (A). Once more we encounter disappointment: I know of no way to directly argue for (A) (how many is 'few'?). For what it's worth, I haven't been able to think of many exceptions to Experiential Expertise. My defence of Experiential Expertise, if you can even call it that, will consist of just looking at a single case (but a very good one) meant to clarify it, especially one of its key components. Thus, my 'argument' for (5) amounts to little more than a *challenge*: find the mistake in [(A) & (D) & (E)], if you think there is one.

VIII. SPIRITUALITY, VISION, AND COLOUR, PART 2

The socks-spirituality analogy has its limits. For one thing, in the spiritual case the experts are telling you that all your spiritual experiences are those of a beginner, are somewhat (not entirely) confused or crude, and naturally produce a few mistaken beliefs. In the socks case the experts are not saying that you're a beginner or that your colour experiences are *systematically* flawed; instead you have made a very limited error (just those socks). But there is another case that provides an analogy with spirituality that is significantly better than the socks one. I bring it up here because it gives a nice illustration of what Experiential Expertise really says and why it's so plausible.

As mentioned earlier, colour eliminativism is as well respected as any view on colour (see Byrne and Hilbert 2003 for an introduction and some references). It's been around for hundreds of years and is now endorsed by many philosophers who are experts on colour as well as many expert colour

scientists. It's far from being some fringe view that a few philosophers are interested in but don't believe to be true; and it might actually be the favourite view of colour scientists. These colour experts insist that visual experiences are genuine experiences, are unlike other experiences, are reliably used to reveal a tremendous number and variety of facts about the world, are evolutionary advanced, etc. These experiences are simply wonderful! The only problem with them is that they almost always lead to false *colour* beliefs among people who haven't studied the matter very thoroughly. (Not all ordinary colour beliefs will be false: even if colour eliminativism is true you still know perfectly well that the table looks red and that red is darker than yellow.) This is a practically unavoidable and perfectly natural mistake; no one said evolution was perfect. Upon mature investigation, one can realize one's initial mistakes regarding colour, and in those cases one will alter one's colour beliefs. Obviously, visual experiences provide us with much more than colour beliefs (e.g., they tell us how big things are, how far away they are, etc.). According to the experts the problem with visual experiences is *quite limited*: they systematically produce false beliefs just about the colours of ordinary objects; other than that they are great.

The spiritual experience/colour eliminativism analogy is superior to the spiritual experience/trick socks analogy, as both the spiritual experts and colour eliminativists are saying that all your (but not everyone's) spiritual/visual experiences are systematically misleading in *one* particular way even though they are genuinely new and different from experiences of other kinds, knowledge producing (perhaps not propositional, when it comes to spirituality, depending on how various kinds of knowledge (propositional, ability, acquaintance, etc.) are related), evolutionarily advanced, etc. Visual experiences do much more than generate beliefs about the colours of ordinary objects; similarly, spiritual experiences do much more than generate beliefs such as 'God is speaking to me'. The colour experts in question are really making a rather minor objection to the epistemic import of your visual experiences; similarly, the spiritual experts in question are really making a rather minor objection to the epistemic import of your spiritual experiences (recall that they need not deny that God exists, deny that we can experience Him, etc.). In fact, the alternative spiritual explanations need not claim that spiritual experience is unreliable for forming beliefs. The colour eliminativists don't say that vision is unreliable, at least not generally; they just say that certain judgements based on vision (viz. most but not all colour judgements) go wrong. Similarly, the spiritual experts need not, and do not, say spiritual experience is unreliable.

It seems to me, for reasons I have detailed elsewhere (with maximum strength, wit, and elegance in Frances 2005a), that most of us philosophers

who are thoroughly informed of colour eliminativism as well as its highly respected status as a philosophical and scientific theory should give up our ordinary colour beliefs such as 'Fire engines are red'. This is not to say that philosophers shouldn't believe that fire engines are red. It's not to say that contemporary philosophers shouldn't believe that fire engines are red. It's not to say that contemporary philosophers who are aware of colour eliminativism shouldn't think that fire engines are red. It is to say that contemporary philosophers who are fully aware of colour eliminativism *and* its status among genuine experts, philosophical *and* scientific, shouldn't believe that fire engines are red.

Actually, I don't think that that conclusion is exactly right either, although it's awfully close. It might be the case that we simply cannot *stop* ourselves from having certain beliefs even when our theorizing convinces us that those beliefs are false. Ted Sider and David Braun (forthcoming) think that no thoughts expressed with vague concepts are true (including that one!); Peter van Inwagen (1990) thinks that there are no chairs; Patricia S. Churchland (1986) and Paul M. Churchland (1989) believe that there are no beliefs. Despite those theoretical views, these philosophers might not be able to avoid forming beliefs obviously inconsistent with those views. Belief is biological, at least in part. What I suspect is the correct conclusion in the colour eliminativism case is this: contemporary philosophers who are fully aware of colour eliminativism and its status among genuine experts shouldn't *assert or avow* that fire engines are red, at least when doing philosophy and not merely educating children about fire engines, say. Call those 'theoretical assertions' as opposed to 'everyday assertions'. Even more carefully: if a contemporary philosopher aware of the content and credentials of colour eliminativism makes a theoretical assertion such as 'Fire engines as well as many other ordinary physical objects are red', then their theoretical assertion or avowal isn't epistemically upstanding largely in virtue of their colour experiences (although it might be upstanding in virtue of other factors, e.g., they are geniuses regarding colour and have refuted colour eliminativism in their unpublished works).

Now, maybe something similar is true for the spiritual case: some of us simply can't avoid forming various pro-theistic beliefs (any more than the Churchlands can avoid coming to have positive beliefs about beliefs). I think this won't apply to many philosophers (in spite of what they may say), but let's allow for the possibility anyway. In that case, my argument regarding G-based experiences should really conclude that the theistic philosophers who satisfy (a)–(h) shouldn't make theoretical assertions or avowals that God has spoken to them (or that they have experienced Him, etc.). Even more carefully: if (a)–(h) are true for some contemporary philosopher regarding the theism case and 'God has spoken to me' ('I have been in

His presence', etc.), then their theoretical assertion or avowal of 'God has spoken to me' or 'God exists' isn't epistemically upstanding in virtue of their G-based spiritual experiences. I'll ignore this belief/avowal/assertion wrinkle in what follows.

Of course, some people just can't 'put up with' strange theories such as colour eliminativism. They just can't take seriously philosophical error theories for instance. For them, scepticism about knowledge, moral truths, colours, character traits, free will, and a large number of other anti-commonsensical theories (not all of which are error theories) are beyond the pale—even though they are fascinating to study. These philosophers will reflexively reject any theory that goes against common sense—although they will make exceptions for well-established scientific theories.

Speaking for myself, I don't have much respect for that attitude. But it hardly matters because colour eliminativism is a scientific theory endorsed by scientists for scientific reasons. For one thing, there's no more a priori thought behind it than behind other popular scientific theories. For another, the main supports for colour eliminativism are hardly a priori. I'm not saying that there is *no* a priori reasoning behind the acceptance among scientists of colour eliminativism; I'm saying that if there is, it isn't exceptional in any way.

In any case, contrary to what you might have been recently suspecting I'm *not* going to argue this way: since we are blameworthy to retain our 'Fire engines are red' belief in the colour eliminativism case, we are likewise blameworthy to retain our 'God spoke to me' belief in the G-based spiritual case. I think that conditional is true, when construed as a material conditional, and I think it forms the basis for a decent argument for (5), but my argument for (5) in this essay doesn't rely on it in any way. Instead, I bring up the eliminativism-spirituality comparison in order to help *explain* Experiential Expertise. For one thing, it provides a nice, interesting case very similar to the spirituality case, thereby helping us better understand the latter. More to the present point, it draws our attention to the important conjunct (e) of Experiential Expertise:

These experts base these opinions of theirs (viz. against your belief P) on their long familiarity with experiences (their own and their students) of the genus of E.

The colour experts who think fire engines aren't red are doing so based largely (not entirely) on some advanced and difficult arguments, arguments contemporary colour experts who are colour realists don't accept. A philosopher might be wary of any highly advanced, relatively abstract argument that attempts to overthrow a whole class of commonsensical beliefs—even if the argument is mostly a posteriori and has excellent scientific as well

as philosophical credentials. But please notice that none of this applies to the spiritual case! In the latter case the spiritual experts reached their opinion that is contrary to yours *based on experience, not argument.* These experts have had a great number and variety of spiritual experiences, have taught many pupils regarding their own spiritual experiences, etc. *That's* the basis for their contrary opinion. I think this shows the great plausibility of Experiential Expertise: it's one thing for experts to disagree with you based on their highly abstract arguments; it's another thing entirely for them to do so based on their years of experience.[16] That's why I put 'experiential' in the name of the principle. In reality, Experiential Expertise doesn't even apply to the colour eliminativism case, as condition (e) is not satisfied, even though the colour eliminativism and spirituality cases are quite similar.

FN:16

IX. EXCEPTIONS TO EXPERIENTIAL EXPERTISE

If I make one worthwhile point in this section, let it be this: even if I miss out on some important exceptions to Experiential Expertise that doesn't mean that (A) is false or my argument for (5) thereby fails. I say: lawnmowers fall to the earth if you drop them out of flying airplanes. And I think the same will hold true of your lawnmower, which we just happen to have with us as we fly over the Atlantic Ocean. It won't do you any good to point out that the lawnmower won't fall to earth if we attach enough balloons to it, or that there might be a hole all the way through the earth and your lawnmower might fall straight into the hole. Or that your lawnmower has magical powers, or that it might land on and stick to another plane. Some counterexamples are irrelevant: your lawnmower has no balloons, no magical powers, there are no holes through the entire world, and there is no chance that your lawnmower will stick to another airplane.

Similarly, if there are exceptions to Experiential Expertise it has to be shown that the spiritual case falls within them. Otherwise all we have is misdirected cleverness. One thing we emphasize to students about the nature of argument is that one can't defeat an argument until one knows it can't be *repaired* to get around one's criticisms. Speaking from personal experience, I know this is a tough rule to follow, and philosophy professors would do well to remind themselves of it from time to time!

[16] I'm not suggesting, absurdly, that there is no reasoning or theorizing behind the spiritual expert's contrary opinion. When I say, as a parent, that baby bibs that are hard plastic with a scoop for catching food are better than other bibs, I do so 'on the basis of experience'. Of course I reached this expert opinion with the aid of reflection on my many relevant experiences, but it's the experiences that are doing most of the epistemic work in making my opinion expert.

Here's one exception to Experiential Expertise: although you can identify 100 spiritual experts, you know full well that only 7 think P (your theistic belief) is false while 88 think it's true and 5 are undecided. In that case, (a)–(h) are true, the antecedent of the consequent is true, and yet the consequent of the consequent is false.[17] Or so I'll allow.

FN:17

Another exception: although you can identify 100 spiritual experts, and eighty-five of them say P is false while you say it's true, you know perfectly well that the remaining fifteen think P is true and that everyone including the first eighty-five agrees that those fifteen are the spiritual superiors of the eighty-five. You know that the eighty-five experts are your spiritual superiors, but you also know that the fifteen are far and away the spiritual superiors of the eighty-five superiors. In this case it seems to me that you're epistemically a-okay in sticking with your belief in P.

There are many other classes of exceptions to Experiential Expertise if we alter it to focus on disagreement due to arguments and omit the business about experiences. I claim without offering justification: often one is epistemically blameless in retaining one's belief in P even when one is *fully aware* that there are loads of people who think P is false and whom one *fully admits* are one's epistemic superiors regarding the topics that P belongs to (for enlightenment on these cases and the general issue see Frances ms.).

X. SUPPOSE (6) IS TRUE ...

Suppose that I accept the main argument of this essay, so I hold that the typical theistic philosophy professor is not epistemically upstanding in virtue of spiritual mentality (even though God exists, G exists and satisfies (i)–(vii), etc.). Even so, we have argued against the epistemic goodness of (a certain interesting class of) theistic belief without arguing against the truth of that belief. A theistic philosopher could fully endorse the main argument of this essay and be epistemically upstanding in retaining her theistic belief.

In addition, even if my argument is successful, all is not lost. You might have a wonderful philosophical argument for God's existence. Or maybe you have some other epistemic item that adequately supports your belief. But even if you don't, things are *still* not that bad, for five reasons.

First, the blameworthiness need not be permanent. You could get zapped. Alternatively, you could become a spiritual expert, through years of spiritual

[17] Your knowledge of the sociological facts (involving the numbers) doesn't do anything to *undercut* the opinion of the experts, at least not in anything even close to a direct manner, which is why the antecedent of the consequent of Experiential Expertise is not falsified. The same point holds for the next exception case.

discipline, and rightly come to regard the disagreeing spiritual experts as epistemic peers instead of epistemic superiors.

Second, even if you have to withhold belief in order to avoid blame you're still on the path towards spiritually based knowledge of God. That's a big point in your favour. You're still *spiritually better off* than you were before you had any spiritual experience, even if you don't yet have much spiritual knowledge as a result of those experiences. As I pointed out before, you might be akin to the congenitally blind person who has just gained the power of sight but who needs some more visual experience in order to start gathering knowledge via vision.

Third, maybe a lot of philosophically fundamental belief is blameworthy. That is, perhaps almost all beliefs on fundamental philosophical issues are blameworthy due to expert disagreement (roughly put). In that way there is nothing special about theistic belief. For one thing, it doesn't mean that theists are much worse, epistemically speaking, than other philosophers who have beliefs on fundamental and controversial matters such as compatibilism, physicalism, etc.

Fourth, you still have all the positive warrant for theistic belief gained through your admittedly immature spiritual experiences. The warrant is still *there*, so to speak, and has as much epistemic goodness as it has always had; it's just been counteracted (by awareness of contrary expert spiritual opinion) in such a way that it's no longer sufficient to underlie epistemically upstanding theistic belief. There might not be a great deal of positive warrant for theistic belief generated by the spiritual experiences, but no one has argued that the positive warrant doesn't exist at all. This is yet another way in which my sceptical argument is kind to the theistic philosopher: I'm not saying that it fails to generate warrant for theistic belief.

Finally, no one has said that you shouldn't continue to develop your spiritual life, assuming you have some control over it. All the argument says is that you should 'go agnostic' as to what the import of your spiritual experiences is (setting aside other epistemic supports you may have). If anything, the contrary spiritual experts would encourage you to further your spiritual development. This is yet another way in which my sceptical argument is different from similar arguments. So: by all means vigorously continue your 'spiritual path', just suspend judgement on what it means!

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