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https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-024-01008-y

Review of Hans Van Eyghen, *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs*

New York: Routledge, ISBN 9781032249988, hbk, 168pp.

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Accepted: 9 February 2024
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In *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs*, Hans Van Eyghen sets out philosophical arguments for belief in spirits—angels, ghosts, jinn, loa, kami, and the like. While spirits feature in almost every religious tradition, they have attracted little philosophical attention.

In chapter 1, Eyghen characterizes spirits as 'supernatural beings that are not gods' (p. 11). Criteria are offered for 'supernatural' and 'not gods,' but they are imprecise—e.g. spirits are 'less powerful' and have 'less elevated status' than gods (p. 12). Nothing in the subsequent chapters turns on whether experiences of (e.g.) Hermes are experiences of a spirit, a god, or some exotic-yet-natural being.

Chapter 2 presents three arguments for the conditional 'If God exists, then (probably) spirits exist.' God's existence would show the shared genus, supernatural beings, to be non-empty. Drawing on the Platonist Apuleius, Eyghen argues that God has reason to employ intermediaries in communicating with us. Lastly, God has reason to create a sacred scripture, and the sacred scriptures of almost all religious traditions affirm the existence of spirits. The arguments are interesting but illustrate the saying 'one's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*.'

Chapter 3 explores the argument-type that spirits are the best explanation of some 'unusual events'—e.g. cases in which a spirit apparently responds to ritual or prayer, causing 'miracles' such as healings or 'mundane' outcomes such as 'a stable marriage or fertility' (pp. 43–44). Eyghen refrains from endorsing any particular arguments of this type, since they should be 'assessed on a case-by-case basis' (p. 50). Engaging with the work of David Kyle Johnson, Eyghen focuses on showing that spirit-explanations are not, as a class, worse than their naturalistic competitors *vis-à-vis* theoretical virtues such as simplicity and explanatory scope. Eyghen's case is thought-provoking. An apparent theoretical vice of spirit-explanations is causal inadequacy, the lack of apparent mechanism. Eyghen's response

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Published online: 28 February 2024

to this (difficult) problem is unsatisfying; 'Since spirits have greater intellectual powers, they could know of ways to intervene without a physical body' (p. 45).

Chapter 4 gives the epistemological framework underpinning arguments from experience, then chapters 5–8 apply it to four types of spirit-experiences. These are differentiated by the modality through which, and locus in which, the spirit-experience occurs. 'Perception-like experiences' are cases in which spirits are seen or heard in one's outer sensory field, as one might perceive a dog. 'Mediumship experiences' are cases in which spirits are experienced in one's inner mental life, as one might experience a memory or imagining. 'Possession experiences' are cases in which third-parties experience a person as being inhabited by a spirit. 'Animistic experiences' are cases in which plants, animals, or features of the natural environment are experienced as spirit-inhabited.

Chapter 4 opens by outlining Michael Huemer's principle of phenomenal conservatism; 'If it seems to S as if *p*, then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that *p*' (p. 54). On this principle, spirit-experiences justify spirit-beliefs by default. The task of justifying spirit-beliefs is therefore a defensive maneuver, showing that the *prima facie* justification is not defeated, overturned. Eyghen's selection of this principle, influential and plausible though it is, means that he avoids the task of offering particular positive arguments for thinking that spirit-experiences are really of spirits.

Following Richard Swinburne's discussion of religious experiences, Eyghen identifies that one prominent type of defeater for spirit-experiences would be to show 'that the experience was not caused by the presumed object of experience' (p. 57), that a superior alternative causal explanation is available. Chapters 5–8 examine and reject a medley of alternative causal explanations. Eyghen concludes that these alternative causal explanations are not persuasive, and so that spirit-beliefs are justified (p. 155), both for those who have spirit-experiences and those who receive their testimony (pp. 64–65).

At the close of chapter 4, Eyghen hastily dismisses the defeater of conflicting experiences, so prominent in discussions of religious experience: 'the problems raised by diversity do not affect spirit-experiences. The reason is that no spirit is seen as the one sole existing spirit' (p. 63). The plurality of spirits does not foreclose conflict. Experiences of spirit-types that do not feature in one's religious tradition tend to undermine experiences of spirit-types that do. The appearance of characters from others' stories casts doubt on the truth of your story. For instance, in certain strands of Judaism, a dybbuk is a dead human being who can possess the living. Most Christians would reject the idea of ghost-possession. So, dybbuk-possession-experiences conflict with Christian spirit-experiences. The Christian might say that apparent experiences of dybbuks are of demons, or Eyghen, for that matter, might say that the experiences the experiences only conflict over the exact nature of spirits, not their existence. Whether these are good dialectical moves or not, they are dialectical moves: argumentative grappling with apparent defeaters. Eyghen only briefly considers other grounds for skepticism about the justificatory force of spirit-experiences, e.g. the sheer variety of alternative explanations on offer, the capacity of each alternative to account for some aspects of spirit-experiences, or the limited state of empirical research on the topic (p.61).

Chapters 5–8 share the same structure. Eyghen gives examples of spirit-experiences, and salient anthropological information, from a wide range of religious traditions (the bibliographies are very useful). Eyghen then states and defuses a series of alternative causal explanations that have been offered for each type of experience. These run the gamut from neuroscience (temporal lobe micro-seizures), psychiatry (dissociative states), psychology (suggestion), sociology (social functions served), evolutionary speculations (hyperactive agency detection), and particular physical causes (e.g. some argue that 'noises at 19 Hz make the human eye vibrate in such a way that humans see person-like figures' (p. 79)). These putative defeaters are explained clearly for the layperson.

Most of Eyghen's rebuttals fall into three categories. The defeater does not explain all features of spirit-experiences—e.g. hyperactive agency detection can account for the fleeting sense that a spirit is present, but not a lengthy visual perception (p. 78). The defeater fails to explain all spirit-experiences—e.g. hypnagogic hallucinations do 'not explain spirit-experiences during normal waking states' (p. 81). The defeater has not been empirically substantiated, reproduced—e.g. 'a recent overview of studies on the effects of low frequency sound did not report visual distortions' (p. 79). Most of these rebuttals were persuasive, though some seemed tendentious. For example, in Zimbabwean mediumship, the mediumship of a particular spirit may pass from one medium to another over the years. Eyghen rejects the theory that mediumship is a kind of immersive fantasy because messages from these spirits are fairly consistent, whereas 'people tend to have diverging fantasies' (p. 98). There are obvious reasons why the fantasies of different mediums might be similar—e.g. cultural-communal expectations about the messages that a particular spirit is to deliver.

Eyghen makes two types of rebuttal that are more troubling. He suggests that some alternative causal explanations could in fact involve spirits. On hypnagogic states, he says:

> spirits could enter the human mind during hypnagogic states and reveal themselves internally… If that is the case, attributing spirit-experiences to hypnagogic cognition is compatible with spirit-experiences being caused by actual spirits. The theory then no longer constitutes an alternative causal explanation (p. 82, cf. p. 101).

This is an ad hoc response; spirits could, in principle, be appended to any naturalistic explanation. Another is his response to the suggestion that mediumship experiences result from schizophrenia:

> It could, however, be the case that the alterations [different brain-activation and corresponding changes in information processing in patients suffering from schizophrenia] are not causing misapprehensions but allow subjects to perceive what others cannot (p. 100).

Though it is conceivable that non-normative brain-states give us special access to spirits, it is hard to take this possibility seriously when we have no account of how this might work. These responses show the limitations of relying primarily

on experiential arguments for spirits; without a precise metaphysics of what spirits are and how they interact with our plane of being we have no criteria for the kind of explanations that spirits can feature in, allowing them to be invoked arbitrarily.

This book is an important contribution to the philosophical study of 'non-classical' religious belief. It is an ambitious synthesis of philosophy, science, and anthropology, bringing serious attention to an overlooked topic. Seeing how arguments from experience play out in relation to spirits is an illuminating comparison class for theistic arguments from religious experience.

Declarations

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