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THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: A NARROWING OF ALTERNATIVES

Richard J. Ketchum

One position on the epistemic status of religious experiences is what I call the liberal position: those who have had a religious experience are justified on its basis in believing in God but the testimony of those who have had religious experiences does not justify others in believing in God. I argue that, though the liberal position is popular, it is unreasonable. The principle I use to support this view seems also to support an argument which appeals to religious experience as evidence that God exists. I argue that onus of proof considerations block the inference, however.

An 'argument from religious experience,' as I somewhat loosely use the term here, is an argument which attempts to find evidence for the existence of God in the testimony of those who claim that they have directly experienced Him. One position taken with respect to the cogency of such arguments is that though a) those who have had religious experiences are indeed justified by virtue of having had such experiences alone, and not by virtue of any argument, in believing that God exists, nevertheless b) the testimony of such people does not justify others in believing that God exists. Let me call this position the "liberal position." In the first part of this paper, I argue that the liberal position is, with only a few qualifications, an unreasonable position. This leaves us, those of us who have not had a religious experience, with two reasonable conservative positions. The "theistic conservative position" is the position that religious experiences justify those who have them in believing that God exists and the testimony of these people justifies the rest of us. The other conservative position, which I somewhat misleadingly call the "atheistic conservative position," is that neither those who have religious experiences nor those who hear their testimony are justified in believing in God. The argument of part I of this paper, the argument that the liberal position is unreasonable, appears to lend credence to the theistic conservative position. The argument of part I does establish a premise required to support the theistic conservative position and in this weak sense supports that position. I will argue in part II,



however, that onus of proof considerations prevent the theist from using the argument of part I to increase the likelihood of his conservative position.

I

I artificially assume that the word "God" has a relatively clear meaning shared by all who use the word. I simply want to avoid controversy concerning the meaning and meaningfulness of religious language. Within limits, the reader may supply his own definition. For present purposes, the only restrictions on a definition are a) that the definition must not rule out the possibility that God is experienced and b) that it must specify what some have meant by the word when they have asserted, "I have had an experience of God."

I understand a religious experience to be any experience which causes the experiencer to believe that he is aware of God. This definition is narrow in that it restricts the object of religious experiences to God, as opposed to witches or Odin, but broad in that the experience can range from an ineffable mystical experience to an apparent awareness that God is protecting one from evil. A veridical religious experience is an experience which causes the experiencer to have the true belief that she is aware of God. A justified religious experience is a religious experience which justifies the experiencer in accepting the belief that she is aware of God. I will assume that one who is justified in believing that she is aware of God is, thereby, justified in believing that God exists. Whether or not a religious experience can be justified for one person and not for another is an open question. That is to say, it may or may not be the case that an experience which justifies one person, S, in believing that S is aware of God would also justify anyone else, T, in believing that T is aware of God were T to have the experience. These definitions would clearly be inadequate in a context of investigating what, if anything, can be learned about God from religious experiences other than that He exists. They will, however, suit present purposes since it is arguments for the existence of God we will be concerned with here.

The liberal position with respect to religious experience is fairly popular. Two of William James' conclusions concerning whether or not mystical experiences provide evidence for the existence of God are as follows.¹

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have a right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

James leaves little doubt that in (1) he means to assert that mystics are justified in holding those beliefs acquired in the mystical experience. "They have been 'there' and know."² "Our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs."³

Those mystics then who believe that during their mystical experience they were aware of or were experiencing God are, according to James, justified in believing as they do.

The second claim can be understood as a trivial truth. There are those who believe that nothing should be accepted uncritically. James' conclusion is not so insipid, however. "Its [the mystical experience's] value must be ascertained by empirical methods, so long as we are not mystics ourselves...non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature."⁴ The non-mystic then is not justified in believing in God by the fact that mystics have claimed to experience Him. "...[m]ystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experience, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto."⁵ The problem is not that we have reason to doubt the sincerity of the mystic. Mystical experiences simply are experiences which justify those who have them in certain beliefs; but the fact that they occur does not justify others in accepting those beliefs.

More recently, William Rowe has cited James' position and stated, "It is unlikely that the studies of mysticism over the intervening years have invalidated these conclusions."⁶ Rowe interprets (2) above as claiming that "we non-mystics have no good reason for regarding mystical experience as veridical and no good reasons for regarding them as delusory."⁷ He interprets (1) as the claim that mystics are justified in regarding their experiences as veridical. Rowe doubts that mystical experience justifies even the mystic in believing in the theistic God but this is due to the fact that mystics typically do not claim to experience something as omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, etc. If I understand Rowe's concurrence with James' first conclusion correctly, the mystic would be justified in believing in the theistic God if it seemed to the mystic that the theistic God was revealing Himself to the mystic as such.

George Mavrodes, after arguing that we can have no criterion for determining whether a religious experience is a deception of the Devil or not, quotes an uncharacteristic passage from the works of St. Teresa, in which she claims knowledge of the presence of God without such a criterion. Mavrodes comments that

Teresa is here giving her testimony that, as this experience presented itself to her, its veridicality—the fact that it laid hold of a truth and delivered that truth to her understanding—was so plain and open on the face of that experience itself that its purpose was accomplished. The truth was 'engraven upon the understanding,' and doubt was banished. And it is this sort of experience, I think, and not the use of criteria, which is basic in Teresa's mystical knowledge.⁸

Mavrodes compares the degree of certainty which accompanies St. Teresa's belief that she was, in a mystical experience, aware of God with the certainty

accompanying a belief that a specific argument [which in fact is a straight forward *modus ponens* argument] is of the form *modus ponens*. He concludes,

Teresa's fundamental epistemological strategy, then, is one which is common to us all. If she is mistaken in substance, then, either her mistake is not traceable to this strategy, or else all of us, mystics and non-mystics alike, stand on equally shaky ground.⁹

Mavrodes must be telling us here that St. Teresa is justified in believing that she was aware of God. Her belief is as justified as Mavrodes' belief that a particular obvious instance of a *modus ponens* argument is such.

Mavrodes does not believe, however, that if one accepts "this line of argument" we (non-mystics) must accept Teresa's experiences as veridical.

Teresa had her experiences, but she has not given them to us. She has instead given to us a description of them, a report.... It may be that what happened to Teresa engraved something on her soul which her description will not engrave on our souls.¹⁰

All of this is of course true but it is hard to see how it is relevant, since it is true of the relation of reports of experiences to experiences generally and some reports do justify. If you, whom I know to be a competent logician, tell me that you can see that the first argument on page 34 of *Principia Ethica* is a *modus ponens* argument, in typical circumstances, I take you to have had an experience which justifies you in believing that this is so. Your report justifies me in believing that the argument is a *modus ponens* argument in spite of the fact that your report does not supply me with the experience which justified you and in spite of the fact that your experience "engraves something" on your soul which your report does not engrave upon mine.

Louis Pojman cites James' two conclusions listed above and agrees with them.¹¹ He thinks that the realization that those who have had mystical experiences are justified in believing that God exists does not justify those who have not had a mystical experience (perhaps also those who do not believe that God exists) because there are no publicly verifiable tests of the hypothesis that God exists. There are however, no publicly verifiable tests of the hypothesis that I am now imagining a fire truck but if you think that I am justified in believing on the basis of some experience that I am now imagining a fire truck you would also, typically, think of yourself as justified in believing that I did in fact imagine a fire truck. The point is that it is not at all clear why publicity of tests is relevant once it is decided that the experiencer is justified in a belief by virtue of having the experience.

Given the popularity of the liberal position it seems worthy of careful consideration. For, on the face of it, it seems unreasonable. Consider ordinary perceptual cases. You tell me Reagan was in a certain parade and when pressed for a justification you tell me you saw him in the parade. If I do not doubt your sincerity, I believe that you had an experience which, all else being equal,

justifies you in believing that Reagan was in the parade.¹² For me to deny under these circumstances that Reagan was in the parade would at the very least make appropriate your request for a justification of my denial. It would also make appropriate a request for an explanation of why I believe as I do in the face of evidence that he was in the parade, namely, your testimony.

Before trying to state the principle needed to justify the claim that the liberal position is unreasonable, let me clarify my understanding of the liberal position. It is possible that those to whom I have attributed the liberal position have overstated their case. Their position may simply be that the justified belief that others have had justified religious experiences does not rationally force or obligate those who have this belief to accept the claim that God exists. If this is their position it is a reasonable one that can be defended. Let me suppose that if S believes the sentence, N, and realizes that N entails M, then S ought to refrain from believing not-M (or give up N). The word "ought" is intended in the last sentence to express a purely epistemic obligation and the sentence is plausible when the word is understood in this way. It is less clear, however, that experience either imposes purely epistemic obligations or would impose them if we were free to choose our perceptual beliefs. Most of us have no choice but to believe, e.g., that there is a pencil in one's hand when we see and feel it there. Suppose however that someone, through a great deal of mental exercise, was able to make believing such things a matter of choice. Suppose further that this person realizes that were she to choose to believe, on any particular occasion, what the rest of us are caused by our sense experience to believe, she would be justified in these beliefs. Does she have an epistemic obligation to choose to believe, e.g., that she is holding a pencil when it seems to her just as if she is holding a pencil? It might be prudentially unreasonable to believe that there is no pencil there but suspension of belief seems to me to be a permissible option from a purely epistemic point of view. Suspension of belief might be imprudent or even in certain circumstances immoral or impolite. One who tries to suspend belief whenever he is less than certain may be acting foolishly (imprudently) but I do not see that the behavior is irrational.

If this is true, it would also seem true that S, who believes that T is justified in believing that p on the basis of some experience, is not by that very fact obligated to believe that p. If the experience which justifies T in believing that p does not obligate T to believe that p, it is difficult to see how S could be obligated to believe that p by having the justified belief that T had an experience justifying T in believing that p. If those to whom I have attributed the liberal position have merely intended to point out that being justified in believing that others have had justified religious experiences does not obligate (epistemically) one to believe in God, I would agree. *Some* of James' comments suggest that he is making this point. The view I find unreasonable is the view that both a) some people have had justified religious experiences

and also b) those who have a justified belief to the effect that a) is true would not be justified in believing that God exists if they were to believe that He exists.¹³ Its seeming for all the world to me as if I have a pencil in my hand does not *obligate* me to believe that I have a pencil in my hand though it would *justify* me in believing this if I did believe it. So too, I will argue, even though S's justified belief that T has had a justified religious experience does not obligate S to believe that God exists, it would justify S in believing this if he in fact believed it. I am assuming that it is not irrational to say "In all probability p but I choose not to believe p" or "We have strong reasons to believe that p but I choose not to believe that p." Those who believe that we do have an epistemic obligation to believe what we would be very justified in believing were we to believe it, can make relevant adjustments in my claims. My conclusion will be correspondingly stronger.

It is also possible that those to whom I have attributed the liberal position have overstated their case in another way. Perhaps, they mean merely to claim that others *may* have had justified religious experiences but (since we do not know that they have) their testimony does not justify those of us who have not had justified religious experiences in believing that God exists. I do not mean to deny this possibility. Clearly, the realization that others may, for all we know, be justified in believing in God does not justify those who realize this in believing that God exists.

The principle needed to show the unreasonability of the liberal position is as follows:

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

Note that if P is true then so too is the weaker principle, P', whose antecedent is the same as P but whose consequent reads, "were S to believe that not-p, S would be unjustified in believing that not-p." For surely if someone would be justified in believing that p he would be unjustified in believing that not-p. The point as applied to religious experience is that if James, Rowe, etc. can justify their opinion that those who have had a religious experience are in fact justified in believing that God exists and if P is true then there is a straightforward way of showing the atheist that his position is unreasonable. There is a straightforward way of showing the atheist that he is not justified in believing that God does not exist.

By way of clarification let me apply P to a few cases. First the unproblematic case. You tell me that you saw Reagan in a parade in Chicago's loop. I believe, trusting in your sincerity, that you had a visual experience which justifies you in believing that Reagan was in said parade. This belief of mine is justified by your testimony. I have no reason to believe that Reagan was in fact in

Santa Barbara or that you were hallucinating. Were I to believe that Reagan was in the parade, as most normal people would, I would be justified in so believing. A more complicated case: I ask you to hand me the green pencil on my desk and you hand me the yellow one which looks green because of the special lighting in my office. Your behavior justifies me in believing that you believed that the pencil you handed me was green. Your belief, I realize, is justified given the lighting which makes it look green. But I would not under these circumstances be justified in believing that the pencil was green. For I am justified in believing something which is such that if you believed it and if you were justified in believing it, you would not be justified in believing that the pencil was green, namely, that the lighting in my office makes yellow things look green. One final case: I know that we are in a habitat in which it would be very unlikely to see a sparrow but in which longspurs, a sparrow-like bird, typically abound. You, who know little about birds and their habitat, report having just seen a sparrow. Your belief, I judge, is justified but I would not be justified in believing that it was a sparrow you saw on the basis of your testimony, since I have relevant knowledge which you do not possess, namely: this is not sparrow habitat and/or this is longspur habitat and/or longspurs look much like sparrows.

I think that pointing out examples such as these without reference to P makes one realize that the liberal position needs a kind of support it does not receive. Those who hold the liberal position do not guess or speculate or hold on faith that those who have had religious experiences are justified in believing in God. They think that this is the reasonable, justified position to take. But given this, the above examples make it fairly clear that something needs to be said to explain why we are not justified in believing that God exists on the basis of the testimony of those who have had religious experiences. It further seems that the explanation would have to point to some special knowledge possessed only by those who have not had religious experiences.

Before trying to support P, let me first point out a defense of P that fails. We cannot argue for P by pointing out that if S is justified in believing that T has had an experience justifying T in believing that p, then S is justified in believing that were S himself to have that experience, S would thereby be justified in believing that *mutatis mutandis* p.¹⁴ For this is false. Suppose that you are an expert at bird identification and that I am not and that we both have equally good views of a bird. Your confident assertion that it is a Swamp Sparrow justifies me, in the normal case, in believing that you have had an experience justifying you in believing that we are in the presence of a Swamp Sparrow. However, my ignorance of what Swamp Sparrows look like is enough to explain why your (visual) experience would not justify me in believing that I was looking at a Swamp Sparrow were I to have it. Also, if S were blind from birth probably none and certainly few of T's visual expe-

riences are such that if S were suddenly to have them they would justify S in believing *mutatis mutandis* as T did. The relatively straightforward point is that whether or not an experience justifies a person in believing something may depend on the person's past experience and background knowledge.¹⁵

The point is relevant to mystical experiences and religious experience generally. Our being justified in believing that another has had an experience which justifies him in believing that God exists, does not justify us in believing that the experience would have justified us in believing in God if we had had it even assuming that we satisfy the other conditions in the antecedent of P. It is I think often assumed by those who have not had religious experiences that to evaluate the claims of those who say they have experienced God, they would have to have the experience themselves. In fact, having the experience would not obviously help in evaluating the extent to which the experience justifies the relevant belief.

The argument for P, such as it is, runs as follows: to believe that another is justified in believing something, for whatever reason, is to believe that the belief has something to be said for it, it passes muster. Furthermore, there is enough to be said for it to be able to conclude that the holder of the belief is justified, within his rights, in holding it. Now suppose that S has no reason or evidence to doubt that p which is not possessed also by T and that S justifiably believes that T is justified in believing that p. (Note that if being justified is a matter of being caused by a reliable process to believe, then S, in believing that T is justified in believing p believes that T was caused to believe that p by a reliable process.) Under these conditions S justifiably believes that there is enough to be said for p to justify T's believing it and nothing to be said against p not already taken into account in assessing T's justification. Though it does not follow logically that S would be justified in believing that p were he to believe p, it is difficult to see how he could fail to be.

Somewhat polemic support may be supplied for P by pointing out that some such principle seems to be assumed by any attempt to justify a belief by 'appeal to authority,' where the authority's belief is justified by perceptual experience. If S justifies his belief that there no longer are any elms on Elm Street by telling us that he has just spoken with T who testifies to having been there and having seen none, we do not shake our heads in wonderment at the gullibility of S. S in accepting T's testimony did, in the normal case, the reasonable thing.

P does, however, make an assumption and it is one that can be doubted. The assumption is,

- R: If a given experience justifies U in believing that p then it would justify anyone else, V, who was just like U in all epistemically relevant respects, in believing that p.¹⁶

Before explaining why I think that P assumes the truth of R let me briefly clarify

R. An epistemic feature is to be thought of as a belief or system of beliefs, intelligence and/or belief forming mechanisms, past or present experience, awareness of or ability to become aware of relations between beliefs, etc. Could, for example, U be justified on the basis of a visual experience in believing that he is looking at a Dusky Flycatcher while V, who is just like U in all (other) epistemically relevant respects, is not justified in believing this on the basis of the same experience? R denies the possibility. If we answer affirmatively we might try to explain how this could happen by saying that V needs more evidence to be (not merely to think that he is) justified than U does. Saying this, however, seems to repeat the point rather than to explain it. We could almost rule out by definition the possibility that two people differ in being justified but in no other epistemic feature. Suppose we defined an "epistemically relevant difference between U and V relative to the belief that p" as any difference between U and V which would explain why U is but V is not justified in believing that p. Given this definition, the only way to maintain that U might be justified when V is not, even though U and V differ in no epistemically relevant respect, is by maintaining that sometimes the fact that people differ with respect to being justified is a brute, inexplicable fact about the people and the belief.

I will, however, leave the notion of an epistemically relevant difference between people undefined. I assume that we have (linguistic) intuitions as to whether or not a feature or characteristic of a person or belief is epistemically relevant. Finally, I assume that if U has a belief which prevents him from being justified in believing that p on the basis of some experience but V does not, then there is an epistemically relevant difference between U and V with respect to the belief that p. For example, if U knew, but V did not, that the light in a particular room made yellow things look green, then there would be an epistemically relevant difference between U and V with the respect to the belief that this (yellow) pencil is yellow.

If P is true, then R must be as well. For, suppose that R is false. On this supposition, it is possible for two people to be just like each other in all epistemically relevant respects except that one is and one is not justified on the basis of some experience in believing that p. Thus, it would be possible for the antecedent of P to be satisfied even though S would not be justified in believing that p were S to have had the experience T had instead of hearing T's testimony. But T's testimony can confer no more justification on S's belief that p than the experience itself would have as long as we are assuming that S and T are alike in all epistemically relevant respects. So, it is possible for P to have a true antecedent and a false consequent and thus P, considered as a lawlike proposition, is false.

Since few, if any, would contend that R is false I will assume that R is true in what follows. I have mentioned it here for two reasons. First, contemplating the implausibility of the claim that R is false increases confidence in P. I can think of no way of arguing that P is false, or of seeing how P might be false, other

than by assuming that R is false. Those who do not recognize the possibility that R is false can take the fact that it is not possible for two people to differ in being justified without further epistemic differences to be additional support for P. For it does seem that P holds otherwise. Second, since I do not argue, and do not know how to argue, that R is true, there is a weakness in my argument. Those who believe that the consequences of accepting P are false can justly protest that P stands in need of justification.

II

If we accept P, we must, it seems, give up the liberal position. We must either refrain from claiming to be justified in believing that there are justified religious experiences or refrain from claiming that others would not be justified by the testimony of those who have had justified religious experiences in believing that God exists were they to believe. We are not thereby forced to accept either the theistic or the atheistic conservative position. We have the option of simply withholding belief both as to whether there are justified religious experiences and/or as to whether testimony that there are such experiences justifies others in believing in God. If we choose to take a stand on these issues, however, we must believe that both are justified or that neither are. I say all of this assuming that those who have not had religious experiences have no relevant information not possessed by those who have.

Furthermore, it would seem that recognition that P is true supports the theistic conservative position. For, although there is no standard version of the argument from religious experiences any such argument must, it seems, assume the truth of some principle such as P. One first argues that it is possible for an experience to be a justified religious experience, i.e., it is possible for an experience to justify the experiencer in believing that God exists. One then appeals to the testimony of those who claim to have had a justified religious experience for evidence that such experiences have actually occurred. It is concluded that we are justified on the basis of this testimony in believing that God exists. A more precise version of the argument I will refer to as “the *modus ponens* argument” runs as follows. (I use “we” in the argument as an abbreviation of “those who have not had a religious experience but have heard the testimony of those who claim that they have had a justified religious experience.”)

- (1) P
- (2) We are justified in believing that others have had justified religious experiences.
- (3) We are justified in believing nothing which is such that were those who have had religious experiences to be justified in believing it they would not be justified in believing that God exists.

So, if we were to believe that God exists we would be justified in believing that God exists.

To the extent that arguments from religious experience for the existence of God rely on P, I have buttressed these arguments by arguing for P. Just how good is the *modus ponens* argument? The third premise is relatively uncontroversial.¹⁷ The argument is valid and the first premise is justified. This leaves premise (2). While this premise might reasonably be doubted, we do have a good idea as to how to investigate further into its truth. The testimony of those who have had religious experiences is surely relevant and indeed the existence of such testimony seems to create a presumption in favor of (2). That is to say, the fact that we are aware of the testimony of those who claim that they have been aware of God seems to place the onus of proof on those who would deny (2). As James has put it, "they [mystics] have been 'there' and know."

Perhaps, however, P can be put to equally good use by the atheistic conservative. Consider what I will call the *modus tollens* argument below.

- (1) P
- (2) It is not the case that we would be justified in believing that God exists if we in fact believed.
- (3) We are justified in believing nothing which is such that were those who have had religious experiences to be justified in believing it, they would not be justified in believing that God exists.

So, it is not the case that we are justified in believing that there are justified religious experiences.

This argument seems far weaker than the *modus ponens* argument. In the present context it seems to beg the question against the theistic conservative and even more so against the person who has had a religious experience and believes it to be a justified religious experience. Furthermore, the second premise is far from obvious. It stands in need of justification itself. Granted, the second premise of the *modus ponens* argument also stands in need of justification. But there we know how to go about finding it. We find evidence for premise (2) of the *modus ponens* argument in the testimony of those who have had religious experience. I know of no general arguments, on the other hand, to the effect, that with the possible exception of those who have had a religious experience, no one is justified in believing in God.

The appearance that the *modus ponens* argument is a stronger more cogent argument than the *modus tollens* argument is, I think, mere appearance. Does the sincere testimony of the mystic justify those of us who have not had religious experiences in believing that there are justified religious experiences? In fact this is a much debated topic.¹⁸ The jury is still out as to whether the second premise of the *modus ponens* argument is true or itself justified. Once the many problems involved in arguing either for or against this premise are realized the appearance that the *modus ponens* argument is stronger than the *modus tollens* argument with respect to the justification of their respective second premises should, I think, begin to fade.

The second purported disanalogy between the *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* argument remains; the *modus tollens* argument begs the question, it is suggested, against the theistic conservative but not *vice versa*. Perhaps the appearance that this is so dissolves once it is seen that the second premise of *each* argument is controversial. I will assume, however, that this is not the case. I want to argue that even granting the strong feeling that the *modus tollens* argument begs the question against the theistic conservative while the *modus ponens* argument does not beg the question against the atheistic conservative, still that feeling is beside the point. If one argument begs the question against the other, they both do.

It is easy to point out that the second premise of each is the negation of the conclusion of the other and that the other two premises of each are exactly the same. It seems to follow that the way to evaluate the arguments is to find evidence for or against their second premises without using the other argument to do this. Still the feeling persists. The *modus ponens* argument can legitimately be used to cast doubt on the second premise of the *modus tollens* argument but not *vice versa*. The importance of this feeling, or rather the unimportance of it, will become clear I think when it is pointed out that that feeling persists in other contexts, contexts in which it is clearer that the feeling should be given little or no weight. I have in mind the skeptical arguments involving the possibility of our being deceived by an evil genius or of our being a brain in a vat.

There are two types of belief which, it has been argued, not even an all powerful being could give us false tokens of. First, there are beliefs descriptive of our own states of consciousness, e.g., the belief that I have a headache or the belief that I seem to see something green. Second, there are the beliefs expressed by analytic sentences, e.g., the belief that all bachelors are unmarried. Let me call both of these types of belief, "privileged beliefs." I then define an "evil genius" as one who makes all of my non-privileged beliefs false. The skeptical argument now runs as follows.

- (1) I do not know that there is no evil genius.
- (2) I know that if there is an evil genius then none of my non-privileged beliefs are true.

So, I do not know any of my non-privileged beliefs to be true.

Given a reasonably lax definition of validity, the argument is valid. But now consider the following 'gnostic argument' which attempts to cast doubt on the first premise.

- (1) I know at least one non-privileged belief to be true.
- (2) I know that if there is an evil genius then none of my non-privileged beliefs are true.

So, I know that there is no evil genius.

Note the similarity between this pair of arguments and the *modus ponens* and *tollens* arguments concerning religious experience. Both pairs are couched in epistemic terms. Both have as a conclusion of one member of the pair the negation of a premise of the other and they have the remaining premise(s) in common. The premises of each are plausible when considered outside of a context in which the two arguments are compared. There are those who continue to feel that the gnostic argument begs the question against the skeptic but not *vice versa*. In the case of this pair of arguments, however, it is clear that the demand to explain the disanalogy, if there is one, is justified.¹⁹ The demand in the case of the pair of arguments concerning religious experience is equally justified. Until some disanalogy is pointed out, the truth of P supports theistic conservatism no more than atheistic conservatism.

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NOTES

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902), p. 413.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 414.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
6. *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, 1978), p. 75.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
8. George Mavrodes, "Real v. Deceptive Mystical Experiences," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Steven T. Katz, ed. (Oxford, 1978), p. 256.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
11. "A Critique of Gutting's Argument from Religious Experience," in *Philosophy of Religion, An Anthology*, Louis J. Pojman, ed. (Belmont, 1987), p. 142.
12. For the remainder of the paper I assume that the sincerity of those who report religious experiences is not in question.
13. Frequently I write a sentence of the form, "S would be justified in believing that p if S were to believe that p," when the reader may anticipate and/or find more natural, "S is justified in believing that p." I use the more awkward subjunctive conditional only to avoid attributing the belief that p to S. For example, instead of writing, A) "Whoever hears the testimony of the mystic is justified in believing that God exists," I may write, B) "Whoever hears the testimony of the mystic would be justified in believing that God exists were he to believe this." A) is rather trivially false in that one might hear the testimony and not be justified in believing that God exists but only because he does not believe that God exists. B), since it attributes the belief that God exists to no one is not, at least for

the same reason, false. I do not mean to suggest by using the conditional that believing that *p* in some way contributes to the justification.

14. I say “*mutatis mutandis p*” to take account of the fact that the description of the belief may make reference to the believer. Thus, T’s belief that he is in the presence of God when *mutatis mutandis* believed by S is the belief that he, S, is in the presence of God.

15. There are those who would deny the intelligibility of “uninterpreted experience.” They see the interpretation as essential to the experience. The fact that I attribute the same experience to a sighted person and a blind person who has suddenly gained the capacity to see indicates that I am not assuming such a view here.

16. I argued above that because people differ in background beliefs and epistemic abilities the following principle is not true:

Q: If a given experience justifies one person in believing that *p* then it would justify anyone else who had it in believing that *p*.

R would be identical to Q were it not for the fact that R stipulates that U and V are alike in all epistemically relevant respects and thus that they do not differ in relevant background beliefs. Though the fact that Q is false deprived us of a way of arguing for P, its falsity did not cast doubt on P. I argue below, however, that if R were false, P would be false as well.

17. Those who have thought through the problem of evil may be able to reasonably claim that they have a reason, not possessed by those who report religious experiences, to deny that God exists. If so, they have independent grounds for denying the conclusion of the *modus ponens* argument. The argument fails because the third premise is seen as false. I ignore this complication in what follows.

18. See, for example, William P. Alston, “Perceiving God,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 83, no. 11 (Nov., 1986), pp. 655-65; and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 265-71.

19. Peter Unger [*Ignorance: A Case For Skepticism* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 25-27] is one who thinks there is a disanalogy and also attempts to justify the claim. My intuitions are different from his. I do not think that were I to discover that I was a brain in a vat or manipulated by an evil genius I would feel embarrassed or foolish for having claimed earlier to know what I typically do claim to know.