

# *The Argument from Religious Experience*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In recent analytic philosophy of religion, one hotly debated topic is the veridicality of religious experience. In this paper, I briefly trace how the argument from religious experience comes into prominence in the twentieth century. This is due to the able defense of this argument by Richard Swinburne, William Alston and Jerome Gellman among others. I explain the argument's intuitive force and why the stock objections to religious experience are not entirely convincing. I elaborate Swinburne's approach to epistemology (I call it the Critical Trust Approach, CTA), and applies it to religious experience, and theistic experience in particular. Then I argue for the following theses. First, the concept of theistic experience is coherent, and is a well-established type of experience, which deserves our prima facie trust. Second, the CTA's foundational principle, the Principle of Critical Trust, is basically correct, and the whole approach has a rational method to sift experiential claims. Third, many major objections to the argument from religious experience do not really succeed. I conclude that the argument from religious experiences is a reasonable argument which can provide significant justification for the belief in God.

One of the main concerns of natural theology is whether there are rational arguments for the existence of God. The argument from religious experience (hereafter ARE) contends that given the appropriate premises, we can derive from the religious experiences (abbreviated as REs) of humankind a significant degree of epistemic justification for the existence of God. In this paper, I will defend the ARE but I have no intention to argue that only a particular theistic tradition (such as Christianity) is correct here. My strategy will focus on a sub-class of RE, the experiences of God or theistic experience (TE), and argue that theistic experiences provide significant

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<sup>1</sup> I have used a significant part of my essay published in *Philosophy Compass* in this paper (Kwan, 2006b). I am grateful for the journal's permission of me to do that.

justification for the belief in God. I do not claim it is a conclusive argument but I think it is a reasonable argument which can contribute to the cumulative case for the existence of God.

Some clarification of terms is needed. By a *religious experience* I mean an experience which the subject takes to be an experience of God, or some supernatural being or state of affairs. (By "God" I roughly mean the supremely powerful, all-loving and personal ground of being.) Such an experience is *veridical* if what the subject took to be the object of his experience actually existed, was present, and caused him to have that experience in an appropriate way.<sup>2</sup> The claim that "S has an experience of God" does not entail "God exists." So the fact that religious experiences have happened does not prejudge the issue of the existence of God.

## **The Experiential Roots of Religion**

God is not just a hypothesis for the religiously devoted. He is a Living Reality who permeates all their lives. Religious experiences sometimes convey such a heightened sense of reality that the conviction they instill transforms the lives of the experiencers. Furthermore, religious experiences are often world-transforming as well- just contemplate the immense impact of people like Moses, St. Paul, Augustine, Wilberforce, etc. on Western civilization. Let me give some concrete cases of religious experience below.

### Cases of Theistic Experience

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<sup>2</sup> The last phrase is added to safeguard against the so-called deviant causal chains. This condition is hard to specify in details. The same problem occurs for the explication of the concept of veridical sensory perception (see Grice in Dancy, chapter III). It should also be noted that this is offered as a sufficient condition for veridicality and this may not be identical to its necessary condition.

### 1) The Story of Christiana Tsai: Queen of the Dark Chamber

Christiana Tsai was a Chinese lady who was born into a traditional Chinese society in the nineteenth century. She came from a Chinese family which was antagonistic towards Christianity but she was converted after such an experience: one day she was playing in the backyard, and she noticed a stone which looked very smooth on the surface. She turned it over by a stick and discovered that there was a big lizard and many bugs below the stone. Suddenly she heard a voice in her heart: “You are just like this stone, looking beautiful from the outside but full of evil inside!” She knelt down and prayed to God for forgiveness. Immediately she found peace and felt that the burden of sin on her was lifted. Since then, the world appeared to her as the Lord’s beautiful garden. She found a source of love in her heart, and felt that even the inanimate objects in the surroundings were singing praise to the Creator with her.

She shared the gospel with friends and relatives and many were converted as well. However, her mother was very resistant, and she was addicted to opium. One night, her mother had a vision of Jesus, appearing in front of her in His glory. After that, her mother was also converted, and found it easy to quit opium altogether. One time Tsai was struggling over a decision concerning her relationship with her boy friend. Suddenly she seemed to see Jesus in Gethsemane. She was filled with the Holy Spirit. She felt the pain of Christ and knew that Christ could also understand her pain. She decided to let go that relationship. Since then she felt that the love of the Lord had never left her, and her communion with Him became sweeter and sweeter. However, the most severe trial was still to come.

One day a strange disease suddenly started to inflict immense sufferings on her. Even light would make her feel like being stabbed by a knife. For many days she just couldn’t eat, move, speak or

open her eyes. Doctors said she would die soon. However, she saw a vision of a beautiful crown rising up to heaven one night, but a voice told her it was not yet the time. Then she started to recover. To cut the story short, although she survived the sickness, she had to stay in the dark chamber for the next twenty-four years, and tremendous pain still visited her. However, through such a long period and in darkness, she continued to feel strongly the love of God and the illumination of His light. She continued to have communion with God, and her life did show a kind of peace and joy which were almost palpable for her visitors. Many of them would say they could see God in her life.<sup>3</sup>

## 2) Experience of Chinese Christians under Persecution

Since the Communists have taken hold of China, many Chinese Christians were cruelly persecuted but many of them courageously held on to their faith even though sometimes just a verbal denial of faith would easily secure their release. One believer said, “I am a prisoner but my spirit cannot be imprisoned. I can freely have communion with the Lord from time to time... Although my hands are handcuffed, and my body feels indescribable pain, my heart is still filled with peace and joy” (Xi, p. 4). He was only released after twenty years in the labour camp but he continued to experience the presence of God and His abundant grace (Xi, p. 8). Another believer was arrested and brought before the crowd to receive criticisms. He felt like he was near the end of his life but suddenly he had a vision of Jesus bearing the cross and walking on the road to Calvary. Immediately he felt a kind of relief all over his body, and all fear was driven out of his heart. He was then able to face the fierce crowd calmly (Xi, p. 54). Many similar stories were told in the same book.

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<sup>3</sup> This story is told in Tsai (1953) and my account is extracted from the Chinese version of this book (Tsai, 2000).

### 3) Sheila's experience

“The One, losing nothing from itself, overflows.’... I simply saw that it was so... The only bodily symptoms were tears of joy... It seemed for a moment as though I stood ‘in the great hand of God’... Any distinction of subject and object, active and passive, noun and verb was lost... That it was not an hallucination is, however, the most abiding conviction that I have” (quoted in Wall, p. 47)

### 4) Mark's experience

This experience lasted over nine months: “The experience included a sublime consciousness of a personalized sustaining power which defies description. I recall wondering whether I had found God or had God found me. I was infinitely more concerned with and aware of people and my environment. Mental perception and originality of thought were heightened. Living reached undreamed of levels of sheer joy... I was at first surprised to discover little correlation between my experience and the Church's beliefs and behaviour” (quoted in Wall, p. 50).

### 5) Simone Weil's experience

“In moment of intense suffering, when I was forcing myself to feel love, but without desiring to give a name to that love, I felt, without in any way prepared for it (for I had never read the mystical writers) a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of any human being, though inaccessible to the senses and the imagination.” Weil remarks: “I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them” (quoted in Layman, p. 42)

## 6) Angelique's experience

Angelique is a psychiatrist. She writes, "as far back as I can remember I 'knew' of the existence of God. Whatever gradually developing sense I had of myself as an entity was accompanied by a sense of someone other, invisible and infinitely greater than any other 'person' and different to them, a kind of all-powerful, pervasive force within the world but far from being impersonal was loving and beneficent with a real interest in me... I never used any word for this person- after all I never needed to- but other people's use of the word 'God' or 'Creator' seemed to fit pretty well. I never saw or heard anything that I recall but the knowledge was as certain as the knowledge that other people continued to exist when they left the room... my parents were both agnostic and anti-church. I don't remember religion ever being a topic of conversation at home. Apart from a few flirtations with Sunday School I did not attend church until at 13 years old" (quoted in Wall, p. 77).

Angelique claims that the experiences "have the quality of being not only self-authenticating but being the ground or standard by which everything else in my subjective experience can be, and is judged. This phenomenon itself is not unknown in abnormal states of delusion and hallucination," which "invariably leads to progressive mental deterioration, pain, and eventually psychological and social disintegration, whereas the only objective test of spiritual experiences is that they show fruit in enhanced sensitivity and maturity, and lead to growth in all areas of the personality" (Wall, p. 78)

## 7) A Completely Surprising Religious Experience

"The experience itself is very difficult to describe. It took me completely by surprise. I was about to start shaving at the time, of all things. I felt that my soul was literally physically shifted-for

quite a number of seconds, perhaps 15 to 20 from the dark into the light. I saw my life, suddenly, as forming a pattern and felt that I had, suddenly, become acquainted with myself again...I must stress here that prior to this experience I used never to use the words such as "soul" or "salvation" or any such "religiously coloured" words. But in order to make even the slightest sense of what happened to me I find it imperative to use them" (quoted in Hay, 1994, p. 21)

#### 8) Experience of Design

"My mind suddenly started thinking about the beauty around me, and I considered the marvelous order and timing of the growth of each flower, herb and the abundance of all the visible growth going on around, I remember thinking "Here is mind."...For a few moments I really did feel at one with the Universe or the Creative Power we recognize.... I must have been confronted with the source of all being" (quoted in Hay, 1994, p. 23).

## The Argument from Religious Experience in the Twentieth Century

Earlier defenders of religious experience included both theologians and philosophers, e.g., Farmer, Frank, Waterhouse, Knudson. Some of them claimed that religious experiences provide immediate knowledge of God which was *self-authenticating*. However, philosophers tended to be critical of such claims (C. B. Martin, chapter 5; Flew, 1966, chapter 6). Keith Yandell (chapter 8), himself a defender of religious experience, was highly critical of this notion. No matter these criticisms were cogent or not, they were influential and accounted for the rise of a form of argument from religious experience which did not rely on claims to self-authentication.

C.D. Broad anticipated the contemporary ARE:

"The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical. We cannot *prove* that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them; but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not" (Broad, p. 197).

From the fifties to the seventies, able defenders of religious experience include A.C. Ewing, John Hick, H.D. Lewis, Elton Trueblood, John Baillie, Rem Edwards and H.P. Owen. However, at that time, verificationism, roughly the doctrine that only in principle verifiable sentences were

cognitively meaningful, was still influential and hence even the meaningfulness of religious language was in doubt. The situation by now is very different. First, verificationism is effectively dead. Second, starting from the end of 1970's, a number of analytic philosophers had produced increasingly sophisticated defence of religious experience. Richard Swinburne (1979, chapter 13) defended religious experience via his Principle of Credulity (hereafter PC), which said that it was rational to treat our experiences (including religious experience) as innocent until proven guilty. In other words, religious experiences were treated as prima facie evidence for the existence of God until there were reasons for doubting them. This attracted a lot of attention in philosophy of religion. There were of course many critics, e.g., William Rowe, Michael Martin, but Swinburne had also inspired the support of quite a few professional philosophers, e.g., Gary Gutting.

Many books were written on religious experience which basically followed Swinburne's line of reasoning: Davis (1989), Wall (1995) and Gellman (1997). Other philosophers also worked independently towards a similar conclusion, e.g., Wainwright and Yandell. One landmark of this debate is William Alston's *Perceiving God* (1991), which skillfully defended a doxastic practice approach to epistemology. This approach said that it was practically rational to trust our socially established doxastic practices, including the Christian Mystical Practice. His arguments were widely discussed and taken seriously in general.

Defenders of the ARE have made considerable progress in the twentieth century. When Swinburne first propounded his ARE via his Principle of Credulity in the late seventies, he was greeted with incredulity. At that time, the prevailing opinion among professional philosophers seemed to be that this kind of argument was hopeless and beyond the pale for respectable philosophers. So not even Mary Hesse, who was kind of sympathetic towards religion, could

stomach it at that time. In response to Swinburne, although she thought his paper was “tightly argued,” she could dismiss it in a few words: “such appeals to RE ... are not common nor intellectually persuasive nor even intelligible in the current secular climate” (Hesse, 1981, p. 288). Swinburne replied, “The suggestion that they are not common seems just false... The argument of my paper was that appeals to RE *ought* to be intellectually persuasive... As to the claim that appeals to RE are not intelligible- I can only suggest that he who finds them so should familiarize himself with the literature of religion in order to see what the appeals mean” (Swinburne, 1981, pp. 303-04). This is a bit amusing.

Nowadays, on the whole even critics among professional philosophers of religion treat it with some respect. It is now regularly treated in texts on philosophy of religion, and I think it is going to become one of the classical arguments for the existence of God. The old defenders continue to update their case (Gellman, 2001; Hick, 2006; Yandell, 1999), and it has also drawn new supporters (Garth Hallett; Stephen Layman; Grahame Miles; T. J. Mawson; Douglas Geivett). Of course, the ARE also have able detractors (Richard Gale; Matthew Bagger; Nicholas Everitt; James Harris), but I think even they will concede that their opponents are their epistemic peers. After all, Alston and Swinburne are active researchers in the field of epistemology (and related fields), and they can't be dismissed as amateur philosophers. No consensus exists yet but the ARE seems to be alive and well.

The ARE is also exciting and fascinating because it helps us rethink deep issues in epistemology. I think the contemporary defenders of ARE are exploring a new paradigm. There are also independent and consonant developments in the field of epistemology in recent decades. When Swinburne first boldly proposed his PC, it was quite novel and radical, and he did make

apparently shocking statements like “if it seems to me Poseidon exists, then it is good evidence that Poseidon exists.” True, it was similar to Chisholm’s critical common-sensism but few would imagine applying it directly to RE. At that time the deficiencies of traditional foundationalism have already been made apparent to many epistemologists but perhaps they were still hoping for a quick fix. Now they are more open to radically different epistemological frameworks. Epistemic principles like Swinburne’s PC have been accepted by diverse philosophers like Gary Gutting, William Lycan, Robert Audi, and Michael Huemer (but they do not entirely agree on its scope of application). Things like presumptive data and defeasible reasoning are now stock-in-trade of contemporary epistemologists. Moreover, they are exploring theories which resemble more or less Alston’s Doxastic Practice Approach, for example, Catherine Elgin’s (very) weak foundationalism, Susan Haack’s foundherentism, or Nicholas Rescher’s methodological pragmatism. This kind of epistemological development certainly enhances the initial plausibility of the ARE.

# **The Decline of Traditional Foundationalism and Stock Objections to Religious Experience**

Traditional foundationalists believe that our knowledge has to be built upon the *sole* foundation of sense experiences because only they are the indubitable given free from interpretations, and are open to public confirmation. Religious experiences, if they are to be trusted, have to be vindicated on the basis of this foundation- sense experience. Although the argument from religious experience has strong intuitive force for many people, for Western philosophers steeped in the tradition of empiricism, the trustworthiness of religious experiences is hard to swallow. In introductory books on philosophy, the ARE is usually dismissed on the basis of stock objections like the following:

1) **The Logical Gap Objection:** We have to distinguish the experience and the subjective conviction it produces from the objectivity (or **veridicality**) of the experience, e.g., a very "real" hallucination or dream is a live possibility. The critics such as Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (p. 72) admit that religious experiences often produce subjective certitude in the subjects. However, there is a logical gap between the psychological data and the ontological claim of the religious experiences. To bridge the gap, we need independent certification of the religious belief. For example, Flew challenges the defenders of religious experiences to answer this basic question:

"How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of religious experience, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective religious truths?" (Flew, 1966, p. 129).<sup>4</sup>

2) **The Theory-ladenness Objection:** The religious experiences are heavily (or even entirely) shaped by the conceptual framework of the experiencers. Hence they are not useful as evidence for ontological claims (Donovan, chapter 5). Indeed, a recent critic Graham Oppy thinks that since

“cases of revelation and selective ('private') religious experiences” are “rarely reported by those who are not already religious believers - or by those who are not embedded in a community in which there is considerable religious fervour, ... there are good reasons for non-believers to suspect that there is pollution by prior theory in these cases as well” (p. 350, note 4).

3) **The Privacy Objection:** According to Rem Edwards, "the foremost accusation leveled at the mystics is that mystical experiences are private, like hallucinations, illusions, and dreams, and that like these "nonveridical" experiences, religious experience is really of no noetic significance at all" (p. 318).

### Evaluation of the Logical Gap Objection

Many theists have provided reasonable responses to these objections. Firstly, we should note that the logical gap objection to religious experiences basically conforms to the structure of the general sceptical argument. This can be seen from Gutting's parody of Flew's question:

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<sup>4</sup> Although Flew has now become a kind of theist (Flew and Varghese, 2007), the ARE is not cited as the major reason for his conversion to theism (or better deism).

"How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of experiences of material objects, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective truths about material objects"? (p. 147).

The certitude/certainty distinction applies to almost all kinds of experience, including sense experience (hereafter SE). A hallucination is exactly an unveridical sense experience which nevertheless produces subjective conviction. If the certitude/ certainty distinction *in itself* threatens religious experiences, it will also threaten sense experience. Why, then, the logical gap is not damaging in other cases? If the critics only apply the objection to religious experiences but not to other experiences, it would be extremely arbitrary. This would also confirm Alston's charge that critics of religious experiences often adopt a double standard with regard to sense experiences:

"The objections ... involve unfavorable epistemic comparisons between mystical perception and sense perception; ... they either condemn the former for features it shares with the latter (double standard) or unwarrantedly require the former to exhibit features of the latter (imperialism)" (Alston, 1991, p. 255; a list of double standards is provided on pp. 249-50).

### Evaluation of the Theory-ladenness Objection

The Theory-ladenness Objection again raises a general problem in epistemology. Even ordinary perception is theory-laden (Papineau) and a similar problem plagues scientific realism. The empiricists and the positivists have searched hard for the rock-bottom "given" which is interpretation-free. In this way, it can be the neutral arbiter of different theories or interpretations.

However, the development of modern philosophy and especially contemporary philosophy of science bespeak the downfall of this project. All the major philosophers of science, e.g., Popper, Hanson, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, agree that all observations are to some extent theory-laden. For example, Nancy Cartwright writes:

"We can be mistaken about even the most mundane claims about sensible properties, and once these are called into question, their defense will rest on a complicated and sophisticated network of general claims about how sensations are caused, what kinds of things can go wrong in the process, and what kinds of things can and cannot be legitimately adduced as interferences" (p. 259).

Some author has also suggested modern psychology confirms the idea that interpretation "is absolutely essential to there occurring a perceptual experience at all.... We are not passive recipients of ready-made representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance for us" (Davis, p. 149). Ralph Baergen, after surveying the empirical study, concludes that the

"psychological evidence shows that the operation of the human visual system certainly is influenced by beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and so on. Moreover, "the processing involved is, to some extent, top-down... our beliefs, expectations, and so on influence our visual presentations, and not merely their interpretation" (Baergen, p. 16).

That means even our sensations are "polluted."

Now let us examine Oppy's claim that in the case of religious experiences, there is likely to be "pollution by prior theory." I think this allegation at least involves two claims. First, believers'

prior theory has significant influence on the content of their RE. Second, this influence tends to “pollute” the experience, rendering it unveridical. The former claim is not implausible in light of the above considerations. It is not likely that RE can be the sole exception to a general rule about our experiences. However, it is not clear whether the prior theory in fact totally constrains the content of their RE. If it is not the case, then at most we can say that the interpretation of RE is fallible, and cannot conclude that they are cognitively worthless. In fact, there is evidence that prior theory does not entirely determine the content of TE:

“many people have experiences which are highly individualistic ... some... feel the arms of God wrapped around them; others sense Jesus’ love gradually coming into their body from head to toe or from toe to head; ... many experience Jesus or God in ways not clearly derived from Scripture or from reports in the church or elsewhere... at one time they have a fairly standard experience of Jesus and at another have an Eastern form of experience (we may think of Joy, who first of all had a Nirvana-type experience, which then developed into an experience in which she felt herself to be a participant with Jesus on the cross, sensing the meaning of his death” (Wall, p. 302).

See also Cases 3, 4 and 7 above. Oppy really needs to adduce more real cases to support his sweeping claim.

The more important point is that the second does not follow from the first: the influence of a prior conceptual framework in experience is not necessarily cognitively debilitating. In fact, after pointing out the top-down way of processing in human visual system, Baergen goes on to say that it is “the top-down aspects of vision which allow us, for example, to recognize objects under poor viewing conditions or when only a small part of them is visible... certain

forms of agnosia arise when our knowledge about objects is prevented from influencing perceptual processing” (Baergen, p. 16).

In other words, in our common experience, prior theory, even built-in our visual system, does not necessarily pollute. It may aid our perception instead. (Of course, we cannot non-circularly prove this point. What is said above is said within the critical trust framework.)

Gwen Griffin-Dickson presses the question: “Does one say that the humiliation a rape victim feels in the attack is just ‘her interpretation’ of the event, distinct from the physical sensations, or is it an integral part of it?” (2005, p. 400). If it seems to be misleading, then the assumption that the less interpretation, the better is dubious. As the phenomena of agnosia in vision show, it is just as possible to miss the genuine significance of an experience through under-interpretation as it is through over-interpretation. Experience only becomes ‘knowledge’ when our basic experiences of the world are transformed by ‘quite elaborate theoretical interpretations’. Might this be true of mystical experiences as well? If we accept making such rich use of interpretative techniques in science, art and everyday life, is it fair to refuse the same toleration to religious experience? After all, the “commonsense *physical objects dispersed in space* conceptual scheme is inculcated in a thousand subtle and not so subtle ways in the course of socialization. Does this imply that we are not proceeding rationally in forming perceptual beliefs in the standard way?” (Griffith-Dickson, 2005, p. 402).

Perhaps the critic will still insist that this deprives RE of an independent evidential force. Namely, the interpretive elements of religious experience have to be independently supported before we can deem the experiences reliable. However, since sense experiences also have interpretive elements, "if we were always required to provide independent evidence that the beliefs in terms

of which we had unconsciously 'interpreted' a perceptual experience were probably true before we could take the perceptual experience to be probably veridical, we would be trapped in [scepticism]" (Davis, p. 144) If the critic is to avoid the charge of double standard, he needs to explain in what way this is a special problem for religious experiences.

So again the Theory-ladenness Objection *in itself* is not decisive. Perhaps to avoid scepticism, the wiser policy is to treat the incorporated interpretations in our experiences as *prima facie* justified. I call it the top-down approach. Furthermore, prior religious frameworks need not be corrupting; they may instead help to 'tune' people to perceive a reality that they would otherwise miss.

#### Evaluation of the Privacy Objection

Let us examine the Privacy Objection, the allegation that unlike sense experience, religious experience is private and subjective. In what sense is a sense experience public? My *experience* of a chair occurs essentially in my mind- it is every bit as private as other experiences in this aspect. I cannot directly experience how you experience the chair and vice versa. What makes a sense experience public is that verbal reports of different persons can be compared. However, reports of people having religious experiences can also be compared. For example, experiences of God are present in almost all ages, all places and all cultures. The reports to a considerable extent match. The experience also develops in a tradition. So in these aspects religious experience is also public. As Edwards emphasizes,

"the experience of the Holy seems to be very much *unlike* dreams and hallucinations. Extremely large numbers of people from extremely diverse cultural backgrounds claim to experience the Holy One, and there is a significant amount of transcultural agreement about what the experienced object is like. This is not the case with the objects of

hallucinations- most hallucinators do not see pink elephants... *Pink elephant* is simply a convenient symbolic abbreviation for the immense variety of weird entities encountered by people having hallucinations" (pp. 320-21).

### Vestiges of Traditional Foundationalism

The force of many stock objections to religious experience depends upon the traditional foundationalist framework. However, although "a narrowly empiricist and foundationalist position is rarely found now outside discussions of religious experience," the philosopher of religion comes up time and again against this outdated assumption (Davis, p. 143).

Unfortunately, what Davis says is still true of some recent discussions. For example, James Harris' severe critique of the ARE basically follows the foundationalists' line of attack. He thinks that when a subject S has a RE, "it is not reasonable to attribute to S the power of determining that x is God who is seeming to appear rather than a near-god, an intelligent alien from some distant galaxy, or Satan" (p. 153). However, it is also not clear that when S has a SE, it is reasonable to attribute to S the power of determining that x is a physical object which is seeming to appear rather than an alien super-scientist or Satan manipulating his brain/mind. *Ex hypothesi*, phenomenologically indistinguishable experiences can be produced by a physical object, an alien super-scientist or Satan. How can S determine which is the case on the basis of his experience alone? An appeal to further experiences will not help because similar problems plague those experiences as well.

Again, Harris insists that “S must make an inference from the experience of being appeared to by those properties or powers to the claim it is God doing the appearing” (p. 153). This betrays a lack of understanding of the severe problems afflicting even ordinary SEs, and the rationales for the PC. True, some philosophers do think that when S is having an experience of a tree (being appeared to treely), S must justify an inference from the experience of being appeared to treely to the claim it is a tree doing the appearing. However, it is notoriously difficult how any such inference can be justified. The spirit of PC contends that typically perceivers do not make such an inference, and they don’t need to. They are rational to trust their experience unless there are positive reasons to the contrary.

The decline of foundationalism does not mean an automatic victory for the argument from religious experience. However, the critics of religious experience should make sure their case is not based on problematic epistemological positions. Of course, the defenders also need to spell out and defend their epistemological framework. Swinburne has exactly attempted to do this.

# The Argument from Religious Experience via the Principle of Critical Trust

## Swinburne's ARE

Swinburne proposes a defence of religious experiences by espousing an epistemological principle that accord religious experiences with *prima facie justification* (hereafter PFJ). An experience has PFJ if the claims of the experience are probably true unless there are positive reasons to the contrary. The idea is that all experiences should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. Religious experiences should also be accorded PFJ then, i.e. the claims of religious experiences should be trusted unless counter-evidence can be brought forward. This epistemological principle is the Principle of Credulity:

(PC) If it seems (epistemically) to me that x is present on the basis of experience, then probably x is present unless there are special considerations to the contrary.

We need to understand Swinburne's distinction between "epistemic seeming" and "comparative seeming". For him, "to use 'looks', etc. in the comparative use is to compare the way an object looks with the way other objects normally look" (1979, p. 246). So a coin may look elliptical (comparatively) to me but on the basis of this experience I am inclined (more or less) strongly to believe that the coin is round. The latter is how it seems epistemically. When I describe my experience of a chair as an epistemic seeming that the chair is present, it does not mean I only hold tentatively to the judgment that there is a chair. On the contrary, it means that on the basis of my experience I am spontaneously and strongly inclined to believe that the chair is there.

Then Swinburne formulates the following argument:

- A) It seems (epistemically) to me that God is present.
- B) There is no good reason to think either God is non-existent or not present; nor any good reason to think the experience unveridical.
- C) Hence probably God is present.

The PC does not stand alone in Swinburne's epistemological approach. It has to be used together with other epistemological principles like the following:

- a) The Principle of Testimony: other things being equal, others' experiences are likely to be as they report them to be.
- b) The Principle of Simplicity: "in a given field, we take as most likely to be true the simplest theory which fits best with other theories of neighbouring fields to produce the simplest set of theories of the world" (Swinburne, 1986, pp. 13-15).

These principles are important. Swinburne's approach has to be distinguished from an "anything goes" approach. It is recognized that man's ability to know is far from perfect: his initial epistemic seemings are fallible. The hope lies in the ability of man to sift and correct these initial data. For example, an erroneous epistemic seeming can be corrected by other epistemic seemings by applying the Principle of Simplicity.

So Swinburne's approach includes a way to sift the data and establish an orderly noetic structure. I call this the Critical Trust Approach (**CTA**). The Principle of Credulity is renamed The Principle of Critical Trust (**PCT**). I am glad that my terminology is at least accepted by Hick: "The term 'the critical trust approach' has been introduced by Kai-man Kwan (2003), and I use it

in preference to the earlier ‘principle of credulity’... and my own ‘principle of rational credulity’” (Hick, 2006, p. 210).

Each version of PCT can be formulated variously in descriptive or normative terms, involving claims about probability, rationality or justification. I will mainly use the concept ‘justification’ in this paper. My basic contention is only that TE is also a basic source of justification (BSJ), and will eschew the controversy about knowledge. The concept of justification is also controversial and we have the great debate between internalism and externalism. I think the PCT is more at home within the framework of internalism which requires what justifies a belief to be internal to the subject *in some way*. I cannot settle the debate here. I suspect structurally similar AREs can be argued using different epistemological vocabularies.

### The Formulation of PCT

A PCT can be formulated in diverse ways. The PCT is supposed to be applied to epistemic seemings. Sometimes epistemic seemings are about necessary truths, and these are typically produced by rational intuitions. If we think that rational intuitions have PFJ, then we can say that the PCT is applicable to rational intuitions- we can represent this claim by PCT(intuition). The content of the bracket after “PCT” stands for the scope of that PCT. On the other hand, we also have epistemic seemings about the world, and they can be produced by intentional experiences (experiences of something external) and introspection as well as memory. These three are often recognized to be basic sources of justification for our epistemic seemings about contingent states of affairs in the actual world, e.g., about physical objects, one’s own mental states and the past. They have similarities but also a lot of dissimilarities and cannot all be subsumed under the category of

sense experience or even perception (unless in a very loose sense). However, they are all broadly speaking experiential sources of justification. I would call all these noetic experiences.

If PCT(noetic experience) is true, then noetic experience is a basic source of justification (BSJ). That would also entail that many kinds of RE (including TE) are also BSJ, possessing PFJ. Whether this is true is exactly the main controversy around the ARE. Defenders want to say that PCT(noetic experience) is true, but the critics either reject the entire Critical Trust Approach, or they want to restrict it to only SE or memory (some would also want to add introspection in the scope covered by the PCT but others, e.g., eliminativists, want to say that introspection is not a BSJ). If the scope of a PCT covers all epistemic seemings including intuitions, I'll call it the wider PC. In this paper, the default version propounded is the PCT(noetic experience).

Formulations of PCT can also vary according to the epistemic force it possesses. We can distinguish the following types:

#### Moderate PCT

If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that p on the basis of a noetic experience E, then S has prima facie justification for belief that p, which is sufficient for justified belief that p *simpliciter* in the absence of defeaters.

#### Weak PCT

If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that p on the basis of a noetic experience E, then S has *some* defeasible justification for his belief that p which is less than sufficient justification for justified belief that p *simpliciter*.

The moderate PCT is incompatible with the weak PCT. (I think strong forms of PCT which grant infallibility or incorrigibility to our epistemic seemings are on the whole implausible.) Swinburne's formulation of his PC, and Gellman (1997)'s formulation of PCT are moderate versions. In contrast, the formulation by William Lycan is a weak one: "Accept at the outset each of those things that seem to be true" (p. 165). However, the initial weight of those spontaneous beliefs are only minimal and they can be overridden by "almost anything: new input, noncoherence with other beliefs in a minimal way, slight explanatory advantage to be gained elsewhere, or whatever. The justification conferred on a spontaneous belief by the Principle of Credulity is flickering and feeble" (pp. 166-67).

Some defenders of ARE favor the weak form over the moderate form. For example, Gutting thinks that

"an of-**X** experience in general provides *prima facie* evidence of **X**'s existence only in the sense of supplying some (but not sufficient) support for the claim that **X** exists. For belief in the claim to be warranted, the solitary of-**X** experience requires supplementation by additional corroborating experiences. ... In cases of kinds of objects of which we have frequently had veridical experiences, we can of course rightly believe that they exist, without further corroboration beyond our seeming to see them. But this is because we have good inductive reason to expect that the further corroborations will be forthcoming. With relatively unfamiliar objects ... this sort of inductive reason is not available; and warranted assent must await further corroboration" (p. 149).

He gives an example of an experience of apparition. He suggests that even if we can't find cogent defeaters of this isolated experience, such an experience, though not completely without force,

still can't be deemed veridical. He then draws the conclusion that "we should think of an individual of-God experience as providing significant but not sufficient evidence for God's existence, needing to be included in a cumulative body of diverse evidence that can warrant the claim that God exists" (pp. 149-50). Several writers also have similar complaints, e.g. Michael Martin (1990, p. 175), Davis (pp. 101-5).

This suggests we can further distinguish a Token PCT which applies to every token experience<sup>5</sup>, and a Type PCT which applies to a *type* of experience. All the formulations of PCT above are Token PCTs. Now suppose the weak Token PCT is true but the moderate Token PCT is not. There is still the possibility that when a token coheres with many other tokens, i.e., it falls within a type of experience, then it can possess a degree of justification sufficient for PFJ. This idea will be captured by the Type PCT, which will be explicated below.

#### Argument for Theistic Experience via the Type PCT

The prior question is: by what principles do we group token noetic experiences together as one type? I suggest two main criteria:

- a) Phenomenology: what kinds of sensations or feelings are involved in this kind of experience?
- b) Ontology: what kinds of thing, process or property are typically supposed to be the objects of experience?

I think that the ontological criterion should take primacy over the phenomenological criterion.

For example, SE is the most clearly demarcated kind of experience. However if the

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<sup>5</sup> From now on, the word 'noetic' would usually be dropped and 'experience' would by default mean 'noetic experience'. So when I say "an experience is justified", it means "the truth of the epistemic seeming embodied in that noetic experience is justified".

phenomenological criterion is primary, SE is not actually one type but a collection of many types: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, etc. It seems better to see SE as an epistemological unit and its unity is explained by the common ontology shared by all these experiences: they all have physical objects as objects of experience. So according to this understanding, SE should be taken to be an experience of a physical thing or event. Sensations or sense data would come in as the *qualitative character* of SE.<sup>6</sup>

Type PCT:

If it seems (epistemically) to S that p on the basis of a noetic experience E, and E belongs to a well-established type of experience, then S has *prima facie* justification for belief that p, which is sufficient for justified belief that p *simpliciter* in the absence of defeaters.

When we can identify an experience as belonging to a well-established type, this means:

- a) **Shared Experiences:** This experience is not altogether idiosyncratic. Similar experience occurs repeatedly and is shared by a substantial amount of people, preferably across cultures and eras.
- b) **Common Ontology:** The tokens of the type have to largely cohere with one another before they can be grouped into a kind. Namely, the group of tokens does not have massive internal contradictions. They also need to share a common ontology such that different tokens can be

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<sup>6</sup> Everitt writes, “MP [mystical practice] is supposed to be a practice directed at mind-independent entities - but so is SP [sensory practice]. Why then count MP as a separate practice? Surely MP should be classed as simply one branch of SP, analogous to VP (visual perception practice), AP (auditory perception practice), etc” (p. 168). In the main text, I have given some reasons why I would not agree with Everitt’s classification, which is not even common among atheistic critics. His major purpose seems to be that by subsuming MP under SP, he can deny the relative autonomy of MP’s checking process, and so on.

mapped onto that ontology, exhibiting different sorts of epistemic relation among themselves (e.g., mutual support, explanatory dependence).

c) **Conceptual Coherence:** To enable mutual communication of the experiences, which is the prerequisite of our identification of a type of non-solipsistic experience, the experiences have to be *to some extent* describable. It also requires a conceptual framework which is not obviously incoherent.

The degree of prima facie justification provided by a type of experience is also a variable because the degree to which each type is established is different. When a type of experience exhibits a significant degree of intra-coherence, I would call it a well-established type. The factors contributing to the degree of *intra-coherence* of a type of experience are summarized below:

#### The Criteria of Intra-coherence

The degree of intra-coherence of a type of experience E would increase with the following factors, *ceteris paribus*:

- a) the number of people sharing E,
- b) the frequency of occurrence of E to an individual,
- c) the variability of the situations in which E occurs,
- d) the explanatory coherence between the tokens of E, and
- e) the conceptual coherence of E's ontological framework.

We can now formulate the following argument for theistic experience:

A) Type PCT is correct.

B) Theistic experience is a well-established type of experience.

C) It seems (epistemically) to S that God exists on the basis of a TE, E.

D) The theistic experience, E, is not defeated.

Therefore,

E) S is justified to believe that God exists.

The argument seems valid. Premise (C) just states the fact of TEs and should not be controversial. If premise (B) is also correct, then the conditions in the antecedent clause of Type PCT (applying to the case at hand) are satisfied. So if Type PCT is correct (premise A), then it follows that S has prima facie justification for belief in God. Further grant the truth of premise (D), then it means S is not faced with defeaters. It follows that S's belief in God is sufficiently justified. The crucial premises are (B), (A) and (D), which will be defended in that order.

The ARE can be defended via different routes, and some authors defend ARE on the basis of an analogy with SE. However, although Swinburne and Alston do appeal to considerations of analogy to illustrate and strengthen their arguments, they are in fact proposing a kind of ARE on the basis of first principles in epistemology. The argument I defend is of this type.

## Religious Experience and Theistic Experience

### The Phenomenon and Typology of Religious Experience

Since time immemorial, human beings as we know it are already religious. Throughout all periods of human history, and in all of the major cultures or societies, there have been a great many reports of a great variety of REs. The evidence for this claim can be garnered from the entire corpus of the religious literature in human history, which is evidently too voluminous to be summarized here. I trust that numerous basic texts on religious studies would substantiate this claim.

The experience of God is not confined to Westerners. A kind of God was known to the ancient Chinese. The most common Chinese translations of the word “God” are Shang-ti (上帝), which means “the Emperor above,” and the Lord of Tien (which means Heaven) (天主). Both Shang-ti and Tien are not terms created by the missionaries. They are in fact widely used in the ancient Chinese classics, and point to the belief in a kind of personal God. The name Shang-ti has already appeared in the oracle bones, and it stands for the Supreme Lord of the universe.

In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius said, “By the ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth they served Shang-ti.” In the *Book of Poetry*, there is a Hymn of Zhou (《周頌》) which praised Shang-ti, “Lord Wu with mighty power, Above all else will tower, Cheng the lord and Kang lord, Shang-ti likewise will laud.” Another poem said, “A good crop of barley and wheat, Will soon be ready to reap, Oh by Glorious Shang-ti blest.”

Shang-ti is One who can receive sacrifice, One who can bless. He is also One whom we should serve. Shang-ti or Tien (Heaven) cannot just mean the physical nature or some impersonal force because He was regarded as a fearful God who had a moral will. Besides being the source of judgment, Shang-ti is also the source of goodness or happiness: “The great emperor of heaven grants happiness (or goodness) to the people below. The one who can follow the human nature of the people and make the people follow the instruction single-heartedly is not other but the sovereign.”

So a contemporary Chinese scholar, He Guang-hu, thinks that the above view of Shang-ti and Heaven is the root of Confucianism, which believes in a personal God who is the Maker of the world and humankind, who is powerful, righteous, loving and willing to communicate with human beings. So Chinese also have experiences of God though the theistic tradition cannot be said to be very strong (Kwan and Han, 2007).

REs can be further divided into the following types:

- A) Theistic experience: a noetic experience whose intentional object is God, the personal and supremely perfect creator of the world.
- B) Ecstasy and peak experience (Abraham Maslow)
- C) Encounter of the Light Being in a near-death experience (Moody)
- D) Experience of evil spirit (Hay, 1990, p. 49), angels or departed saints
- E) Experience of contingency - a spontaneous feeling that the world is not ultimate and is somehow dependent on something beyond.
- F) Experience of design- experience of being struck by the beauty and intricacy of the natural order and the feeling that this order is ultimately due to Intelligence or Mind

G) Nature mysticism or cosmic consciousness: a spontaneous feeling that the universe and oneself are one. It is usually induced by contemplation of nature but a similar experience can also be induced by drugs, e.g. mescaline.

H) Pure consciousness event (PCE): a pure state of consciousness without *any* intentional object and uncontaminated by any concept. This event should be distinguished from the monistic mystical experience which may include a PCE as a part.

I) Experience of minor deities: e.g., visions of Kali or Buddha or Apollo.

J) Monistic mysticism, e.g. the intuitive apprehension that Atman is Brahman and that All is One.

K) Experience of Nirvana: experience of Nothingness or No-self as the Ultimate.

### Religious Experience and Theistic Experience in Contemporary World

According to the secularization theory, the decline (and perhaps ultimate demise) of religion is inevitable as a result of the process of modernization. For the secularists, RE is just a vestige of pre-modern civilization, society and worldview. Since religion no longer plays any essential role in modern society, and the religious worldview has been largely discredited or at least thrown in doubt by modern science and knowledge, it stands to reason that the phenomenon of RE will also fade out in the long run.

Though I have doubts about the secularization theory (Kwan, 2001), the secularists are correct to point out that modern life is hardly supportive of religious life and RE. In fact, Hay points out that the “contemporary culture ...is uncertain about religion. Ambivalence about religion and the question of whether it is an illness ... appears to have been part of the European consciousness for a long time... Repeated findings of modern research into religious experience” have testified

to “a shyness or "taboo" on admitting to religious experience.” Many “respondents said they had never told anyone else about their experience, even relatives as close as their husbands or wives” for “fear of being thought mentally unbalanced, or ... stupid” (Hay, 1994, pp. 10-11).

In such a kind of inhibitive culture, it is indeed extremely surprising how religious faith and RE have held up quite well. According to Schaffer and Lamm (1995, p. 393), the distribution of religious faith is as follows:

religion	Percentage of total population
none	16
Christianity	34
Islam	18
Hinduism	13
Buddhism	6
Other religions	13

Religious believers are still the overwhelming majority of the world’s population (84%), while non-religious people are the minority (16%). It is certainly true that many ‘believers’ counted here are not much more than nominal believers. However, it is reasonable to believe that a substantial portion of the religious people have had some form of RE (past studies of RE show that people who do not profess to any religion sometimes have RE). Note that Christians and Muslims together constitute 52% of the population, and the dominant form of RE in these theistic traditions is certainly TE. Hindus and Buddhists together amount to 19% of the population.

However, we cannot conclude that the major form of their RE has to be monistic. In fact, the Advaita is just one among many schools in Hinduism, and there are theistic and panentheistic traditions in Hinduism (Madvha and Ramanuja). More to the point, many ordinary Hindus are not enthusiastic about the abstruse theory of monism, and their religious life in fact also consists of the worship of God or deities (bhakti).

We have some quantitative data about the situation in the Western world. For example, the “BBC's 'Soul of Britain' survey in 2000 found that 76 per cent of the population ... had some kind of spiritual experience” (Hick, 2006, p. 17). The category of spiritual experience is considerably broader but other statistics show that the proportion of people having RE (largely theistic) is not low:

“In the United States a 1975 National Opinion Research Center inquiry in which people were asked 'Have you ever felt as though you were close to a spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?' found that 35 per cent of those asked said that they had, and a Princeton Research Center ... survey in 1978 also recorded 35 per cent. In Britain at the same time a National Opinion Poll of a sample of 2000 reported 36 per cent” (Hick, 2006, p. 35).

The real proportion may be higher because of the taboo factor I have mentioned. The above results were obtained with the more impersonal method of a poll. Hay and Morisy find out that when they interview people and try to build up mutual trust and let them take time to recall, the positive response rate rises dramatically to 62-67 per cent (Hay, 1994, p. 11).

Quantitative data about TE in other countries are not available. But Christianity is nowadays truly a world religion, and there are a large number of Christians in every continent. For example, there are at least, say, thirty to forty million Chinese Christians. I know from my own experience (treated as a kind of informal sampling) that a significant proportion of them have TEs, some of them quite a lot and quite dramatic (see Cases 1 and 2). I cannot offer any exact figure, but no one can deny that many Christians living in very diverse places in the contemporary world, perhaps running up to hundreds of million, have had at least one TE. If we factor in the experiences of Muslims and people in other theistic traditions, and TEs even in cultures not particularly theistic (e.g., the Chinese culture), the figure will be even more impressive.<sup>7</sup> In short, TE indeed has a broad base across cultures, eras and even religious traditions.

Some critics charge that TE is a kind of odd experience (Vardy, p. 103; Draper, p. 159), and hence it should be subjected to initial skepticism. However, it seems wrongheaded to label a kind of experience shared by at least tens of million of people odd. Again Hay has got it right:

“post-Enlightenment, secular models of reality have come to dominate contemporary understanding,” and this leads to “a failure on the part of many scientists to attend seriously to the phenomenology of religious experience. This has produced a distorted understanding and dismissal of what appears to be a *widespread and normal field of human experience*” (1994, p. 1; italics mine).

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<sup>7</sup> For some people in a more specific theistic tradition, e.g. Christianity, they may want to dismiss the theistic experiences in other traditions in toto. The CTA I adopt does not advise us to do that, and I don't think a Christian theist need to do that. He can appeal to the concept of general revelation or common grace in the Christian tradition. I submit indeed it is plausible to think that God can be experienced in different cultures (e.g., the Chinese culture) at least as the Creator, Supreme Being in the universe or just a very powerful divine being. Moreover, we are only talking about the PFJ here. That we shouldn't dismiss the TEs in other traditions or cultures from the very beginning does not entail that we will accept all of them as veridical in the end. Especially in this paper I mainly want to defend a less specific sub-type of TE such as the sense of presence of God, and the awareness of the transcendent being implicit in different forms of TE.

## Typology of Theistic Experience

### 1) Numinous Experience

Otto's description of the numinous is still a good one: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Yandell spells it out in this way: the subject "seems to experience an awesome ... majestic and overpowering being and the subject ... has a feeling of being a creature in the presence of the creator... the subject seems to experience a being who is unique in kind and intensely alive " (1984, pp. 9-10).

### 2) Theistic Mysticism

Whereas in a numinous experience God is felt to be other than the subject, in theistic mysticism, God is experienced in a union of the soul with God. God is searched from within in this type of love mysticism, e.g., Teresa of Avila (Pike).

### 3) Sense of Presence of God

It is the more commonplace intuitive awareness of God. This awareness is often fused with a feeling of calm assurance and peace (Baillie, Beardsworth). Whereas extraordinary types of TE usually last for a relatively short duration, it is possible for some to maintain the sense of presence of God for a relatively long period (Brother Lawrence).

### 4) Divine-human Encounter

In this type of TE, God is experienced as the Eternal Thou. Farmer has laid his fingers on the crucial features: "First, central in the living awareness of God as personal is something which

happens ... in the sphere of the *will*. The religious man is aware of a certain peculiar type of resistance... the resistance, namely, of absolute, sacred, unconditional values" (1935, p. 23). Second, there is also the awareness of God as the "final succour. ... The unconditional demands, the values of God, are apprehended as pointing the way to the highest self-realisation, the final security of man" (p. 25). These experiences of encounter are fused with characteristic emotions which accompany personal interaction, e.g. warmth, gratitude, joy of communication, sense of being personally addressed.

#### 5) Experience of Grace

Awareness of God's unconditional demands may also occasion awareness of one's moral failings as 'sinning against God' and awareness of one's moral impotence as 'spiritual death'. This may also open up the possibility of experiencing divine forgiveness of sin and renewal of moral personality through reconciliation with God. Characteristic emotions are sense of guilt, peace of forgiveness and joy of liberation.

#### 6) Experience of Personal Growth in God

We should also note the personalizing character of some TEs (Cases 6, 7). A person who experiences God may also experiences personal growth at the same time: heightened sensitivity to people and moral values, a revitalized conscience, a greater concern for people and willingness to sacrifice and so on. In a word, he finds himself becoming more like an (integrated) person and his *telos* fulfilled in his life in God.

#### 7) Baptism in the Spirit

It is "an overwhelming sense of being set free from sinful selfishness ... deep interior peace. ... the gift of tongues " (Dorr, 1978, p. 40). There are a lot of these nowadays since the charismatics constitute one of the fastest growing groups in contemporary world.

#### 8) Conversion

The content of a conversion experience actually overlaps with the above types of TEs and it is only marked out by the dramatic and sudden change that is caused by the experience. There may be a drastic change in personality, beliefs and direction of life.

#### 9) Corporate TE

Many TEs occur in the context of the 'flight of the alone to the Alone'. However, in Christianity the corporate nature of these experiences is always emphasized:

"after Pentecost, the Spirit descends on the disciples. ... then it is said that the disciples were all "of one heart and soul". ... So the descent of the Spirit forms the community and the community is such that in it everything is shared, even at the economic level" (Griffiths, 1989, p. 223).

So experience of God and experience of community are often inseparable and I would call this kind of TE a corporate TE. To different degrees, I think a religious community in corporate worship and prayer (sometimes) is having similar experiences.

#### 10) Mediated TE

Sometimes a person can have a TE which is mediated by other kinds of experience, e.g. experiences of nature, art, conscience, fellowship with others, saintliness of others. Sometimes the subject has focal awareness of God through subsidiary awareness of something else, e.g.

awareness of God through awareness of the beauty of nature. At other times the awareness of God may just be present in the background while the person is focally aware of some other thing. We then have an oblique perception of God instead.

#### 11) Sensory TE

A sensory TE is an experience of God which is mediated by sensory experiences, e.g. visions, auditions, dreams, stigmata.

#### 12) Interpretive TE

It is a spontaneous interpretation of an event as God's action or message but the event can be clearly described without using religious concepts. Experiences of God through answered prayers, guidance, miracles, healing, tongues, etc. are examples of interpretive TE.

#### 13) Intuitive Apprehension of God

All the above types are more or less mediated by some feelings but some mystics also report a non-sensory awareness or intellectual vision of God in which all phenomenal content is absent. I call this an intuitive apprehension.

### Theistic Experiences within a Common Ontology

All the above kinds of TE are actually experienced by believers. It is foolish to elevate a certain kind of TE to the exclusion of other kinds. God's relations to the world and to man are so multi-faceted that it is unreasonable to think there is only one way to approach Him. Consider an experience of drinking a cup of coffee which is actually consisted of visual, olfactory, tactile and

gustatory experiences of the coffee. Considered in themselves, the smell of coffee and the visual sensations of a brown liquid are as diverse as any two things can be. Yet they are connected as modalities of the same SE of the same object. Similarly God can be approached in many directions and manifested in diverse ways; yet the whole lot can be coherently explained by the categorial nature of the same God:

a) Since God is the transcendent and holy creator, numinous experience and experience of contingency are to be expected.

b) If man is created in the image of God and their selves are ultimately grounded in God's sustaining activity, then God can also be approached from within (Theistic mysticism).

c) Since God is Himself the Absolute Good, it is no surprise to have experiences of His unconditional imperative as well as love and succour, and also mediated TEs through conscience and morality.

d) Since God is personal, we can have experiences of personal encounter, divine speech, emotional healing and so on.

e) God's wisdom and power over nature makes it possible for Him to reveal His purposes through providential and miraculous acts (mediated and interpretive TE).

f) God as the source of personality and community nicely explains the personalizing character of TEs and the occurrence of corporate TEs.

g) God as Redeemer is correlated with our experiences of grace and conversion.

h) God can act directly on the mind and hence intuitive apprehension is possible.

So the experience of God is marked by a rich diversity in unity. Arguably, this pattern is already there in the Biblical portrayal of the divine interaction with man. For example, the Old Testament scholar Rowley says,

"His voice is still heard in Nature and in history, in individual experience and in the personality of men and women who are attuned to his spirit ... Of greater significance than any of these separately, however, is that combination of factors dovetailing into one another " (p. 47).

In the New Testament, Paul talks about a God who is above us, inside us, and among us (Ephesians). These descriptions can be nicely correlated with numinous experience, mystical or oblique experience of God, and corporate TE. Paul's own experience of God reflects the same rich diversity in unity: a conversion experience, experience of grace and self-transformation, experiences of providence and miracles and probably some mystical experience (see 2 Corinthians 5).

The same intricate pattern of experience of God is also reported by persons in contemporary secular society. Consider Jackie Pullinger's experience of God. She experienced God's calling to serve Him and finally she settled down inside the Walled City of Hong Kong, trying to preach the gospel to the drug addicts, Triad gangsters, and the prostitutes. Now it is still an expanding ministry. Her story consists of many 'inner' and 'private' experiences of God, and experiences of guidance, providence, comfort and illumination which result in practical actions of social concern. She herself undergoes self-transformation while many drug addicts experience conversion. There are also many experiences of tongues, healing, and miracles. Above all, all

these experiences fit nicely together in her lifelong experience of God which manifests beauty and an overarching purpose.

It is really important to keep sight of the *whole* of this evidential base. All these experiences are of God and the various types are to be expected once the nature of God is given. So they are not like the links in a chain which is as weak as the weakest link. Instead, they are like the strands which are woven into a cable. The full evidential force of TE can only be seen when the rich diversity and coherence of TEs are simultaneously recognized.

## Conceptual Coherence of Theistic Experience

To be a well-established type of experience, the concept of TE needs to be conceptually coherent. Assuming the coherence of the concept of God, TE can still be incoherent because experience of God can be shown to be impossible. Several reasons have been adduced for this claim: Jonathan Harrison rejected TE “partly on the grounds that one cannot have immediate experience of dispositional characteristics, partly on the grounds that we can have immediate experience only of the contents of our own mind” (pp. 257-58). Forgie takes ‘theistic experience’ to mean “an experience which is phenomenologically of God, i.e. an experience which, if veridical, would *have to* constitute an accurate perception of God and *nothing else instead*” (Forgie, 1998, p. 317; italics mine). But no experience can be phenomenologically of God. So TE is impossible. Some other critics put the emphasis on the alleged impossibility to recognize the infinite attributes of God in experience (Davies).<sup>8</sup>

Initially, it sounds plausible to think it rather problematic to say the finite can experience the infinite, or the transcendent can be wholly given in the immanent. Simply put, God is just too big for humans to experience. However, puzzles immediately arise when we realize similar questions can be raised about the possibility of seeing a physical object. We think we can see the Yellow River or the Great Wall of China but isn’t it equally obvious that the Yellow River or the Great Wall are also too big for humans to see? I can see a physical object, and a physical object is essentially a 3-dimensional object, having a front and a back, which cannot be given in our visual experience at the same time. So can I really see the object? Moreover, suppose Kripke is right

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<sup>8</sup> Everitt also thinks that God “is not even a possible object of sensory experience” (p. 172). I think his objection basically hinges on a kind of favouritism towards SE which is widely criticized in this paper.

that water is essentially H<sub>2</sub>O. Then we need to ask: when we see water, how can the property of being H<sub>2</sub>O be given in our experience?

The basic problem about these kinds of questions about experience of God or physical objects is that they have presupposed this requirement:

For S to have an experience of an object O having an attribute F, either the whole being of O (or at least O's essential properties) has to be *given* in the experience, or that an infallible indicator of the state of affairs (O is F) is present (and perceived as such) in the experience.

Similar requirements like the above are in fact made by the traditional foundationalists. If experience is our only access to the external world, once we allow a gap between the experience and the world, how then can we guarantee the possibility of empirical knowledge? However, the lessons of epistemology in recent decades tell us that these requirements simply cannot be met even in our SE.

Consider our visual experience of water. What are given in the experience are two kinds of content: the propositional content of our epistemic seeming ("there is water over there"), and the non-conceptual content which can be described in various ways: being appeared to water-ly, this and that kind of qualia or sense data. The direct realists also contend that, when the experience is veridical, there is the direct awareness of water in virtue of water appearing to us. Water as a physical object cannot be in any literal sense be given in our experience, which is a mental event. Indeed this is a good ground for raising the question whether any experience of a physical object

is possible. This worry is further aggravated by the realization that the concept of a physical object is the concept of something which can exist independent of all our experiences- how can this property be given in our experience? This ability to exist independently is also a dispositional property. How can we perceive that? What features of our experience tell us that physical objects can do that? More experiences only tell us those objects can *continue to be perceived and experienced*, and it does not entail that they can exist *independently* of our stream of experience.

Contemporary understanding of physical objects further complicates the matters. For example, Russell thinks that “if physics is true there must be so little resemblance between our percepts and their external causes that it is difficult to see how, from percepts, we can acquire a knowledge of external objects” (p. 213). Since the “table as a physical object, consisting of electrons, positrons, and neutrons, lies outside my experience” (p. 236), “I do not “see” the furniture in my room except in a Pickwickian sense. When I am said to “see” a table, what really happens is that I have a complex sensation which is, in certain respects, similar in structure to the physical table. The physical table, consisting of electrons, positrons, and neutrons, is inferred” (pp. 237-238).

The problem then arises: if the physical table is inferred, then how do we justify this inference? The sensations certainly are not infallible indicators of the presence of the table. Even the alleged direct awareness of the table can be faked. As Alston admits “the intrinsic indistinguishability of hallucinations and the real thing,” he has to concede that “even if hallucinations do not prove that perceptual experience is never a direct awareness of external objects, they certainly prove that it isn't always that” (1999, p. 238). Of course the propositional content of our experience can also be mistaken.

At this point, I think it is pertinent to ask what kind of approach we should adopt in relation to these questions. I suggest we cannot decide what capacities for experience and recognition are possible in an *a priori* manner. Instead it is more fruitful to look and see what are the actual experiences people claim to have and what sort of things they claim to recognize. If a concept of experience renders most of our actual experiences impossible, then what needs to be changed perhaps is the concept itself. In this spirit, I would suggest there is no need to insist on too strong a connection between experience and its object. As long as the appearance of a transparent colorless liquid reliably indicates the presence of water (H<sub>2</sub>O) *in our context*, and the water causes in an appropriate way our visual experience, then we can see water (H<sub>2</sub>O). Our experiences are fallible and its reliability cannot be guaranteed. Suppose unknowingly we have been transported to Putnam's Twin Earth. The appearance of water may then be misleading but this does not mean that here on Earth we cannot see water. The above analysis is used to explicate the *concept* of "experience of something." I do not suppose it can be proved apart from our actual experiences.

It follows that when we have an experience of O, we do not need to require that O's essential properties, be given in the experience. Schoen argues that encountering maples does not require any knowledge, perception or even detection of the essential nature of maples, which

"presumably ... are tied somehow to matters of genetics... If perceived or detected objects are to be recognized as maples, reliable indicators must be processed more specifically. Such indicators... need bear no special relation to essences... Furthermore, it is not necessary that everyone use the same indicators" (p. 9).

In this way, experiences of the Yellow River, the Great Wall, or a 3-dimensional object, are no longer puzzling.<sup>9</sup>

We can now come back to the question about the possibility of the experience of God. Forgie's concept of TE is certainly too strong. As he admits, his concept will render impossible SEs which are phenomenologically of individuals, or many ordinary objects like a coffee maker. He also admits his concept of the phenomenological content of experience is not the only possible one, and that "on ...an alternative account theistic experience would thus be possible" (Forgie, 1998, p. 323). I have offered an alternative account above which is also similar to Layman's account: "one can have a reliable experience of God without experiencing all of God's features (though of course the experience must include reliable indicators of a divine presence, such as infinite power and goodness)" (Layman, p. 54).

Similarly, Harrison's objection depends on a very narrow understanding of experience. The concept of a physical object entails a lot of dispositional characteristics. Take the experience of color as example:

"In reporting that I saw a red flower, I am normally reporting that I had a visual experience of a physical object having certain powers or dispositions, i.e. that under normal lighting, normal perceivers (in general) would also see something red if they looked at the flower... And of course, being very powerful...is a power or capacity. So, at least in principle, a direct awareness of an entity as very powerful-or even almighty-seems to be possible" (Layman, p. 54).

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<sup>9</sup> Even a critic of theism, Everitt, agrees here (p. 173).

We can also use this model to understand how the content of a TE can convey the presence of God: “God might have created us in such a way that when He appears to us what appears to us phenomenologically is secondary qualities of God which emerge when God is so experienced” (Gellman, 1994, p. 55). These secondary qualities may consist of some unique phenomenal properties of the appearance of God such as the “taste” of God that some mystics have reported. Our feelings and emotions can also be used as indicators of divine presence:

“our own subjective, emotional reactions figure into our recognition of certain types of features. Sometimes upon meeting a person we regard him as less than trustworthy primarily because he invokes in us a feeling of uneasiness. In this type of case, our subjective, emotional reactions serve (in combination with presentations made through sense experience) as indicators of certain types of qualities, and these indicators are very important in dealing with social realities ... in the theistic mystical experiences...subjects were presented with personal presence, and they had an immediate impression of its infinite power and goodness. Their subjective, emotional reactions were of profound awe, of feeling very “small” or finite, of being loved, of extraordinary peace, and so on. All in all, I think that’s what one might expect an experience of God to be like” (Layman, p. 54).

For example, consider the experience of God’s infinite love. According to Harrison, it is both a disposition as well as a mental state of other minds, and hence cannot be presented in immediate experience. However, making use of the above model, there can be an awareness of the love of God mediated by feelings of feelings of warmth and bliss- feelings which are analogous with what we feel in our interpersonal experience.<sup>10</sup> *Pace* Harrison, when we attend to our concrete

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<sup>10</sup> I think epistemologists are still bound by a narrow understanding of human knowing, and underestimate the cognitive role of emotions in human life. Wynn’s recent book (2005) defends the thesis that “emotional feelings can function as modes of value perception- in relation to God, the world, and individual human beings... they can also

experiences, there is reason to believe we can feel the love, joy, sadness or other mental states of other persons.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, we can be told by God about His love. Philosophers sometimes ignore the communication model because they are obsessed with the visual model. However, the former model is especially important in interpersonal experience: a lot of experiences of other minds are mediated by verbal and informal communication (e.g., symbolic acts)- say, God can give us a vision of the Cross of Jesus and impress on our mind or tells us by a “voice” the meaning of this event. Something like this has in fact happened to many believers (Case 2).

Since it is an empirical fact that an awful lot of people seem to have experiences of God, in the absence of a good reason to think otherwise, one should conclude that theistic experiences are indeed possible.

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function as ‘paradigms’, and can therefore properly direct the development of our discursive understanding, in religious and other contexts ...” (2005, p. xi). He explicitly applies this understanding to TE, and argues that even a TE’s phenomenal content is purely affective, this will not necessarily be epistemically dubious (pp. 8ff).

<sup>11</sup> Hallett has a good defense of this possibility, and use this as analogy for TE.

## **Intra-coherence of Theistic Experience**

Of course, mere possibility is not sufficient. We need to judge whether TEs deserve PFJ by the Criteria of Intra-coherence formulated above. As for clauses (a), (b), and (c) in that criteria, we have noted that many people in almost every age, culture, and in many religions seem to have at least some plainer TE like the sense of presence of God. Even nowadays in some countries the majority has some TEs. In other countries, TEs are at least shared and communicated to one another within theistic communities which are significant minorities in the society. So conditions (a) and (c) are certainly satisfied.

For many persons who have had TEs, they may have just a few of them. However, we have also mentioned the dramatic experiences of God which quite a number of individuals (e.g., Christiana Tsai, Jackie Pullinger) have throughout their lives, and many more somewhat in the middle of these two groups. So condition (b) is reasonably satisfied for many, and eminently satisfied for a smaller number. I have also argued for the explanatory coherence between the TEs, and the conceptual coherence of TE. If my arguments are correct, conditions (d) and (e) are also satisfied. So barring the demonstration of conceptual incoherence of theism itself, we can conclude that TE is a relatively well-established type of experience.

The critics may argue that our criterion of intra-coherence of a type of experience has too low a requirement. For example, theistic experiences still fall short of being universal, and are much less frequent to many people than other established types of experience like SE or memory. However, the critics' requirements are too stringent here. First, universality among human beings is certainly not a necessary condition for PFJ. Obviously a kind of experience shared just by a

minority of people can nevertheless still be veridical. Actually not all people can see or hear. Conceivably a nuclear war can happen which causes all but one to be blind. Furthermore, many are tone-deaf. It seems to be quite clear that even if much fewer people share the sense experiences we have, they are still at least prima facie justified for us.

If we count all the people in the whole history, people having TE may outnumber those who haven't. Moreover, in view of the fact that TEs occur to many diverse kinds of person, it is not implausible to say that the capacity for TE is at least potentially universal. If it is true, the contingent fact that TEs are not actually universal is not that damaging. The near universality of our current SEs is also contingent. Suppose there are aliens in many different places in the universe, and they all possess very distinct types of sense. Humankind is only a particular community of perceivers. So our SE may not be really universal in the universe. Would this hypothetical fact show that our SE cannot even be regarded as having PFJ?

Furthermore, in most of our cognitive situations, when we have some initial presumption for the reliability of the experiencers, a sufficient number short of the entire community are adequate to convince us their reports are at least worthy of initial support. Take science as example, the majority of people in fact do not know how to give reasons for the existence of black holes or quarks. However, as long as the science community agrees that they have good reasons to believe those exotic entities, I am reasonable to trust them even though the scientists involved are just the minority among human beings. It is also the case for testimony to events one has not witnessed. Suppose one person tells me that he has seen a rare bird species in Hong Kong. It has some weight for me but I may still doubt it (even not having strong reasons to doubt his integrity or

reliability as a witness). However, when thirty people tell the same story to me, I think my initial worry should be sufficiently dispelled. Suppose I later learn of three hundred people who also give the same testimony. The degree of PFJ of that testimony will be further enhanced but it does not seem to be essential for its PFJ.

I suggest the critics often commit the Super-reliability Fallacy, which strictly requires a BSJ to reach the level of super-reliability before it can be regarded as having PFJ. Gellman rightly points out that we should not tie our notion of confirming evidence to that associated with sensory perception. It is because

“Our ordinary physical-object beliefs are way overjustified by confirming evidence. We have extremely luxurious constellations of confirming networks there. Hence it does not follow that were mystical claims justified to a lesser degree than that, or not by similar procedure, that they would be *unjustified*” (Gellman, 2001, p. 27).

The critics are right in pointing out the ways in which TE differs from sensory experience, and it indeed follows that TE has intra-coherence *to a lesser extent* than sensory experiences. However, the hasty inference that TE is therefore not well-established is a *non sequitur*, and is like arguing that since a scientist is less brilliant than Einstein, he must be an incompetent scientist. The super-reliability requirement will not only endanger the PFJ of TEs but also that of moral experience, aesthetic experience, etc. This consequence is also implausible.

We are not yet arguing for the veridicality of TEs: we are only asking that they deserve similar kinds of initial trust we give to many kinds of experience, and not to write them off. Is it

reasonable to believe that all "God-experients" are either deceiving themselves or others?

Gutting, for one, does not think so:

"religion, throughout human history, has been an integral part of human life, attracting at all times the enthusiastic adherence of large numbers of good and intelligent people. To say that something that has such deep roots and that has been sustained for so long in such diverse contexts is nothing but credulity and hypocrisy is ... extraordinary" (Gutting, pp. 2-3).

So TE is not extraordinary. It is part and parcel of the human situation. Instead it is the overly skeptical attitude towards TE which is extraordinary. Suppose we come to know the life story of a person who has dramatic experiences of God *throughout his life*. We find that person honest, sane, and intelligent. We also find his story corroborated by many others' stories throughout history in many cultures. Isn't it rash to say that *all of them are entirely and chronically deluded*? And for that person, he or she (e.g., Christiania Tsai, Jackie Pullinger) is not even entitled to trust his experiences at least initially? This does not seem to be reasonable.

## The Structure of the Critical Trust Approach

The two basic components of CTA are the critical spirit and the attitude of trust. The CTA thinks that these two components are both essential elements in any viable epistemology, and they need to be kept in a kind of balance and healthy tension. It is similar to Thomas Kuhn's emphasis on a kind of *essential tension* between tradition and innovation in science (this phrase is the name of one of Kuhn's books).

### Data Gleaning- Trust:

The data for the CTA are *all* our experiences. The original incorporated epistemic seeming of a given experience is taken as the epistemological starting point and accorded PFJ. These *presumptive data* are defeasible. The basic principles are the weak Token PCT and moderate Type PCT discussed above.

Bonjour has provided a helpful classification of different kinds of foundationalism. While strong foundationalism requires basic beliefs to be infallible, moderate foundationalism allows basic beliefs to be fallible but insists that they are "sufficient by itself to satisfy the adequate-justification condition for knowledge" (if not defeated) (Bonjour, 1985, p. 26). In contrast, weak foundationalism thinks that the "basic beliefs possess only a very low degree of epistemic justification on their own" (Bonjour, 1985, p. 28). So my approach here is a kind of weak foundationalism. Gellman has moved from moderate foundationalism to weak foundationalism

because of the kind of criticisms offered by Gutting.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the ARE can be mounted on the basis of either moderate foundationalism or weak foundationalism but the latter is the one I adopt here (Kwan, 2004).

#### Data Sifting and Epistemic Ascent- *Critical Trust*:

##### a) Ground Level Sifting

Presumptive data can be defeated. Unfortunately, typically the defeater itself is also defeasible and there can be defeater-defeater as well as defeater-defeater-defeater and so on. Suppose we have a defeater D of an originally prima facie justified belief B. Presumably D also has PFJ. Why can't we use the original belief to defeat the defeater instead? Bonjour has summarized Rescher's suggestion in this way:

"the basic idea is to first segregate the total set of data or presumptions into maximal consistent subsets and then choose among these subsets. ... one might then choose among the maximal consistent subsets on the basis of the plausibility of their members" (Bonjour, 1985, p. 224).

The idea is that we have to bring in coherence considerations to determine the weight of each presumptive datum. Once a presumptive datum coheres with many other presumptive data, its weight would be increased and it can serve to defeat another less weighty presumptive datum. A presumptive datum which conflicts with many other presumptive datum is then defeated. In general, we can formulate this methodological rule:

#### The Rule of Ground Level Sifting

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<sup>12</sup> I am not entirely sure that we have to do that. Perhaps moderate foundationalism is the better position (Van Cleve, p. 173), but I do not need to settle the question here. I think that both are reasonable positions and the distinction between them may not be absolute.

Always choose the consistent subset of our presumptive data which has maximal weight.

#### b) Explanatory Ascent and Feedback Sifting

We are not just happy to leave everything as it is. The data of experience (of various kinds) need to be ordered, explained and made more intelligible. So the data of SE, when subjected to the search for order and intelligibility, yield the scientific framework. However, the framework itself can have feedback effect on the initial data. Some presumptive data of SE may be rejected due to theoretical reasons (e.g., the Principle of Simplicity). This can be captured by the following principle:

#### The Principle of Epistemic Defeat

We should not believe that things are as they seem to be in cases when such a belief is in conflict with the simplest theory compatible with a vast number of data obtained by supposing in a vast number of other cases that things are as they seem to be.

The CTA would regard this as the rational search for intellectual economy. In general, it is rational to believe in the theory which best explains our diverse presumptive data. It is the so-called *inference to the best explanation (IBE)*. When the presumptive data conflict and the best explanation cannot comprehend all the data, our best explanatory theory can serve as defeater of those 'recalcitrant' data. That is also why a worldview can affect our feedback sifting because it is supposed to be an explanation of *all* our presumptive data.

#### c) Second Order Critical Principle

When we trust the majority of our presumptive data, those data may suggest to us that some types of presumptive data are not altogether reliable. For example, those presumptive data are found to be grossly inconsistent or they are contradicted by other well-established data. In such cases, we can formulate second order critical principles. They are *second order* principles because the justification of these principles depend on our basic trust of our presumptive data by and large which is prescribed by the first order PCT. For example, our experiences may tell us that drunk people are prone to have hallucinations. So we can form this second order critical principle: "Bizarre perceptual claims of drunk people are not to be trusted." Of course, without the first order basic trust, we cannot establish the grounds for this principle; nor can we find out who are the drunk people! These principles are in fact crystallized out of repeated applications of our Principle of Epistemic Defeat.

#### d) Consensus and Testimony

Our data consist of personal experiences as well as testimonies. The Principle of Testimony, which will be assumed here, dictates that others' testimonies are also presumptive data for one. We can formulate this:

#### Principle of Consensus:

When an epistemic seeming is consensually corroborated, it is justified to a much higher degree.

Firstly, any consensus has to be *discovered* by each individual. Consensus is not in any sense given directly. Secondly, my principle does not entail that when an experience is not, or even

cannot be, consensually corroborated, it should then be doubted. The latter position would amount to a reverse of PCT.

### The Need for Both Foundation and Coherence

The above pattern of reasoning is similar to Susan Haack's foundherentism, and her crossword puzzle metaphor is helpful (Haack, 1994, p. 736). In short, an entry is much more likely to be correct if it not only corresponds to the clue given, but also coheres with other entries which in turn correspond to their clues. We can formulate the following principle to capture this idea.

### The Principle of Epistemic Enhancement

When an epistemic seeming is coherent with other epistemic seemings, and its truth is coherent with or even suggested by the simplest theory which can explain many other epistemic seemings, then its degree of justification will considerably be enhanced.

The Principle of Consensus is just a special case of the Principle of Epistemic Enhancement. So the CTA needs to appeal to both a foundation and coherence. Without some foundation (albeit weak), the process of justification cannot take off the ground. Without coherence, we can hardly build a decent cognitive edifice on the foundation.

### Comparison and Conflict

We can evaluate a type of experience by its coherence with other types of experience: *inter-coherence*:

A type of experience  $E_1$  is coherent with another type  $E_2$  if:

- a) the ontology of  $E_1$  is consistent with  $E_2$ , and either
- b) one type helps to explain the nature, possibility, veridicality, etc. of the other type of experience, or
- c) the realization of the ontology of one type receives inferential support from the other type, or
- d) they are analogous in some respects, e.g. phenomenology, structure.

I would call a doxastic system a *worldview* if it is meant to incorporate all the phenomena into its scope and unify them by explaining the whole lot with reference to a few fundamental principles or ideas. The weight of a type of experience would also be affected by its *worldview coherence*: the degree of ease this type of experience can be accommodated within a coherent worldview with high explanatory power. This is just the application of the Principle of Epistemic Enhancement to a larger context. It is obvious that the possession of the above kinds of coherence to a higher degree would make a type of experience better established.

Principle of Comparison:

A type of experience  $E_1$  is better established than  $E_2$  if either

- a) ceteris paribus,  $E_1$  has a higher degree of intra-coherence than  $E_2$ , or
- b) ceteris paribus,  $E_1$  has a higher degree of inter-coherence than  $E_2$ , or
- c) ceteris paribus,  $E_1$  has a higher degree of worldview coherence than  $E_2$ , or

This principle of comparison seems to imply the following principle:

Principle of Conflict Resolution:

If type  $E_1$  conflicts with type  $E_2$  and that  $E_1$  is better established than  $E_2$ , then  $E_1$  can serve as a defeater of  $E_2$ .

Cognitive Adjustment:

When a prima facie justified belief is defeated, what kind of cognitive adjustment should we make to our original cognitive structure? An experiential claim can be false in different ways and to different extent. Suppose I thought I seemed to see John on a street in London last Monday but this was defeated by many reliable witnesses. I ought to retract my claim. Consider these possibilities: a) I may be hallucinating, or b) I actually saw someone who looks very like John. The second is at a higher level of epistemic seeming than the first. *All other things being equal*, we should reinterpret the original experience so as to preserve as much truth in the original experience as possible. So (b) is rationally preferable. We can formulate the following:

Principle of Conservation:

When an experience is defeated, it is rational to salvage as much noetic content as possible from that epistemic seeming, i.e., to retain the highest undefeated level of epistemic seeming embedded in that experience.

## The Impartiality Argument for the Principle of Critical Trust

### Different Ways to Defend the PCT

Defenders have offered several main lines of argument for the PCT. Some says that the PCT is / intuitively correct or even self-evident (Swinburne, 1979, p. 254; Wall, p. 19; Huemer, p. 103). Others emphasize that the PCT is not a radically new invention. It is a principle which we do, in fact, employ in our actual epistemic practice (Mawson, p. 166). While the former focus more on our epistemic practice, John Hick argues that the PCT is implicit in our whole life: “We could not live on any other basis... Critical trust, then, is part of our working definition of sanity” (Hick, 2006, p. 130). Still others argue that the PCT is justifiable on the basis of pragmatic utility (Rescher, 1995, pp. 96-97). Rescher’s argument in fact has some similarity to Alston’s argument from practical rationality and impartiality. Alston argues that we cannot provide any non-circular proof for any of our socially established doxastic practices. How should we proceed then? To *suspend* our acceptance of the doxastic practices is either impossible or extremely costly. To *replace* the current doxastic practices with some others is no wiser because the new ones will not do better. So it is “eminently *reasonable* for us to form beliefs in the ways we standardly do” (Alston, 1993, p. 126).

Alston is aware of the possibility to “take our stand on one or more of these [doxastic practices], and hold the others subject to judgment on that basis,” but this approach is “vulnerable to a charge of *undue partiality* in taking some of our firmly established doxastic practices for granted and requiring vindication of the others in the light of the former” (1993, p. 126; italics mine). Layman also presses this point about impartiality:

“Having seen that we cannot prove the reliability of sense experience—that we must give sense experience “the benefit of the doubt,” how can we reasonably demand proofs for the reliability of other types of experience? To do so is to operate with an unjustified double standard” (Layman, p. 45).

I’ll unpack this line of thinking in the following impartiality argument for PCT.

### The Impartiality Argument

(T1) *Impartiality Thesis*

If we adopt a certain epistemological attitude towards a certain type of noetic experience, we should adopt the same attitude towards other types of noetic experience when we can find no epistemologically relevant distinction.

(T2) *Applicability Thesis*

The Type PCT should be applied as a *fundamental* principle to at least some types of our noetic experience. (Note that 'Type PCT' here actually means a principle identical to my generalized Type PCT except that its scope is unspecified.)

(T3) *Seamless Web Thesis*

We can find no clearcut distinctions within the whole web of our noetic experience which are epistemologically relevant *with respect to the applicability of the Type PCT*.

Therefore,

(T4) The Type PCT should be applied as a fundamental principle to all types of noetic experience.

The argument seems valid. Let us look at the credibility of the premises.

### Impartiality Thesis

(T1) is intuitively very plausible, and is also the implication of the general principle of impartiality: “Treat similar cases similarly unless the relevant differences are shown.” If we let go this principle, then effectively we are abandoning any rationality in various kinds of discourse, e.g. legal reasoning, personal judgment of scientists, literary criticism, social sciences, philosophy. These consequences seem too costly. If we reject the Principle of Impartiality in epistemology, then we can just choose to treat different token experiences in arbitrary ways. It would also be difficult to justify how we can treat a *type* of experience, say sense perception, as an epistemological unit because certainly there are differences between every two individual perceptions and it is hardly possible to *show* that each of this is not epistemologically relevant. If we have to discuss whether *each* perceptual claim is credible and which attitude we should adopt to *this* or *that*, epistemology would hardly be possible!

### Applicability Thesis

One common response is that we should not accord PFJ to any kind of experience. The critics contend that we can justify claims of experience without appealing to the PCT. We'll consider the cases of SE and memory.

#### 1) Application of the Type PCT to Sense Experience

Alston (1991; 1993) has extensively and convincingly argued for the thesis that we cannot non-circularly show the reliability of SE. To avoid repeating his points all over again, I offer only brief discussions and put my focus more on memory below. It may be argued that our belief in

the general reliability of SE is justified by inductive evidence. But it is not hard to see that in gathering this inductive evidence, we cannot avoid the use of memory: "an induction from past experiences to future experiences is only reliable if we correctly recall our past experiences. And what grounds have we got for supposing that we do? Clearly not inductive grounds- an inductive justification of the reliability of memory-claims would obviously be circular. Here we must rely on the principle that things are the way they seem, as a basic principle not further justifiable" (Swinburne, 1979, p. 256).

So in the end to "justify" ordinary perception inductively, we have to rely on the prima facie reliability of memory. But of course memory claims can be prima facie reliable as data concerning what the world is only if our past perceptions were prima facie reliable. We are trapped in a circle if we deny PCT's status as a fundamental principle.

## 2) Application of the Type PCT to Memory

It is clear that our memory is fallible. How can we safeguard from mistakes and distinguish real memory from false ones or even imagination? Some philosophers have suggested that the reliable memory claims have intrinsic characteristics which are accessible to us, e.g., vividness of the images associated or degree of conviction. However, after a long exploration in his book on memory, Von Leyden concludes, "since a false memory claim is as a rule qualitatively indistinguishable from a correct one, no memory experience alone can make it certain that what is alleged to be remembered really occurred" (pp. 115-116).

Since reliance on memory is almost ubiquitous in formation of our beliefs, it is extremely difficult to see how there can be non-circular justification of memory. Consider the suggestion that the general reliability of one's memory is to be established by our perceptual experiences. However, unless we take the reliability of memory for granted to some extent, it is well-nigh impossible to gather sufficient empirical evidence for memory. It is because our experiences almost all happened in the past. Without our basic trust in memory, what we can get from an even infallible SE is only and always a vanishing point.

Some philosophers suggested we can check our memories with documents and archaeological evidence, e.g., Hamlyn. However, if we do not already trust our memory of the meaning of the words, how can we be sure that we have interpreted the documents correctly? Moreover, what is the basis of my belief that the documents are reliable? Their reliability cannot be read off directly. Here we again need some inductive evidence from the past, *which we can remember*, to support it. So this kind of check is also in the end circular.

In the case of our memory beliefs, the appeal to the PCT as a fundamental principle seems inescapable. I have surveyed quite a few authors, and found that almost all of them reach similar conclusions. For example, Russell claims that "the past occurrence is itself a premiss for my knowledge. It cannot be inferred from the present fact of my recollecting it except by assuming the general trustworthiness of memory" (p. 205).

Other authors concur: "in the last analysis ... we cannot justify or validate our memories further than by allowing a great number, possibly the majority, to be reliable and hence by assuming that the sufficient conditions of remembering are in fact very often fulfilled" (Von Leyden, p. 119).

Ginet also thinks we “should trust the direct deliverance of one’s senses, or the direct perceptual deliverance of one’s memory, when they belong to the part that is coherent relative to all that their deliverance imply about one’s direct perceptions. *Why* should one do this? Why not?” (p. 202). The last question is supposed to be a rhetorical one. To suspend our trust in them is simply “too intolerably frustrating to be borne and in practice impossible.”

### 3) Explanatory Foundationalism

The CTA also emphasizes explanatory considerations, and indeed some scholars are forced by their explanationism to accept PCT, e.g. Lycan (pp. 165-66). However, explanatory foundationalism wants to deny that the PCT is a fundamental principle by suggesting that the hypothesis of the external world can be justified as the best explanation of our SEs (interpreted as appearance beliefs like "it appears to me that a table is there"). Alston (1993) has already criticized many versions of explanatory foundationalism, e.g., Goldman, Slote. I want to discuss the more recent attempt by Jonathan Vogel (1998; 2005) here.

Vogel considers the isomorphic skeptical hypothesis (ISH) which is in a way parasitic upon the real world hypothesis (RWH). “The relationships among causes and effects according to the ISH match those of the RWH. To that extent, it seems, the explanations provided by the one are no better or worse than the explanations provided by the other” (2005, p. 75). For example, if our experiences are produced by the computer of a mad neuroscientist, then different portions of the computer disk can be supposed to occupy the explanatory roles we normally assign to familiar objects. This is called the computer skeptical hypothesis (CSH).

This kind of improved skeptical hypothesis apparently can do as well or as bad a job as the RWH does. However, he contends that necessary truths like “two distinct objects can’t be in the same place at the same time” in the RWH has some explanatory power, but ISH has to guarantee that by invoking “an extra empirical regularity,” say, one written down in the computer program of the superscientist. So the ISH is shown to be inferior by its “lack of simplicity” (2005, p. 77).

I doubt whether this really works. For argument’s sake, let us concede his point about extra empirical regularities in the CSH. However, we can equally agree that the ISH just needs a computer and a brain, whereas RWH needs myriad of separate objects. Hence the former scheme is much more economical. Vogel is aware of this point but then he goes on to assert that “it is far from clear that, all by itself, positing fewer entities is a theoretical virtue” (1998, p. 355). Well, it seems to me quite clear that when we consider our practice of IBE, a theory which posit fewer entities is indeed simpler than another theory which posits more. A detective will not posit ten murderers to explain a dead body when one can do. Astronomers will not posit ten more planets to explain the deviation of Uranus’ orbit from Newton’s theory if just one (Neptune) can do, and so on.

Moreover,

“we can compare our commonsense hypotheses about physical objects to, let us say, a Berkeleyan hypothesis about a very complex mind orchestrating the comings and goings of sensations. Which theory is simpler? Well Berkeley had just minds, mental states, and causation. The commonsense hypothesis has minds, mental states, causation, and physical objects. On any criteria of simplicity, Berkeley seems to win” (Fumerton, 1992, p. 165).

So in terms of simplicity, it is by no means clear that the RWH will win over skeptical competitors. To make a successful epistemic *ascent* possible, the Principle of Simplicity alone is not enough because its basic inclination is to trim things *down*. It needs to work together with the PCT.

Fumerton has further pointed out serious problems about IBE. Concerning the status of IBE, Vogel just says: “If ... you are skeptical about IBE..., you will also be a skeptic about induction of all kinds... skepticism about IBE is exotic and, consequently, may be ignored” (Vogel, 2005, p. 79). It seems to me this kind of dismissal of exotic skepticism is quite dogmatic. I agree that the “skeptic has every right to insist ... that one can and ultimately *must* ask questions concerning the legitimacy of the reasoning... One philosopher’s domestic species of skeptic ... is another philosopher’s exotic skeptic” (Fumerton, 2005, p. 94).

In any case, there are some general problems with explanatory foundationalism which even Vogel’s version cannot overcome. First, the basic trust in memory seems quite inescapable. The common data for the competing hypotheses like RWH or CSH are the *continued coherence* of our experiences. But this datum we can only know through our memory. Indeed the presupposition of memory in almost all attempts to vindicate SE’s reliability is not far from the surface. Or perhaps we can try to provide a coherentist justification for memory, or even an IBE for the reliability of memory? Bonjour clearly points out the problems:

“But then the issue arises of how, according to a coherence theory, the memory beliefs upon which any access to the fact of *continued coherence* must rely are themselves to be justified. Many philosophers have offered coherence theories of the justification of memory beliefs, but such an account seems clearly to be involved in vicious circularity if

the only reason for thinking that coherentist justification is conducive to truth, and so that the memory beliefs in particular are true, relies on the existence of coherence over time and so on those very memory beliefs themselves. The upshot is that there is no noncircular way for a coherentist to appeal to sustained or long-run coherence” (Bonjour, 1999, p. 130).<sup>13</sup>

Second, memory is also vital in reasoning. Suppose we have a valid mathematical proof which needs ten pages to write it out. When you come to the end and believe that the theorem is proved, what justifies this? Not directly by the steps because we can't hold all of them together in our minds and see all at once their connections; but by the *memory* that you have checked all the connections and found them convincing. So any reasoning with more than a few premises, *including the explanatory argument for RWH*, has to depend on the memory belief that the argument has proceeded correctly.

Third, how do we justify the appearance beliefs themselves? Sometimes we claim that they are infallible or incorrigible. But then how do we know that? Well, the answer can only be "it seems self-evident or obvious to me". (The problem would be more serious if we believe that these

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13 Despite this criticism, Bonjour is ambivalent about the ultimate prospect of explanation foundationalism. On the one hand, he thinks that “some explanation is needed for the combination of involuntariness and coherence, and that the conclusion advocated by the philosopher in question is thereby justified as the best explanation of the facts in question. My own conviction is that such an inference, to Locke’s conclusion..., is ultimately cogent and can be justified on a priori ground.” This sounds like he is hopeful but then it is puzzling that he immediately goes on to say that it is “a very familiar and serious problem for which no developed solution is yet available” (Bonjour, 1999, p. 139). So at most he is only issuing a promissory note. He seems to be struggling here. I admire his heroic struggle with skepticism, and in the process he has not evaded the hard problems. In fact he also has doubts about whether the argument he promised can in the end succeed: “it still seems to me that some forms of skepticism are unavoidable and will simply have to be lived with” (Bonjour, 1999, p. 129).

beliefs are not incorrigible.) Some form of PCT(introspection) seems to be inescapable. The Applicability Thesis is also justified then.<sup>14</sup>

### Seamless Web Thesis

Suppose the critic wants to reject (T3). The basic strategy is to acknowledge SE and memory as the only BSJs. All other kinds of experience are then non-BSJs which must be justified by the deliverances of the BSJ. However, how do we justify this kind of “discrimination” which apparently violates the principle of impartiality? Perhaps we may claim that the BSJs *alone* are infallible, incorrigible, or uncontaminated by theory. But then it is doubtful that any *type* of experiential claim can aspire to this status, not even SE and memory. We may claim the BSJs *alone* are public. But to know a type of experience is public, we need to first know that it is shared by many people, and they agree quite a lot. But we can't know that unless we *presuppose* PCT(SE and memory).

Some may claim that the BSJs *alone* are the *most* reliable, and SE and memory are the only candidates here. However, once it is admitted that the difference between the various kinds of experience is only a matter of degree, is it still plausible to cling to the *qualitative* distinction between the BSJs and the non-BSJs? Admittedly SE and memory are more reliable but this judgment is only possibly arrived at when we give initial trust to our various kinds of experience. Furthermore, given two kinds of experiences E1 and E2, is it plausible to demand that E2 *has to be validated by E1 before it has force* if E1 is *only more reliable* than E2? Suppose a mutant species of human beings (X-men) start to emerge among us, and they possess a kind of super-perception which is much more reliable than our perception. They may insist *only their* super-

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<sup>14</sup> My argument does not need to start with SE or memory.

perception is a BSJ, and that our perception needs to be validated by their super-perception before it can be trusted. Would it be a reasonable requirement? No!

(T3) asserts that we can find no relevant distinction between the various kinds of experience with respect to the applicability of the PCT. Although this is hard to *prove conclusively*, the discussions above suggest it may be well-nigh impossible to defeat (T3) once we accept (T2). If we grant (T2), then we are conceding that the Type PCT should be applied as a *fundamental* principle to, say, our sense experience as epistemic seeming, and on this ground alone. That means we accept SE for no other reason than that it seems to us to be true. Then when we consider experiences in other areas, the only relevant point seems to be whether they are also epistemic seemings. The other factors are just irrelevant. So (T3) follows. Anyway the burden is equally on the critic who rejects the (T3) to *show* what is the relevant distinction.

Now I have defended the Type PCT and this is sufficient for my ARE. However, the Type PCT also requires the weak Token PCT. If token experiences have no force at all, it is hard to understand why then tokens of a type can have PFJ.

## Objections to the Argument from Religious Experience

### Disanalogy Objection

Some critics argue that the serious disanalogy of RE or TE with SE undermines its veridicality.

The logic is like this:

- A1) A kind of experience is cognitive *only if* it is analogous with SE, especially in the aspect of (e.g., having analogous tests).
- A2) RE (or TE) is not analogous with SE.
- A3) Hence RE (or TE) is not cognitive.

It is instructive to consider a parallel argument against induction:

- B1) Induction is justifiable (or reliable) *only if* it is analogous with deduction.
- B2) Induction is not analogous with deduction.
- B3) Hence induction is not justifiable (or reliable).

The second premise seems true. Deduction is truth-preserving while induction is not, and so on.

The differences are quite obvious. However there are problems for (B1). Why do we regard analogy with deduction as essential for a kind of inference to be reliable? Is it not implicitly assuming that there is and can only be one kind of reliable inference? Exactly because the two methods are concerned with different kinds of epistemological connection, isn't it to be expected that the two methods should also show differences accordingly? The fact that induction is disanalogous with deduction only suggests that the two cannot be reliable *in the same way or to*

*the same degree*. It is still a live possibility that induction can be as reliable as it can be in its own realm. So this parallel argument against induction is not sound.

Similarly the above argument against TE should be rejected. Why should we expect that there is only one kind of reliable experience? Isn't it possible that we can have *some* access to different kinds of contingent truths about different aspects of the world? If it is the case, isn't it to be expected that there will be several kinds of experience accordingly? Each may be reliable in its own way and to different degrees. So (A1) seems to presuppose narrow empiricism whose employment of Disanalogy Objection is self-refuting. Typically it is also claimed that the assumption that only SE and its like are reliable is also justified by the facts of the matter (Daniels, p. 489). But this justification of SE is dependent upon the reliability of memory which is also disanalogous with SE in many respects. If (A1) is upheld, wouldn't it destroy justifiability of memory as well? This is to undermine the earlier justification of SE. The appeal to science to reinforce (A1) also suffers from similar problems. The actual success of science also depends on deductive reasoning and the capacity for making rational judgment, which are both very disanalogous from SE. So (A1) would damage justifiability of science as well! So (A1) is quite implausible. On the contrary, if TE is in general veridical, we should positively expect TEs to be somewhat different from sensory experiences.

The bracket in (A1) can be filled in with different content, emphasizing a different aspect of disanalogy. Let us further examine the objection (from A1 to A3) which has been put forward by Richard Gale: REs "are cognitive *only if* they are subject to similar tests to those that SEs are" (p. 316) (his prominent target is also TE). The reason for Gale's negative assessment is that

"A veridical sense perception must have an object that is able to exist when not actually perceived and be the common object of different sense perceptions. For this to be possible, the object must be housed in a space and time that includes both the object and perceiver. ... there is no RE analogue to this concept of objective existence ... Because of this big disanalogy, God is categorically unsuited to serve as the object of a veridical perception, whether sensory or nonsensory" (pp. 326-27).

Gale's discussions clearly display his epistemic chauvinism. Even if he is correct about the necessary conditions for a veridical *sense* perception, it is only *one* concept of an objective empirical particular. To argue that it is the only viable concept would have presupposed that physical object is the only possible kind of objective existent and that SE is the only viable kind of experience. It is just arguing in a circle. Gale admits that his argument would commit him to reject intellectual and moral intuition and the like as non-cognitive. It also seems clear that introspection and some personal memories are not of spatio-temporal particulars. So on Gale's criteria they should also be rejected as non-cognitive. These debilitating consequences of his argument in fact count against his argument. That Gale's Disanalogy Argument has such sweeping consequences is a reason to suspect his standard for cognitive experience is too stringent.<sup>15</sup> Whether TE is called a cognitive experience does not really matter. The crucial question is whether TE is a BSJ. It is quite clear that Gale's Disanalogy Objection offers an unreasonably restrictive criterion for BSJ in general. So his objection is not a sufficient reason for discounting TE as a BSJ.

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<sup>15</sup> We should note that he himself appeals to necessary truth, e.g. "no two empirical individuals of the same kind spatiotemporally coincide" (p. 328). I would like to see how he is going to justify the above claim apart from an appeal to intuitions. He has not even hinted at the answer.

In any case, Gale's objection does not undermine my argument for TE.<sup>16</sup> The general idea is that determination of analogy or disanalogy must be subsequent to our basic trust in experiences. The PCT is prior to knowledge about details of analogy or disanalogy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed reply to Gale, see Gellman (2001, chapter 3).

<sup>17</sup> Everitt's critique of ARE also includes a form of Disanalogy Objection. Initially, he directly attack the tests of RE by applying the standards of SE (p. 169). When he later considers the plausible suggestion that some kind of variability of tests across practices is to be expected, he just insists that these tests cannot be too different from the standards of SE (p. 170). Besides being a mere assertion rthan argument, it is unclear how different is "too different."

### The Conflicting Claims Objection

Many critics claim that since religious experiences are so various and mutually contradictory, we should regard all of them with suspicion. Even if we grant some force to religious experiences, different religious experiences cancel one another's force in the end (Flew, 1966, pp. 126-127; Michael Martin, 1986, pp. 87-88). So it seems that the challenge of RE to naturalism can be easily neutralized.

### The Application of the PCT to Conflicting Experiences

Firstly, the existing contradictions between religious experiences do not render the PCT inapplicable to them. To apply the PCT to some experiences is to have *initial* trust in them and, if they are defeated, to salvage as much as possible from them. It does not entail that they are all or mostly reliable. There is no contradiction in saying that we should have initial trust in conflicting experiences. Indeed, almost all sorts of experience or doxastic practices produce conflicting beliefs sooner or later. Empirically speaking no experience in which we trust is completely free from this problem. (Just think of the empiricists' "argument from illusion".) So why do we think that the presence of contradictions in religious experience should debar us from having initial trust, at least to some degree, in religious experience?

Now the critics seem to suggest a Sceptical Rule (SR):

SR     When experiences or claims conflict with one another, we should reject all of them.

Should we adopt the SR instead? I don't think so. Consider the conflict of witnesses in the courts. It would be indeed stupid to reject all their accounts just because they conflict! It seems to be a rational strategy to try to reconcile their reports as much as possible. For example, a common

core<sup>18</sup> can be identified. Another example: suppose a phenomenon occurred very briefly which led to conflicting reports: A reported seeing an aeroplane, B a spaceship, and C an air-balloon. It is absurd to suggest that we should reject all their statements and think that nothing has ever happened! At the very least we should accept the common content of their experiences: there is an *unidentified flying object*. Moreover, historical documents are also liable to massive contradictions. However we don't deduce from this phenomenon that historical enquiry is entirely pointless. The job of the historian is to utilize all these materials to reconstruct the past by harmonizing them without producing too much strain in the overall interpretation. Many historical accounts of a momentous historical event, e.g. China's Cultural Revolution, are contradictory. It is difficult to determine the exact course or nature of this event but it would be preposterous to deny that the Cultural Revolution has happened. All the above examples count against the sceptical policy and show that conflict of presumptive data is not irremediable.

In line with the above suggestions, although there is a significant degree of conflicts of the religious experiences at the highest level of description, a certain common core can still be extracted from them at a lower level of description.<sup>19</sup> For example, Davis carefully sifts through the data and suggests the following as the common core:

" (i) the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centres of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.

(ii) ... there is a far deeper 'true self' which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality.

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18 Indeed it is not the case that a "common core" has to be shared by all the eye-witness accounts. Sometimes it is sufficient that it is shared by the large majority of the accounts, provided that either the error of the deviant witness in that aspect can be explained or overwhelming explanatory power is attained by adopting the common core. Admittedly there are borderline cases in which we have to rely on our judgments.

19. Davis (chapter 7) provides detailed suggestions how the conflicts can be reconciled.

(iii) Whatever *is* the ultimate reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything else depends on it.

(iv) This holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence with whom individuals can have a personal relationship ...

(v) ... at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power ...

(vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being's *summum bonum*, his final liberation or salvation, and the means by which he discovers his 'true self' or 'true home'" (p. 191).

All the religious experiences point to the fact that there is another realm *up there* or *beyond* the naturalistic world. So even if REs have internal conflicts, arguably they can still lend support to ARE insofar as they tilt the balance away from naturalism. However, it is a kind of general support for the religious worldview instead of a specific support for theism at this level.

### Re-classification of Religious Experience

To evaluate the epistemic status of TE relative to other kinds of RE, the Rule of Ground Level Sifting is helpful. What we need to do is to segregate the presumptive data into consistent subsets and then choose the one which has maximal weight. So let us reclassify REs in the following way:

A) *Theistic experience*

B) *Theism-compatible non-TE*

These REs, though not specifically theistic, are logically compatible with theism. It can be further divided into:

1) *theism-friendly non-TEs*: these experiences go quite well with theism and they can be readily interpreted theistically without distortion or implausible reinterpretation.

2) *theism-neutral non-TEs*: these experiences are compatible with theism and they can be interpreted theistically; however, they do not strongly suggest a theistic interpretation, and they can also be interpreted in a way which goes against theism.

3) *theism-unfriendly non-TEs*: these experiences are logically compatible with theism but seem to suggest an interpretation which is in tension with theism.

C) *Theism-incompatible non-TEs*: These experiences, if veridical in their most ramified description, are incompatible with theism because the Ultimate disclosed in these experiences is not personal.

I just explain my classification scheme above, and will soon discuss what kinds of religious experience can be placed within it. I have defended the claim that TE is a well-established type and so the Type PCT is applicable to it. As for other non-theistic experiences are concerned, they are also covered by the Token PCT, which means that they at least have some force. Now there seems to be a major conflict between TE and theism-incompatible non-TE. If we also take into consideration the theism-compatible non-TEs, then there are two competing groups of RE: the *pro-theistic group* which consists of TE plus theism-friendly non-TEs, and the *anti-theistic group* which consists of theism-incompatible plus theism-unfriendly non-TEs. (Since the theism-neutral

non-TEs do not point in any specific direction, we can ignore them here.) The question is to decide which group has the greater weight. Before discussing this question, we need to clarify the nature of monistic mystical experience.

### Pure Consciousness Event and Monistic Mystical Experience

How to accurately describe the monistic mystical experience is in fact a controversial question, and the mystics sometimes offer paradoxical descriptions. To clarify the problem, we need to distinguish these two experiences:

- 1) Awareness *of* undifferentiated unity, the One, the Self, and so on.
- 2) A pure state of awareness which *is* undifferentiated unity.

The first experience is more like an intuition, an insight into reality but the intentional structure of experience is intact. The second experience is the pure consciousness event (PCE) and it does not have an intentional structure at all. They are logically incompatible: no person can have both experiences at the same time. I propose that the phrase 'monistic mystical experience' should be used to refer to the first intuitive experience rather than the PCE because the PCE in itself is not specifically monistic. Indeed it *cannot* yield support to monism by virtue of its epistemic seeming because there is no conceptual element in the PCE. The PCE is not without its conceptual difficulties (see Katz) but we have empirical evidence for the PCE (Forman, Part I).

Consider this report:

"I would settle down, ... and there would just be a sort of complete silence void of content. The whole awareness would turn in, and there would be no thought, no activity, and no perception, yet it was somehow comforting.... I did not yet identify myself with this silent, content-free inner space. ... Then ... I began to recognize in it the essence of my own self as pure consciousness. Eventually, ... "I" as a separate entity just started to have no meaning ... There is no thought, there is no activity, there is no experiencer" (Forman, pp. 27-28).

The description is littered with paradoxes. Certainly, there was some experience akin to a PCE but it was also "somehow comforting". Did this sense of comfort feature within the experience or not? If yes, the experience is no longer pure. If no, then the sense of comfort should be another experience *subsequent* to the PCE. This is probably the case. I also wonder how the person can report a PCE afterwards. In the PCE, there is no thought and feeling and no awareness of any sort. How then can the subject later ascribe this experience to *himself*? This must be explained by the continuous operation of the memory even if it is somehow hidden during the PCE. But whose memory and whose PCE? To give intelligible answers to this question, it is difficult to avoid positing a self who possesses this PCE even though the sense of self is not present *in* the PCE. Indeed it is the interpretation adopted by the subject originally. But later the subject comes to another interpretation: "there is no thought, activity and experiencer". But this *thought* cannot be *given* in that experience. So this must be an *interpretation* imposed on the PCE due to subsequent reflection. So the question as to why this interpretation is justified has to be raised.

Perhaps we can conceive of the experiences as a unity. First, the subject has a PCE without monistic mystical experiences. However, when he comes back from this contentless state, *he* immediately has some monistic illuminations. The two experiences seem to go together and the PCE *in this context* may then be legitimately interpreted as an experience *of* the Self.. However, the same move is available to the theists. Pike argues that when the Christian mystics experience a 'monistic' interval within the context of dualistic experiences of God, it is legitimate to think that this "moment of experience in which the soul detects no distinction between itself and God is a kind of experiential fiction" (Pike, p. 156). The spirit is simply "deluded by love into not noticing the difference between itself and God." The upshot is that there is no simple way to connect PCEs with monistic mystical experiences, either conceptually or evidentially. So PCEs are theism-neutral.

### Coherence and Conflict of Theistic Experience with Other Religious Experiences

I have just argued that Pure consciousness events (PCEs) are theism-neutral. The main reason is that a PCE has no propositional content and hence it cannot contradict theism). In fact in the earlier Cases, some people can have both PCEs and TEs, and they do not see any contradiction between them.

I think nature mysticism is also theism-neutral. It can be interpreted in either a monistic or theistic way. For example, Jonathan Edwards's experience of nature mysticism is explicitly integrated with a TE:

“The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom,

his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature” (quoted in Hick, 2006, p. 29).

The kind of unity sensed in nature mysticism can reflect either the unity of all things rooted in their common source- their Creator God, or the kind of metaphysical unity envisaged by monism.

Second, let us assess the weight of the Pro-theistic Group. I have contended that TE is a well-established type of experience, and it is plausible to think it has the highest degree of intra-coherence among REs. So TE is weighty in itself. Furthermore, many kinds of religious experiences are compatible with theism and can readily be interpreted theistically, and hence theism-friendly:

- a) Ecstasy and peak experience
- b) Encounter of the Light Being in a near-death experience
- c) Experience of evil spirit, angels or departed saints
- d) Experience of contingency - a spontaneous feeling that the world is somehow dependent on something beyond.
- e) Experience of design- experience of being struck by the beauty and intricacy of the natural order and the feeling that this order is ultimately due to Intelligence

(a) suggests a kind of spiritual depth in human beings which is more consonant with theism than with naturalism. If (b) and (c) are veridical, then there exist immaterial beings outside the bounds of nature. This is compatible with theism but incompatible with naturalism. (d) and (e) point somewhat in the direction of a Transcendent Creator-Designer. If these experiences are veridical, they are certainly friendly with theism, and can even offer significant support for theism. I think

these experiences are not that uncommon but the empirical case cannot be made here. Anyway, as far as RE is concerned, the Pro-theistic Group has considerable weight.

Now let us assess the weight of the Anti-theistic Group. The prime examples of theism-incompatible non-TE are monistic mysticism and the experience of Nirvana. Since these experiences suggest the Ultimate is essentially impersonal, it conflicts with theism. I'll examine this conflict later. Let us now discuss theism-unfriendly non-TEs. Perhaps the experience of minor deities: e.g., visions of Kali or Buddha or Apollo, belong to this group. Michael Martin argues that they are *indirectly* incompatible with theism because they are embedded in a worldview which is at odds with the theistic one. Martin has a point but I would like to emphasize that logically speaking, it is possible that both God and these minor deities exist at the same time. The tension only arises because we have a further assumption that if God exists, He would not have created these minor deities. Otherwise, we can just regard these beings as spiritual creatures in God's world. However, perhaps given some plausible assumptions, these experiences may be *theism-unfriendly*. Since the conflict is not directly given in the experiences, I think it is quite possible to remove the tension by appropriate adjustment of our underlying assumptions and reinterpretation of those experiences.

As I have argued, cognitive adjustment is frequently needed even in our SEs, memories, and scientific inquiry. Deliverances of SE and memory often directly and indirectly conflict with one another. Some experimental data are frequently "indirectly incompatible" with other experimental data because the former are incompatible with the simplest law which are suggested by the latter. We might decide to stick to each and every experimental datum *no matter what*, but

no cognitive systematization is then possible. If we are not willing to forgo at least some presumptive data and take theoretical gain into considerations, no universal laws can be substantiated. For example, after performing an experiment, we have six data which fall roughly on a straight line but also an anomalous datum not even close to that line. I submit it is rational to discard the anomalous datum in favour of the six others. This is what the CTA advises, and is also what the scientists in fact are doing.

Martin objects that acceptance of the PCT would result in a bloated ontology. This reflects a lack of understanding of the CTA. He seems to think that the PCT automatically commits us to accept each and every experience of minor deity *in toto*. This kind of picture is not even true of our more mundane epistemic practices. So in accordance with the CTA, the rational way to do here is:

- We search for the neatest ontology or worldview which can preserve the maximal weight of the presumptive data here.
- Some of these data can be rejected if they are more vulnerable to defeaters and it results in a sufficient gain in simplicity or coherence. However, even in this situation, we should try to preserve their cognitive force as much as possible.

These considerations are just corollaries of the principles of the CTA. The theist does not need to give detailed answers about each and every RE in human history. He can be contented to point out that the argument for TE would be defeated *only if* the process of cognitive adjustment described above results in the truncation of the whole lot of TE. I do not think it is the case. To the contrary, it seems to me that those lesser divine beings are not as widely experienced as God is. So it seems to be justified, on all the evidence, to regard the existence of God as the defeater

of the experiences of those lesser beings who are incompatible with existence of God, and not the other way round. Moreover, it is much simpler to accept theism, which is supported by the significant weight of the Pro-theistic Group.

We also need to investigate how common are these experiences, e.g., experience of Apollo. We can raise these questions: does it survive the test of age and culture? Is it widespread? Does anybody claim to have an experience of Apollo which can be described as a 'life in Apollo'? As far as I know, there is no evidence to show at least one third of people in contemporary Western societies have had an experience of Apollo, and that significant minorities in every culture have organized their life around the experiences of Apollo. I have never heard of a single Chinese having an experience of Apollo but many of them have definitely experienced God.

A theist does not need to choose between blanket rejection or blanket acceptance. He can adopt a more nuanced, case by case approach towards these experiences of minor deities.

- For those minor deities who are not really experienced by a sizable number of people across eras and cultures, the related experiences can be treated as anomalous data- either rejected or shelved
- There is no need to reduce all those REs to sheer self-deception or hallucination. For those minor deities who have a more substantial experiential basis, the related experiences can be explained as the work of spiritual beings, or treated as genuine phenomena in the spiritual world which we do not yet have a full understanding. In cases like an experience of Virgin Mary, it may readily be interpreted as a veridical vision which doesn't commit us to her literal existence in the manifested form.

- In any case, experiences of minor deities *apparently* point in a consistent direction beyond naturalism. If they can be readily defeated, say, by naturalistic explanations, then the problem of indirect conflict with TE is removed. If the naturalistic explanations available are not really adequate,<sup>20</sup> then the whole group of such experiences can be taken to support a less specific claim: there are some spiritual forces in the world. This would actually provide further support for the theistic interpretation of the world.
- These experiences may be re-interpreted by monism as part of the *maya*. For example, Kali can be regarded as just one aspect of the Ultimate (the One) rather than an independently existing deity. This is possible but it is hard to see how those experiences can provide positive support for monism.

The theistic interpretation is further reinforced by considerations of inter-coherence and worldview coherence: we can also ask does anybody have an experience of Apollo or the like through experiences of nature, goodness, beauty, finitude, freedom, and so on? How does the veridicality of the experience of Apollo help to explain other experiences? Is there any worldview which revolves around the existence of Apollo which is coherent and having explanatory power, say, with regard to contemporary scientific findings like fine-tuning? Is there ever a natural theology for the existence of Apollo? I think the theistic worldview will fare much better in these aspects. The entire content of this book is a support for this claim.

To sum up, experiences of minor deities taken at their most ramified description may be somewhat theism-unfriendly. However, from the perspective of TE, there are plausible re-

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<sup>20</sup> For example, those experiences of minor deities may be supported by paranormal experiences which are hard to discredit.

interpretations of experiences of minor deities (whereas the reverse does not seem to be true) which can salvage much of their epistemic force, which supports the claim that there are spiritual forces in this world. This is confirming theism as well.

### Is the Ultimate Reality Personal or Impersonal?

As for the contradiction between the personal versus impersonal understanding of the *nature of the ultimate reality*, I believe it is not as stark as it is commonly made out. The Personal Ultimate can manifest himself in a non-personal way. The manifestation can still be veridical and revelatory. Consider Yahweh's epiphany to Elijah. God can be said to be manifested in the earthquake and the whirlwind but this is not yet a personal manifestation. However, the whole thing is transformed when the 'still small voice' is added to the scene. The whole experience becomes an unambiguous personal manifestation. So non-personal manifestation need not mean it is anti-personal. Indeed, the Old Testament scholar Rowley says, "we find *personal and impersonal factors* woven together in what the Hebrews believed to be God's manifestation of himself" (p. 45).

Wall suggests that

“experiences of God, some personal and some impersonal, may be analogous to viewing an object from different sides. Or perhaps it is like viewing an object from different distances: From a distance we do not see the needles of a pine, but up close we do; yet regardless of the differences in the experiences, we do not begin to think that we have seen different trees.” So “we might say that ‘from a distance’ we may see God as impersonal but ‘up close’ as personal” (Wall, pp. 319-20).

So in the end there is a conflict only if one claims that the Ultimate is *essentially personal*, and the other claims that the Ultimate is *essentially impersonal*. However, “we rarely, if ever, run across claims to the effect that someone was aware of experiencing God’s essential nature or some aspect of God as essential. In all cases I collected or examined I found neither claim made” (Wall, p. 320).

So in the end we do need to resolve the conflict between the claim that the Ultimate is essentially personal, and the contrary claim that the Ultimate is essentially impersonal. I explore the conflict of theism and monism of the Advaita Vedanta school below.

### Conflict of Theism and Monism

The Advaita Vedanta school makes these claims:

- a) Brahman as the Impersonal Absolute is the Ultimate Reality in which there is no distinction and differentiation.
- b) Atman is Brahman, i.e., every human self is metaphysically identical to Brahman; hence every self is metaphysically identical to another self.
- c) The world is ultimately *maya* (illusion).

Obviously, these claims conflict with theism which asserts that the Ultimate is a Personal God who creates the world and distinct selves. Theism also claims that although all the latter are contingent upon the continuous creative act of God, they are nonetheless real and distinct from one another. In my CTA, we have resources to resolve this conflict: Principle of Comparison and

Principle of Conflict Resolution. The crucial point is whether theistic experience is a better established type than monistic experience or vice versa. Let us briefly discuss this question:

1) Intra-coherence:

a) It seems to me the people who have monistic experiences (hereafter MEs) are confined to a relatively small group of mystics in various religious traditions, and mainly Eastern ones, whereas I have argued that theistic experience is present in various traditions and shared by a substantial portion of humankind.

b) I have argued that tokens of TE do form intricate coherence relationships whereas monistic experiences do not exhibit many modalities; nor do their tokens exhibit a complex pattern of coherence.

c) It seems to me the articulation of the monistic experience suffers from many conceptual difficulties: how is an experience of Nirvana or the Absolute possible? A noetic experience has an intrinsic structure but the Absolute is structure-less. If it is literally ineffable, how can it be communicated to form an inter-subjective type of experience? Hick is also aware of this kind of problem:

“to lose one's individual identity completely, like a drop becoming part of the ocean — a familiar simile in mystic literature — would be to lose the individual continuity of consciousness and memory in virtue of which the mystic would later be able to report the experience. How could someone remember being in a state in which he or she no longer existed as a distinct individual? There must, surely, have been a continuing strand of consciousness to enable them later to speak about it, while still enjoying something of its bliss” (Hick, 2006, p. 22).

I have defended the conceptual coherence of TE above. TE seems to have a higher degree of intra-coherence than ME.

## 2) Inter-coherence:

The degree of intercoherence of TE is high. It does not conflict with other basic types of human experience. It can even provide a framework for explaining them (e.g., moral experience and rational intuition). The following points concentrate on the intercoherence of ME with various kinds of noetic experience.

### a) SE:

It seems that SE discloses a world of multiplicity and change. Since SE is one of the best established types of experience, then SE can serve as the defeater of almost all other types of experience. Now ME apparently comes in conflict with SE and this seems to be a serious problem. For example, Gale thinks that concerning monistic experiences, their "descriptions are often contradictory or in conflict with our best-established empirical beliefs, such as that there exists a multiplicity of distinct objects and events in space and time" (p. 303). This criticism has been pressed by Madhva in the thirteenth century *within the Hindu tradition itself* (Copleston, p. 80). The postulation of *maya* does not clearly help: isn't it introducing multiplicity within Brahman itself? There is also the move of *qualification*: there are degrees of reality and SE discloses something real at its level but not ultimately real. I, however, have the problem of understanding its exact meaning. If it means that the physical world, though real, is only contingent, it does not conflict with either SE or theism. If it means that the world is real only as an appearance, it again comes into conflict with SE.

b) Moral experience:

Monism also seems to come in conflict with the basic assumption of moral experience, i.e., there is an objective distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. It is questionable how this can be preserved in a system when All is One. Does it mean that in the end we can't distinguish Hitler from Mother Teresa, and Stalin from Gandhi? If so, it is a mockery of our ordinary consciousness, not to mention the morally dangerous doctrine that Brahman is beyond good and evil. Of course, many monistic mystics exhibit a high degree of moral consciousness and display virtues in their lives. What I am pressing is the *logical* problem: are the moral experiences of the monistic mystics compatible with their monistic experiences? Furthermore, moral strife seems to presuppose a self distinct from Brahman:

"the teaching of the Advaita school about the need for moral purification, for detachment from selfish passions, and for the advance from ignorance to knowledge presupposes that it is in fact the human being who is being urged to turn to the One. It is the human being, not Brahman, who is called upon to recognize his or her relationship with the One. If the Advaita really means that the human being must disappear altogether, he should say so in an unambiguous manner ... Further, if the human being is appearance, to whom the appearance appear? To Brahman? If so, the Absolute presumably misleads itself, though why and how remains obscure" (Copleston, p. 84).

TE, on the other hand, provides an ontological explanation or basis for the basic distinction in morality and the categorical imperative, and there is experiential fusion between moral experience and TE. Conscience sometimes mediates the voice of God and experience of grace is often experienced in and with the experience of moral improvement and so on (see Kwan, 2006c).

c) Interpersonal experience:

Our interpersonal experience reveals the otherness of the *Thou*. Again this seems to be in conflict with the monistic doctrine that all these distinctions are just illusory. On the other hand, this type of experience is coherent with TE. For example, theism allows for ecstatic union of souls and the ecclesiological doctrine of the Body of Christ also suggests that although human persons are distinct, they are destined for intimate communion. So some insights of monism are preserved.

a) Experience of change:

According to monism, change is an illusion. But "nothing seems plainer than that there are a multiplicity of things in the world around us and that these, and our experience of them, are constantly changing. To deny the reality of change, variety and multiplicity seems to be the most bizarre of all religious or metaphysical procedures" (Lewis, 1969, p. 296).

So TE also seems to have a higher degree of intercoherence than ME.

3) Worldview coherence:

I assume that the theistic worldview has substantial explanatory power (see other chapters in this book). If there is not a comparable rational case for monism, then TE will have an advantage over ME. This question cannot be fully settled here of course.

As a summary, it seems possible to argue, with respect to clauses (a) and (b) (and possibly (c)) of the Principle of Comparison, that TE should be taken as the better established sub-type of RE.

Therefore, in accordance with the Principle of Conflict Resolution, it is plausible to claim that TE would serve as the defeater of ME rather than the other way round.

#### 4) Cognitive Adjustment:

Of course, it is not plausible just to dismiss the whole type of ME. For my case to be more convincing, some plausible post-experiential re-interpretation of ME is needed. First let us consider the case of extrovertive mysticism which

"takes its start from the facts of the world around us, and ... finds that all things run into one another in a unity in which all separate existence and variety is lost. There is nothing but the One, but the One is seen 'in or through the multiplicity of objects'" (Lewis, p. 302).

It seems that the core experience is a kind of nature mysticism which, as I have argued, is compatible with theism. On the other hand, there are also plausible interpretations of introvertive mysticism. Maritain suggests:

"The Hindu experience does appear therefore, to be a mystical experience in the natural order, a fruitive experience of the absolute, of that absolute which is the substantial *esse* of the soul and, in it and through it, of the divine absolute" (pp. 97-98).

The PCE can be interpreted as an experience of the substance of one's soul which is indeed grounded in God. Because the PCE is a purely negative experience, it is not surprising that a monistic intuition can occur after that. Although it is defeated, it can be seen to be a plausible error. Furthermore, theistic mysticism shows that the mystical path can be accommodated within theism, i.e. it is not at all surprising that God will bring about the experiences of emptiness. According to Louis Dupre, negative theology may be the first step to achieve spiritual poverty

and humility. This enables us to see the emptiness of creaturely things and our inadequacies and liberates us from the attachment to things (Dupre, p.48).

Can it be done the other way round? Can the way of devotion be incorporated into the mystical path? Yes, but ultimately it is more like a concession than an integration. The Advaitin would allow that the *bhakti* is a legitimate way to Brahman but ultimately a loving devotion to Brahman, if he is consistent, must be regarded as based on ignorance. It is because devotion presupposes some sort of dualism and it conflicts with Advaita's non-dualism. So

"theism can give us a profound and beautiful way of integrating the insights of prophets with those of contemplatives and combining the paths of devotional worship and mystical endeavour. But if you try to do it the other way round the main teachings of theism begin to disappear: devotion fades and the revelations wither. While theism can convincingly absorb and enrich the mystical path without detriment to the latter, the mystical path cannot absorb theistic belief without relegating it to second place" (Smart, 1960, p. 72).

If this is the case, then the theistic way of cognitive adjustment preserves more PFJ than the monistic way. In accordance with the Principle of Conservation, the former is to be recommended.

Of course, the above is just the beginning of a critical dialogue between different religious traditions. I also have no time to discuss other theism-incompatible REs, e.g. experience of Nirvana (yet many things said above also count against these 'mystical' theism-incompatible REs). Nevertheless, I suggest tentatively that the CTA may have significant resources to resolve

the conflicts, and at least it is not obvious that TE *is defeated* by monistic experience or other types.<sup>21</sup> Yandell (1999, chapter 13) has also offered a strong critique of monistic non-TEs.

### Conclusion

The degree of conflicts among REs is usually grossly over-estimated. Many REs are just different and far from logically inconsistent. REs as a whole still support theism more than naturalism. Among the REs, TE is a relatively well-established type, and it is also widely corroborated by a diverse group of theism-friendly REs. It is at least compatible with many mystical experiences, e.g., nature mysticism. Moreover, in accordance with the principles of CTA, a plausible case can be made that the Pro-theistic Group has a greater weight than the Anti-theistic Group. So TEs are by no means defeated by conflicting religious experiences. I have a fuller treatment elsewhere (Kwan, 2003).

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21 Perhaps some may object that my interpretation of monistic experience is uncharitable. For example, Hick agrees that accounts of ME, when taken literally, are indeed incoherent. His solution is that we should interpret the mystical literature metaphorically: “the unitive language of Advaita Vedanta is ...metaphorically ... expressing a ... vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted” (Hick, 2006, p. 23). I am not sure Hick’s revisionism is really true to the monistic mystics’ experience or traditions. In any case, a vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted is compatible with theism because God is limitless, and we are indeed rooted in Him. So in any case, TE seems less problematic than monistic experience. If taken literally, the monistic experience is plagued by apparent incoherence. If taken metaphorically, it is not incompatible with theism, and cannot be taken to offer support for monism over against theism.

## Brief Discussions of Several Objections to Theistic Experience

I have treated quite a few major objections: Logical Gap Objection, Theory-ladenness Objection, Privacy Objection, Conceptual Incoherence of TE Objection, and Disanalogy Objection. I have written at length responding to the Conflicting Claims Objection because I think it is the most serious one. In my section on “Intra-coherence of TE,” I have also implicitly dealt with the Oddness of TE Objection. There are still a few objections which I have not explicitly dealt with. I give some brief comments on them below.

### 1) Impossibility of Individuation Objection

James Harris has built on Gale’s idea, and has made heavy weather of the problem of individuating God in TE. I think it is indeed impossible to *prove* that it is the same God all the time and not similar but different gods appearing in different occasions. However, I don’t think the requirement of absolute or non-circular proof is realistic because even our SEs cannot satisfy this. Outside the critical trust framework, we cannot in fact prove that our experiences apparently of the same table are really caused by the same table, and not really the results of two qualitatively similar acts of deception by the Cartesian demon. I agree with Gellman (2001, chapter 3)’s idea that reidentifying physical objects is also a holistic practice, which is inescapably circular in the end. If we also accept the re-identification of God as a holistic practice, then I think given the basic trust in theistic experience (revelatory experiences of prophets and Jesus, the experience of maximal greatness-making properties in TE) and the Principle of Simplicity, the problem can be largely solved. Even if in the end we cannot do that, then at most we can say that the ARE does not uniquely support monotheism over against polytheism. But this would be small comfort for naturalists because polytheism is equally unacceptable to them.

## 2) The No Criteria/Uncheckability Objection

Critics allege that there is no criterion to distinguish the veridical religious experiences from the non-veridical ones. Of course, there are in fact criteria from within the religious framework but the critics object that these are not objective, non-circular criteria. The first line of response is to point out it is also the case that SEs can only be checked by other SEs, and it is also circular (see Kwan, 2006b). This point should be obvious after discussions in this essay. Moreover, my lengthy section on the “Structure of CTA” is in fact meant to show that there is a universal method which governs how second order critical principles or principles of epistemic enhancement arise from the experiences themselves. In fact criteria of veridicality and unveridicality are just corollaries of these principles. I have also demonstrated how the rules of CTA can be used to settle the problem of conflicting REs. So the basic thrust of the No Criteria Objection has been neutralized.

## 3) The Naturalistic Explanation Objection

The prior question which needs to settle is when would a naturalistic explanation of TE really constitute a defeater? I think it needs to fulfill several conditions:

- a) It can specify a set of causally sufficient conditions for TE.
- b) We have reasons to believe that that set of conditions will render the veridicality of the TE unlikely.
- c) We have reasons to believe that set of conditions really obtain in the majority of cases of TE.

I doubt any available naturalistic explanation can satisfy these requirements but I have not said much about this here. Fortunately many authors have a good response to this problem: Davis (chapter 8), Yandell (1993, chapters 6-7), Gellman(1997, chapter 5; 2001, chapter 5), and

Griffith-Dickson (2000, chapter 4). Wall's book is entirely devoted to this issue and he utilizes concrete examples of religious experiences to point out the inadequacy of various naturalistic explanations. I have also offered a detailed critique of projectionism (Kwan, 2006a).

#### 4) Gullibilism Objection

Many critics like to produce alleged counter-examples to the PCT like experiences of UFO, apparitions, and so on. They contend that the PCT leads to the acceptance of all these strange claims, and hence the approach is too gullible. I have taken care of this objection in the very first stage of my argument. I only argue for a weak Token PCT, emphasize the need for critical sifting, and explain how the CTA can produce an orderly and coherent noetic structure.

## **The Argument from Religious Experience in the Twenty-first Century**

Although the argument from religious experience is hotly contended, I think Swinburne's route of taking religious experience as *prima facie* evidence for the transcendent realm is a promising one. Following this line, I have defended a version of ARE in this essay.

I have argued that the Type PCT is a fundamental principle. Even if my Impartiality Argument is not conclusive, I hope I have made or at least suggested a plausible case for the CTA, which is clearly delineated here. I contend that since TE does have impressive empirical grounding and intra-coherence, it deserves to be accorded PFJ. I have also argued that many popular alleged defeaters of TE do not really succeed. Of course, I cannot deal with *all* the proposed defeaters here. However, the recurrent pattern of discussions shows that the objections often commit fallacies of double standard, epistemic chauvinism or requirement of super-reliability. So those alleged defeaters are more implicitly the rejection of the PCT and CTA. Otherwise, it seems rather difficult to show the entire corpus of TE to be unreliable. So it may not be unreasonable to believe that the critics are yet to produce a convincing defeater. It follows that belief in God can at least be tentatively justified.

I do not expect the argument from religious experience will gain consensus, but in any case, philosophical arguments rarely achieve this. The argument from religious experience is worthy of further exploration together with the deep epistemological questions in the twenty-first century. It may well lead to fruitful developments in both philosophy of religion and epistemology.



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