Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Religion

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SPIRIT BELIEFS

Hans Van Eyghen

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This book assesses whether belief in spirits is epistemically justified. It presents two arguments in support of the existence of spirits and arguments that experiences of various sorts (perceptions, mediumship, possession and animistic experiences) can lend justification to spirit-beliefs.

Most work in philosophy of religion exclusively deals with the existence of God or the epistemic status of belief in God. Spirit beliefs are often regarded as aberrations, and the falsity of such beliefs is often assumed. This book argues that various beliefs concerning spirits can be regarded as justified when they are rooted in experiences that are not defeated. It argues that spirit-beliefs are not defeated by recent theories put forth by neuroscientists, cognitive scientists or evolutionary biologists. Additional arguments are made that traditional theistic belief is epistemically linked to spirit beliefs and that unusual events can be explained in terms of spirit-activity. The book draws on theistic arguments, phenomenal conservatism and defenses of religious experiences to argue for the justification of spirit-beliefs.

The arguments draw on examples from various religious traditions ranging from Christianity and Islam to Haitian Vodou and Tibetan Bon.

The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs will be of interest to researchers and advanced students working in philosophy of religion, religious epistemology, ethnography and cognitive neuroscience.

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For Christel and Daniël.

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General Introduction

Edward Tylor (1832–1917), the man who arguably first coined the term 'animism', argued that belief in spirits represents a primitive form of religiosity, still present in primitive cultures but now superseded by more civilized forms of religion in the west.[1] Tylor's ideas have largely left the contemporary academy. One can nonetheless find echoes of his ideas in online fora.[2] For most educated westerners, questions concerning spirits are absent or confined to occasional glances at the esoteric section of bookshops. Belief in spirits is also associated with new age groups who are regularly mocked for their gullibility.

One can also note a peculiar, almost deafening silence on questions regarding spirits in the works of theologians and philosophers of religion (apart from some exceptions, see below). Some Christian thinkers go to great lengths to show that the concept of God is radically different from that of other supernatural beings (e.g. Hart 2013), but they spend very little time on the question whether such other beings exist, if at all. Most of the time, spirits are not even mentioned.[3]

Aiming for Respectability

A number of authors share the idea that the question concerning the existence of God or the justification concerning belief therein was difficult to pose until fairly recent. Due to the continuing influence of waned philosophies like classical and logical positivism, philosophical argumentation on God had become awkward or was considered infantile. Some claim that the awkwardness has been largely overcome because of new defenses of God's existence and the justification of belief in God. The works of Richard Swinburne (Swinburne 2004) and Alvin Plantinga (Plantinga 2000) are often regarded as key in this transition.

While questions concerning God have regained a new sense of respectability in philosophical discourse, the same does not hold true for many other religious beliefs. There has been some discussion on belief in hell (e.g. Buckareff and Plug 2005; Kvanvig 1993), belief in heaven (Byerly and Silverman 2017) or belief in the devil (McCraw and Arp 2016).

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They remain scarce in comparison to the discussion on God (see also Chapter 1).

This book before you investigates a different set of religious beliefs, beliefs regarding spirits. Although such beliefs are widespread in most contemporary and historical religious traditions, contemporary philosophical discussion on the topic is very scarce. As with other philosophically marginalized religious beliefs, there are exceptions. Philip Wiebe presents a defense of Christian experiences of angels and demonic activity (Wiebe 2004). Shandon Guthrie provides a defense of the existence of Satan and demons (Guthrie 2018). Marcus Hunt argues that evidence for exorcism renders belief in demons justified (Hunt 2020). Tiddy Smith argues that widespread belief in animism and nature spirits renders their existence more plausible (Smith 2020; 2022). David Kyle Johnson on the other hand raises arguments against the possibility of justification of belief in demons (Johnson 2022). Benjamin McCraw and Robert Arp edited a volume containing historical and philosophical topics regarding demonology (McCraw and Arp 2017). José Porcher argues that religious epistemology needs to find new ways to assess the rationality of Non-Christian religious practices like those of Brazilian Candomblé (Porcher and Carlucci forthcoming).

Most works share a distinctively Christian approach to spirits. Most of the time spirits are referred to as 'angels' or 'demons'. In Western Christian cultures, the whole range of spirits is indeed exhausted by these two classes.[4] Angels are regarded as spiritual messengers who are good,[5] while demons are lower, wicked creatures. Christianity does not include spiritual beings of a more ambiguous moral nature like many other traditions do. Christianity certainly does not accept spiritual beings that can be worshipped in some form.[6] Worship is deemed solely appropriate for God. In non-Christian traditions, spirits of various forms take much more center stage. In some traditions, like traditional African religions, spirits even take on a more prominent role than God. God is believed to be too far remote from human affairs and believed as to have let spirits in charge of various offices on earth.

My aim is to provide a new assessment of belief in spirits. The question to be answered is whether belief in spirits is justified. The question will be assessed by both metaphysical and epistemological arguments. Metaphysical arguments aim to show that the existence of spirits is plausible given the existence of other phenomena. They resemble arguments for the existence of God that claim God offers the best explanation for phenomena like the ultimate beginning of the universe or the fine alignments of cosmological constants. All metaphysical arguments are similar in structure but differ in its conclusion and the phenomena they draw on. The epistemological arguments focus on experiences. These also bear similarities to some arguments regarding belief in God. Several authors argue that belief in God is justified because people report experiences of God. The conclusion is not so much that God exist but rather

that believing in his existence is justified.[7] The arguments presented here are also structurally similar only differ with regard to the conclusion and kind of experiences they refer to.

Unlike most existing philosophical discussion on spirits, I will not take a distinctively Christian perspective. Spirit-beliefs are highly prevalent throughout most traditions and are key to many people's religious practices. The arguments therefore do not aim to establish the justification of distinctively Christian spirits but can be used cross-culturally. Many examples in the book are drawn from Haitian and West-African Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé and Tibetan Bon. By broadening the scope, we can provide a more general assessment of the main research question.

A Note on Methodology

The arguments draw on examples of spirit-beliefs and experiences. I made an attempt to draw on examples from multiple traditions. Most are drawn from ethnographies and some from 'insider literature' by authors actively engaged in a religious practice. In doing so, I was forced to make choices. The amount of ethnographic and insider literature available is vast and impossible to oversee. My choice of examples was informed by what was most readily available and most widely discussed in proposed explanations of various spirit-experiences.

Regarding the potential defeaters (reasons to doubt the reliability of spirit-experiences) in Chapters 5–7, I looked for the most widely discussed explanations or the ones most commonly referred to by ethnographers. I excluded explanations that draw on older or discarded theoretical assumptions, like Freudian psychoanalysis. I also excluded explanations that are no longer discussed by psychologists, neuroscientists, cognitive scientists or ethnographers.

The format does not afford a lengthy detailed discussion on the backgrounds and key assumptions of the theories. All theories could have been discussed in considerably more detail. A considerable amount of literature on the philosophical backgrounds of neuroscience, cognitive science and evolutionary biology has formed, which is largely overlooked in this work. I confined the discussion to presenting the key ideas for any theory and how they relate to the phenomenon to be explained (perception-experiences, mediumship-experiences and possession-experiences). This approach suffices to assess the relevance of all theories in potential defeaters for spirit-experiences.

Outline

The next chapter discusses what spirits are, how they differ from gods and what kind of spirit-beliefs are around in various religious traditions. Chapters 2 and 3 contain metaphysical arguments for the existence of

spirits. In Chapter 2, I argue that the existence of spirits is more likely if God exists. In Chapter 3, I assess the claim that spirits likely exist because they account for unusual events. In the remaining chapters, I move to epistemological arguments. In Chapter 4, I present a general introduction. I survey recent approaches in the epistemology of perception, how these are applied to experiences of God and can be applied to experiences of spirits. In Chapter 5, I investigate the epistemic import of spirit-experiences that resemble perceptual experiences. In Chapter 6, I do the same for mediumship-experiences and in Chapter 7 for possession-experiences. I discuss animistic experiences in Chapter 8. I end with a conclusion.

Notes

1 For a discussion of Tylor's ideas, see Jong (2017).
2 See, for example, https://www.quora.com/Why-is-it-that-primitive-people-believe-so-much-in-spirits-and-spirituality.
3 For example, Braaten et al. recent 'Christian Dogmatics', discusses various loci of theology, e.g. the church, attributes of God, etc. But nothing about spirits or demons (Braaten and Jenson 1984).
4 Adherents of Many African strands of Christianity tend to accept the existence of other spirits as well.
5 Examples are fallen angels. These are, however, commonly ranked under demons in Christianity.
6 Some may argue that some Christians appear to worship saints and suggested that saints can be regarded as a kind of spirits for some Christians. For most Christians, however, saints are not viewed in a similar way as spirits are in other traditions. They are usually seen as living in a different realm close to God.
7 In some versions of the argument, authors do conclude to God's (likely) existence because religious experiences occur (e.g. Kwan 2009).

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1 What Are Spirit-beliefs?

1.1 Philosophy of Religion's Fixation with Theistic Belief

Religious topics have always drawn the interest of philosophers.[1] The earliest surviving fragments in western philosophy already discuss the ultimate origins of the universe and the nature of God or gods. Though the interest in religious topics waned with the growing dominance of atheistic and naturalistic philosophies in the 19th and 20th centuries, philosophy of religion remains a prominent subdiscipline of philosophy till this day.

The main concern of philosophers of religion was and is God. There is a long and venerable tradition of arguments for the existence of God. The best-known examples are the ontological, cosmological and design argument. All have a long history and come in contemporary varieties. Recent handbooks in philosophy of religion usually also spend considerable pages on the attributes or nature of God (e.g. Clack and Clack 2019). These questions (e.g. God's omniscience, omnibenevolence and aseity) are also widely discussed in recent papers. A look at how papers in philosophy of religion are indexed on www.philpapers.com shows the dominance of theistic belief (Figure 1.1).[2]

Of the main categories, four focus almost exclusively on theistic belief. The categories 'Arguments for theism' and 'Arguments against theism' include classical arguments like the design argument, ontological argument and the problem of evil.[3] Nearly all arguments conclude to the (probable) existence or non-existence of a supreme being. Though some arguments could be tailored to argue for or against the existence of spirits (most notably pragmatic arguments or the argument from divine hiddenness), this is hardly ever done.

The categories 'Divine attributes' and 'Analytic theology' mainly include theistic topics as well. Papers that discuss divine attributes usually focus on properties like divine eternity, divine goodness, omniscience or divine personhood.[4] All of these pertain to God rather than other supernatural beings. Spirits are often believed to be temporal in nature and some demons are believed to be malicious. Personhood does seem

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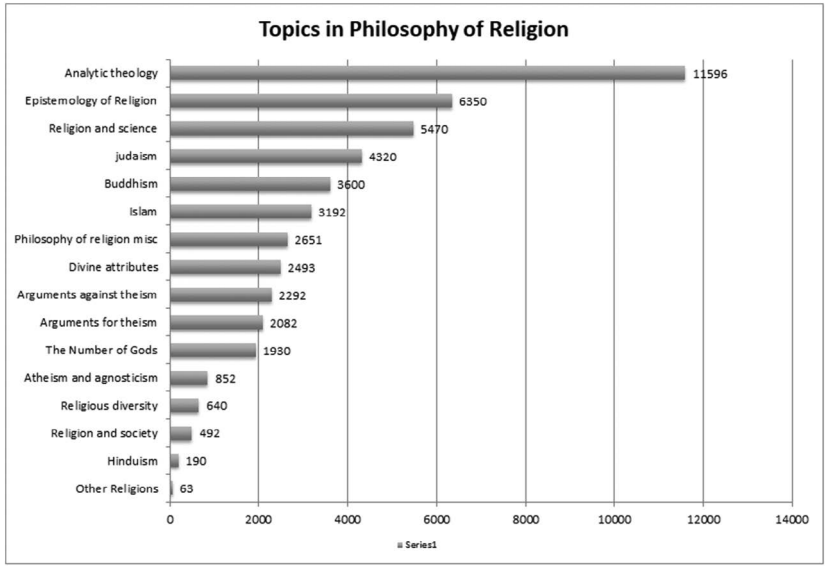

Figure 1.1 Graph Philosophy of Religion.

to apply to spirits (see also below) but this is rarely discussed in papers in this category. Most papers in 'Analytic theology' discuss topics like 'creation', 'miracles', 'prayer', 'sin', 'the soul', 'prophecy' or 'the afterlife'. Of these, most thus discuss matters relating to religious life or man's relation to God. The domain of 'creation' is almost exclusively reserved for God. Most papers on miracles do not mention miracles allegedly performed by spirits.

Most papers ranked under 'Religion and science' discuss well-known problems like the alleged conflict between Darwinian evolution and the Christian view on creation (e.g. Van den Brink 2018) or how to conceive of divine action given the scientific, mechanistic view of the world (e.g. Murphy 2010). All these relate to God and not to other supernatural beings.

Chapter 4 discusses epistemology of religion as applied to spirit-beliefs at length. It is clear though that most existing work in epistemology of religion investigates the rationality or justification of belief in God. A small number of recent papers also discusses the rationality of engaging in religious practices (e.g. Cuneo 2014; De Cruz 2018). Some also discuss the rationality of afterlife beliefs (Hasker and Taliaferro 2005). Few take on the matter of the epistemic status of belief in spirits and the like.

The categories 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism' and 'The number of gods' probably include some papers that at least mention spirits. However, the categories make up only close to 12% of the total. Furthermore, a considerable number of papers in these categories probably discusses

theistic topics like 'the concept of God in Hinduism' or arguments for monotheism over polytheism.

The short survey clearly indicates that a very large majority of contemporary papers in philosophy of religion is exclusively focused on God. Such a focus is not totally surprising since God is regarded as the highest, most perfect being that is worthy of most worship in nearly all religious traditions. However, given the significant importance of spirits in a very large number of religious traditions (see below), the lack of attention is somewhat unwarranted.

1.2 Spirit-beliefs and Incommensurability

One idea is vital for the arguments in this book, the idea that adherents of various traditions hold beliefs concerning similar entities. The arguments address the justification of belief in spirits in a general fashion. They do not merely aim to assess the justification of one class of culturally specific spirit-beliefs, like belief in vodoun, kami, dybbuks or jinn. The issue mainly concerns the arguments rooted in experiences (see Chapters 4–7). These assume that experiences of one kind of spirit can provide justificatory force for a general belief in spirits, not just belief in that one kind of spirit. It is therefore assumed that various culturally specific spirits are part of the same genus or at least share a great deal of similarities. This all raises questions with regard to incommensurability and the possibility of cross-cultural comparison.

Stating that various cultures are (to a large extent) incommensurable means that they are different to such an extent that comparisons become impossible. The idea continues to be dominant in religious studies. In practice, it means that scholars in religious studies tend to focus on differences between religious traditions or unique features in their research and theorizing.[5] For many scholars, the focus is not just a practical decision but the only possible one. Because religious traditions are radically different, any attempt at comparison, let alone reconciliation is doomed to fail.

A common argument for incommensurability is that religious traditions use different frames of reference. Eva Spies argues that accepting incommensurability does not exclude all forms of comparison but acknowledges that all comparison relies on different frames of references. Any comparison necessarily relies on one frame of reference, which is thus not shared. The frame of reference would inform all or most concepts, approaches and analytic tools used in the study of religions. Clear examples are the concepts of 'modernity' or 'secularization'. Both are tailored to the study of western traditions and are difficult to apply outside the west (Spies 2013).

As Spies notes, individuals often experience their own tradition as different from others. She notes how two groups tend to look very different

to a funerary ritual in Madagascar. In the practice called 'famadihana', the bodily remains of the deceased are taken out of their tombs and wrapped in another layer of cloth. The remains are then wrapped in a mat, family members dance with them around the tomb and place them back in the tomb. Some Christians in Madagascar see similarities between the practice and the respect Christians show toward deceased family members in Christian burial rituals. Some also see parallels with the Christian call to honor your father and mother. Most, however, see the practices as radically different and disapprove of famadihana practices. According to Spies, the two groups tend to see their traditions as providing different answers to different questions that may exist side by side (Spies 2013).

Incommensurability comes in weaker and stronger forms. In weaker forms (religious), concepts that are clearly culturally specific, like the Christian Trinity or the Buddhist Sunyata, are uncontroversially different to other seemingly similar concepts. In stronger forms, almost all concepts have a culturally specific origin and should not be applied across cultures. There are also various intermediate positions. For our purposes, the question looms whether the concept 'spirit' can be applied across various religious traditions and whether specific cultural forms (like vodoun, kami and demon) can be ranked under its header. Doubts of this kind were raised by Sokyo Ono and William P. Woodard. They argue that translating the Japanese term 'kami' as 'deity' is often correct but not translating the term is preferable (Ono and Woodard 2011: 26).

1.2.1 Against Incommensurability

Incommensurability is likely dominant in religious studies. Nonetheless, opposition appears to be growing. I will discuss two ways to argue against incommensurability, one drawing on cognitive similarities and the other drawing on conceptual similarities.

Defenders of cognitive explanations of religion stress the (creative) role of the human mind in the genesis of religious beliefs and behavior. They look for common patterns in religious beliefs and behavior, which are then linked to processes or mechanisms in the human mind.[6] For example, Pascal Boyer argues that humans have a shared 'folk ontology'. It consists of categories like 'human', 'animal' and 'plant'. Entities encountered are linked with these categories. Doing so allows humans to make expectations or predictions about that entity. Classifying something as a 'plant' allows for the expectation that the entity will grow larger under the right conditions and will not be able to move suddenly. Some entities violate some of the expectations. Venus Fly traps have a limited range of sudden movements. Others violate a lot of expectations. Wolffia Angusta are very small (0.6 mm) and barely grow larger. They have no roots and group together in water. Entities like the Venus fly trap are

more memorable because the limited amount of differences make them noteworthy. Entities like the Wolffia Angusta are not because the large amounts of differences makes them harder to process. Boyer argues that many religious concepts are, like the Venus fly trap, minimally counterintuitive. A spirit shares most of the characteristics of a 'human' but violates the expectation that humans cannot move through walls and are visible (Boyer 2001).

By relying on Boyer's cognitive account, one could argue that loa, kami and demons are similar because they rely on the same cognitive processes. All are minimally counterintuitive humans. The expectations of the ontological category 'human' or 'person' are the same as well.

Although referring to cognitive accounts can point to some similarities, they are too limited for our purposes. A number of defenders of cognitive explanations point out that human cognition always occurs at the backdrop of culturally specific contexts. Cultural context can mold the outputs of cognitive mechanisms and take it in new directions.[7] A scholar leaning toward idiosyncrasy could argue that while there may be cognitive similarities between concepts like 'kami', 'loa' and 'demon', the cultural context adds many differences that far outweigh the cognitive similarities.

Another way to overcome incommensurability does not rely much on cognitive similarities but on conceptual similarities.[8] Instead of focusing on how rituals in Madagascar are different, one could also look at a more general level and see how they are similar. Both the indigenous ritual and Christian funerary rituals perform a ceremony to honor the deceased. Both cases likely involve addressing God or another supernatural being and in both cases, the corpse of the deceased is put in a tomb. Both can therefore be classified as funerary burial rituals. Funerary burial rituals can be defined as communal, religious ceremonies where a deceased member of the community is honored and buried. Applying the concept of 'burial ritual' to both allows comparison and making statements or claim that apply to both. For example, one can argue that burial rituals are highly important in communities and are seen as necessary when a member of the community passed away. Obviously, not all claims will be applicable to all exemplars of a concept.

Turning back to our discussion, counter-arguments against generalized claims about spirit-beliefs can be preempted by defining the concept of 'spirit'. We move to this task next.

1.3 Spirit-beliefs

The goal of this book is a novel assessment of the epistemic status of belief in spirits. Clarity on what is meant with the term is indispensable for this enterprise. This section serves to delineate the term and how its referent differs from related concepts like 'theistic belief'.

Throughout the book the term 'spirit-belief' will be used as referring to:

> Beliefs in the existence or nature of supernatural beings that are not gods.

The term thus includes both positive existential beliefs that such beings exist and beliefs on what these beings are like. Both kinds of belief usually occur jointly but can be distinguished for analysis. Most of the discussion before us will focus on questions pertaining to the epistemic status of existential beliefs. Reasons for this approach are both practical and principal. From a pragmatic perspective it is clear that providing an assessment of the whole scope of beliefs concerning the nature of spirits, demons and other supernatural beings is impossible in the scope of one book. People have vastly diverging beliefs on the natures of supernatural beings and these differ greatly depending on religious tradition or geographic location. There are also other reasons for the focus on existential beliefs. Questions concerning beliefs on the nature spirits depend on the status of existential beliefs. A negative epistemic verdict on existential spirit-beliefs therefore implies a negative verdict on all beliefs concerning their nature.

Having provided more clarity on what is meant by 'spirit-belief', we will now move on to details on the content of these beliefs. Like theistic belief, spirit-belief is belief about a kind of beings. The sections below discuss various properties of what these beings are believed to be like.

1.3.1 Supernatural

Above 'spirit-belief' is defined negatively in opposition to theistic belief. Spirits are those supernatural beings that are not gods. This raises the question what is meant by 'supernatural' and what is meant by 'god'.

Let us begin with defining 'supernatural'.[9] Spelling out necessary and sufficient conditions for delineating the supernatural from the natural is notoriously difficult. Nonetheless, a couple of sufficient conditions can be stipulated. For this purpose, it is helpful to look at when naturalists (adherents of the view that only natural entities exist) rank something among the supernatural. In the past, a lot of naturalists aligned their view with physicalism, the view that only physical entities exist. Nowadays, many naturalists are reluctant to limit the natural to the physical. However, the non-physical entities which naturalists allow for in their ontology are usually limited to entities that supervene on physical things or that are very common. Examples are social institutions (e.g. money or borders) or relations between people. For example, James Ladyman excludes everything that is 'spooky' from a naturalist stance (Ladyman 2011). Ladyman is not specific about what being 'spooky' amounts to but it has an air of being unusual or out of the ordinary

about it. Hardly ever do naturalists allow for non-physical beings in their ontologies.

Being non-physical, however, cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. There are ample examples of supernatural beings that are regarded as having some physical body or physicality.[10] For example, during possessions (see Chapter 7), demons take control over a human body and show themselves through its physicality. Both the Old and New Testament include reports of humans *seeing* angels with some sort of body.[11]

A second sufficient condition is the capacity of being invisible. A large number of supernatural beings are considered invisible or capable of becoming invisible. Practitioners of African traditional religions claim that spirits are *felt* rather than seen. Their presences are announced by certain bodily sensations or emotions. Most adherents of monotheistic religions believe that God remains invisible most of the time.[12] It is hard to think of an invisible being that would be acceptable to a naturalist ontology.

Again, the capacity to remain invisible cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. Some religious scriptures make mention of angels that are visible when they visit the earth. Some Hindu gods, like the avatara of Vishnu, are also believed to be visible.

A third and final sufficient condition is being able to exist outside space and time. No being that is able to do so is acceptable for naturalists. For them, the whole of reality is usually confined to space and time.[13] In a lot of religious traditions, God is believed to be the source of everything besides himself and therefore the source of space and time itself. Having created space and time, God therefore is able to exist outside of it. Other supernatural being are believed to exist outside space and time as well. Sometimes angels are regarded as existing in a different realm of existence. The same would hold for elevated spirits.

Once again, being able to exist outside of space and time is not a necessary condition. In ancient Greek religion, Japanese Shinto and contemporary folk religions some spirits are seen as attached to rivers, trees or caves. Since they are bound to natural phenomena they appear to be bound by space and time as well. Some traditions also hold that some spirits are deceased humans that have not ascended up to an afterlife. These are bound by the same spatial and temporal conditions as humans as well.

Summing up, I discussed three properties of supernatural being that are sufficient but not necessary. A being is thus supernatural if it is:

i Non-physical
ii Capable of being invisible
iii Able to exist outside of space and time

The three properties can get us some way toward distinguishing supernatural beings. Since none of the criteria are necessary, some supernatural beings cannot be distinguished by means of (i) to (iii). For these, one can resort to looking for family-resemblances and rank something as supernatural if it resembles obvious supernatural beings to a sufficient extent.

1.3.2 Non-theistic

The conditions discussed in the previous section help us distinguish supernatural beings from natural beings. For our purposes, this is not sufficient. The goal of this book is assessing the epistemic status of spirits. We are thus interested in a subset of all supernatural beings. I noted that spirits are defined negatively as all supernatural beings that are not gods. A useful way to distinguish such beings is thus looking at how gods are defined.

An initial problem is that various traditions appear to have different criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents. If we compare ancient Greek religion to West African Yoruba, we can note that a number of supernatural agents are attributed similar properties. For example, the *orisha* Ogoun is regarded as the orisha of iron and metallurgy. The Greek *god* Hephaistos was regarded as the god of blacksmiths and metallurgy. Both were worshipped by people active in metallurgy and called upon to aid in their endeavors. Both Ogoun and Hephaistos thus appear to have similar roles and be worshipped in similar ways. Yet, Hephaistos is generally called a god whereas Ogoun usually is not. Adherents of ancient Greek religion therefore appear to have had different criteria for counting supernatural agents among the gods than adherents of Yoruba do.

In western philosophy of religion, God is often defined as a perfect being. A perfect being is the greatest possible being. Perfection implies a number of omni-properties; the best known being omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipresence.[14] Because God is the only perfect being, perfection can serve to distinguish God from other supernatural beings.[15]

Although straightforward and easy to applicate, defining non-theistic supernatural beings as non-perfect supernatural beings raises some problems. The first is that the definition of God as a perfect being is far from universally shared. Karl Barth famously argued that God is only known through his self-revelation and all human (philosophical) reflection is always at best incomplete and at worst misguided.[16] The view implies skepticism of the accuracy of divine properties drawn from philosophical reflection like perfection. A less radical criticism of perfect being theology is that the view does not match the concept of God that features in Scripture well. Another problem with defining God as a perfect being is that it is not applicable to polytheistic traditions. Although perfection

does not necessarily imply uniqueness,[17] it does imply similarity. If there could be multiple perfect beings, they should be highly similar sharing all perfections without subordination to one another. Polytheistic traditions commonly ascribe different properties to different gods and often have a hierarchy of gods. For adherents of Vaishnavism, Vishnu is the creator of the cosmos. They also accept the existence of other gods like Shiva and Ganesh but they have different cosmic roles and different impact on human life. As Peterson et al. note, a being that is at the source of the cosmos is more perfect than one that is not (Peterson et al. 2008). Therefore, Shiva and Ganesh are not perfect beings for adherents of Vaishnavism. They are nonetheless regarded as gods. A similar line of reasoning applies to other Indian traditions and to ancient Greek religion. For most ancient Greeks, Zeus was the supreme deity who held power over other gods. Although these other gods were subordinate and therefore not perfect, they were clearly considered to be gods.

Although the criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents differ depending on tradition, a majority of traditions have a (very) limited number of gods.[18] Adherents of Abrahamic religions believe in the existence of one God only and sometimes a number of other supernatural agents like demons or angels (see below). Adherents of Hinduism accept the existence of more gods.[19] However, it is a common misconception that Hindus worship as many as thousands if not millions of gods.[20] Most strands accept a hierarchy of supernatural beings wherein a small number of supernatural beings is considered most elevated. For example, in Vaishnavism, Vishnu (and his avatara) is considered the Supreme Being. Other deities take a subordinate role.

As an alternative to defining God as a perfect being, God (or gods) will be defined as that supernatural being (or those supernatural beings) that enjoy a higher elevated status. The Christian God is far exalted above all other beings (natural and supernatural). The same holds true for the concept of God in Islam and Judaism. Indian gods are also of a higher status than other beings like deva's or spirits. The elevated status of gods is due to them having greater powers, like the power to create or control the course of the universe or being free from constraints that bind other beings, like space/time or finitude.

Making a distinction between God/gods and non-theistic supernatural being on the basis of elevated status introduces vagueness.[21] Status of elevation allows for degrees and does not have a clear cut-off point. Some supernatural beings are regarded highly elevated but not considered to be gods. An example is Avalokiteshvara in Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokiteshvara is one of the most revered and most worshipped bodhisattva's, yet he is not regarded as a God. Something similar can be said of Ogun in West African Yoruba.

Having a less elevated status implies greater constraints on what these supernatural beings can and cannot do. In many cases, the influence of

a spirit does not stretch beyond the bounds of a village or small community. Spirits and demons are also regarded as bound by moral laws or other obligations.

An important difference between gods and other supernatural agents is that the latter hardly ever have a role in creation. In Abrahamic religions, God is believed to be the sole creator of the universe. Angels, demons or jinn (see below) are part and parcel of creation. In some strands of Hinduism, the Brahman is regarded as the primordial source of all that exists. Brahman also manifests as a host of gods that are worshipped by humans. Sikhism has a similar view (Hick 2000). A notable exception is the demiurge in late-antique gnostic religions and Neo-Platonist traditions. The demiurge is usually not regarded as a god, yet is credited with the creation of the visible universe (see: Fossum 2005). Crediting non-theistic supernatural agents with creating the universe is, however, very rare in contemporary religious traditions.

We can distill a number of criteria from the discussion so far:

- Less elevated status
- Less powerful
- Not creators

Because each criterion has one or more counterexamples, none of them can be regarded as necessary. Tied to the criteria for counting as supernatural (see above), they are sufficient to distinguish spirits. Despite the shortcomings, the criteria nonetheless help to distinguish gods from spirits in most cases.

1.3.3 Agent

An obvious objection to my discussion of sufficient conditions for being counted among the supernatural above is that most of the criteria apply to entities that are clearly not supernatural. On a platonic view of mathematics, numbers are regarded as non-visible entities that exist outside and independent of our minds. They are (1) invisible, (2) non-physical and (3) exist outside of space and time. Clearly though numbers are not supernatural. The problem can be avoided if we limit the discussion to supernatural *agents*. Platonic numbers and natural laws are not agents like spirits and gods are. Therefore, the criteria discussed in Section 1.3.1 still apply as criteria for distinguishing supernatural from natural agents.

This leads us to the question of what an 'agent' is. As Marc Schlosser notes, the hallmark of agency is the capacity to act. The capacity to act is not just merely performing actions but requires intentionality or the capacity to act for reasons.[22] Agency thus defined is usually preserved for humans and animals with high cognitive abilities. According to adherents of most religious traditions, supernatural beings (whether perfect

or limited) display agency as well. Supernatural beings are believed to be able to respond to prayers or offerings, influence human lives and in some cases take possession of human minds (see Chapter 7). They do so with a particular goal in mind (e.g. helping humans, punishing humans or communicating with humans).

Having agency does not imply anthropomorphism. Adherents of Hinduism tend to regard the primordial Brahman as having agential capacities, but Brahman bears little other similarities to humans. The same holds for the Chinese concept of the Dao. Spirits are usually conceived as more anthropomorphic. Their agency, however, is usually seen as superior to that humans. For example, they are often capable of performing miracles or disappear.

1.4 Spirits in World Traditions

As contemporary philosopher John Wilkins noted in a lecture, a strict monotheism with only one supernatural being is rather boring. That is the reason why there was never an enduring 'church of Spinozism' or 'church of deism'. Virtually all religious traditions accept the existence of a multitude of supernatural agents. A considerable number of them are not regarded as gods. The sections below briefly discuss how spirits feature in the main religious traditions (also called 'world religions') and are highly important in other, smaller traditions as well.

1.4.1 Christianity

Like contemporary philosophy of religion, contemporary Christian theology is reluctant to spent much energy on spirits. Most discussion either focuses on questions pertaining to God (e.g. creation, the Trinity and Salvation) or man's relation to God (sin, justification and sacraments). Nonetheless, spirits are prominently visible in the Christian tradition and are of high importance to a large number of contemporary Christians.

The authors of the New Testament make mention of demons on a number of occasions. In Mark 5:1–13, Jesus exorcises a demon (or a legion of demons) from a possessed man. In Mark 3:15, Jesus grants his apostles the ability to cast out demons themselves.[23] Demons also occur in the Old Testament (see below). Most Church fathers and Medieval Christian philosophers accept the existence of demons as well. Demons were regularly regarded as impersonations of the forces of evil, which had to be battled by the church and individual believers.

Although Christian demonology has receded into the background of Christian theology, a large number of Christians still accept their existence. In a recent poll conducted among Americans, 38% indicated believing that 'Ghosts or that spirits of dead people can come back in certain places and situations' (Newport and Strausberg 2001). Given that a majority of

Americans self-identifies as Christian or non-religious, a majority of people who indicated believing in ghosts or spirits is likely Christian.

Another group of spirits whose existence is widely accepted among Christians are angels. Unlike demons, angels are regarded as mostly benign creatures in Christianity.[24] Angels usually take on the office of messenger and share divine information with humans. The best known example is the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1: 26–38).

Angels are also believed to provide protection or guidance to humans.[25] Some Christians believe in the existence of guardian angels who serve as personal protectors of individuals (Pope 1910). As Michael LaBoissiere notes, the protective role of guardian angels can be cashed out in many ways. Some believe that guardian angels provide good advice. Others that they provide a comforting presence or keep individuals out of harm's way (LaBossiere 2016).

1.4.2 Islam

Traditionally adherents of Islam accept a host of supernatural agents next to God. Like Christians and Jews, a large number of Muslims accepts the existence of angels. A considerable number of Muslims also accepts a different class of supernatural agents. These are called 'Jinn' or 'Djinn'.

Jinn are regarded by Muslims as a distinct creation by Allah from both angels and humans. They are therefore not ghosts of dead human beings that continue to roam the earth but of a different nature than human beings. While humans are described in the Quran as created from clay, Jinn were created much earlier from some kind of fire.[26] Being created out of fire, jinn are not disembodied but have bodies of a different nature than humans. Jinn are thus not strictly immaterial or non-physical (Moad 2017).

Islamic theology sees Allah as infinitely greater than humans and Jinn (and angels). Allah is the only being that is not begotten and no being is like Allah (Moad 2017). Islamic theology therefore seems to regard jinn as having a lot more in common with man than they do with God. Edward Moad even goes as far to suggest that jinn are not really 'supernatural' in Islamic theology because unlike Allah they do not transcend nature. Like humans, jinn are part and parcel of created nature (Moad 2017).

Jinn are believed to form communities of their own. Jinn would make up nations or tribes with their own kings and chiefs. They do differ from humans in having a much longer lifespan and greater powers, like being able to travel great distances at great speed.

1.4.3 Judaism

Like Christians, adherents of Judaism traditionally accept the existence of angels and demons.[27] Demons are mentioned on some occasions in the Old Testament[28] but not as frequently as in the New Testament. When

demons are mentioned by Old Testament authors, they usually serve to illustrate the wickedness of non-Israelites and their religious practices or the sins of Israelites who strayed from proper worship of God. There is also mention of deceiving spirits who deliver untruths to prophets (e.g. 1 Kings 22:1–23). Post-exilic sections attest to belief in the Satan.[29] Satan is usually portrayed as a tempter that entices humans to sin. He is not identified as a fallen angel as is the case in later Christianity.[30]

Demons are much wider attested in Rabbinical, Jewish literature.[31] Although demons are rare in the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud makes frequent mention of them. Hilers et al. write 'The Babylonian Jews lived in a world which was filled with demons and spirits, malevolent and sometimes benevolent, who inhabited the air, the trees, water, roofs of houses, and privies' (Hilers et al. 2007). Rabbinical authors discussed various demons by name. Examples are Asmodeus, the king of demons and Agrath bat Mahalath, the queen of demons. Also in this era the tale of king Solomon as a binder of demons began to take root. According to the tale, Solomon was able to control demons and enlisted them in the construction of the first temple (Hilers et al. 2007).

Medieval kabbalistic literature makes frequent mention of demons as well. Many of the same motifs from the talmudim and midrashim are retained. Kabbalists made greater effort at a systematized demonology and added elements from non-Jewish sources, like Arabian, Christian, Germanic and Slavic beliefs (Hilers et al. 2007).

The brief survey of Jewish sources on demons indicates a persistent belief in demons in Judaism. Angels have a more prominent role than demons in the Old Testament. Angels are spiritual entities that deliver messages from God.[32] The authors of the Old Testament make a distinction between the Angel of the Lord and other angels of which the first is of higher status.

Bamberger et al. argue that belief in angels was general among both scholars and laymen in the Talmudic age. Some angels are mentioned by their proper names in Rabinnical literature, most notable Michael and Gabriel. The Talmud and midrash contain more extensive discussion on the origins, classification, function and natures of angels. In general, they are regarded as superior to men but obedient to God. It was only in modern times that mentions of angels began to be regarded as symbolic or merely poetic (Bamberger et al. 2007).

1.4.4 Hinduism

Adherents of traditions commonly referred to as 'Hindu'[33] accept the existence of a host of supernatural beings. Most major strands in Hinduism accept the existence of a limited number of supreme gods (see above). Apart from these, a lot of Hindu's accept the existence of demons. One class of Hindu demons are the Rakshasa; a type of demon

with the power to take on animal shapes. The most famous of Rakshasa is Ravana who features prominently in the Ramayana epic.

Another class of Hindu spirits are the Yaksa. They are often portrayed as mischievous, fickle-minded beings or as caretakers of natural resources. They are believed to live in forest, caves or near lakes. According to some, Yaksa serve as guardians of temple doors. They are sometimes likened to gnomes or fairies in western traditions (Dwivedi 2018). Belief in and worship of yaksha would trace back to early cults dating back to 200 B.C. (Singh 2004).

Hindu's also commonly accept the existence of other 'local gods' or spirits that are more limited in powers and who are closely connected to specific towns or geographical regions. An example is Sitala, a supernatural being who is worshipped mostly in the Tamil countryside and whose main function is protecting against snakebites and small pox (Hebbar 2002).

1.4.5 Buddhism

Adherents of various branches of Buddhism often accepts the existence of Yaksa, rakshasa demons or local gods like Hindus do (Sutherland 1991). Many Buddhists also accept the existence of bodhisattva's.

Bodhisattvas are advanced individuals who choose not to attain nirvana and remain in the world to help others reach enlightenment. Belief in bodhisattvas and pursuing the bodhisattva ideal is central in Mahayana traditions of Buddhism (Ellwood and Alles 2008).

A widely worshipped bodhisattva is Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara is worshipped in similar ways like Buddha or minor deities. People burn incense in front of statues depicting Avalokitesvara and make offerings. Worshipping Avalokitesvara is believed to aid in relieving suffering.

1.5 Spirit-beliefs in Other Religious Traditions

Belief in spirits is not only common in the major world religions but also in most smaller religions. Giving an exhaustive overview is next to impossible. I therefore restrict to some examples.

A large number of inhabitants of the Congo basin believe in the existence of *nkisi*. Nkisi are invisible entities that impact human minds. Nkisi are believed to inhabit objects, like fetish sculptures. By means of these sculptures, humans can harness the Nkisi's power for various practical ends (e.g. increase fertility, good luck and professional use) (Volavkova 1972). Nkisi are divided into malevolent and benevolent. The former are believed to have come from the ground below and the latter from the sky above (Dupré 1975).

Adherents of Japanese Shinto traditionally accept the existence of *Kami*. In most classical Shinto texts, Kami are regarded as different

from gods and are venerated by people in their daily lives (Inoue 1988b). Both historically and contemporary Kami are worshipped by the central government, local governments, clans, families or individuals. Worship usually occurs at Shinto shrines (Inoue 1988a). Kami are sometimes closely associated or identified with forces of nature or natural phenomena (rivers, trees, etc.). Some are identified with the spirits of deceased ancestors (Tamura 2001). People worship or make offerings to Kami for practical ends like ensuring a good harvest.

Adherents of Haitian Vodou[34] engage in practices with numerous spirits or Loa. Most Loa hold distinct offices. For example, Erzulie is associated with water, feminimity and the family. Legba is associated with communication, speech and understanding and is seen as intermediary between other loa and men. Adherents of Haitian Vodou typically distinguish different kinds or nations of loa. Each nation is believed to have different geographical origins. The largest nations are the Rada- and Petro-nations. Rada loa are said to have their origins in the former Dahomean empire (present day Benin) and the Petro loa from Haiti itself. Adherents also worship loa from smaller nations. They are the Congo loa (originated from the Congo basin), the Nago loa (originated from Nigeria) and Guede loa (spirits of deceased ancestors) (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2022).

Adherents of Bon in Tibet and Nepal believe that the universe contains numerous spirits and worldly gods. Examples are Sangpo Bumtri and Gyalpo Pehar. Adherents also worship spirits that are tied to mountains and many worship household spirits for protection of their houses and families. Bon was influenced by Chinese thought leading some adherents to worship Confucius. Bon religion had a major influence on Tibetan Buddhism. Adherents of the latter took over many Bon beliefs and practices. A well-known example is the use of spirit-mediums, like the famous Nechung oracle in service of the Dalai Lama (see also Chapter 6).

1.6 Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter was defining what spirits are and how they differ from gods. The brief overview of spirit-beliefs in contemporary religious traditions shows the importance of spirit-beliefs to adherents and shows the need for philosophical reflection on the epistemic status of those beliefs. If spirit-beliefs are on dubious epistemic standing due to lack of evidential support or are based on mistaken experiences, many religious beliefs and practices would be little more than superstition.

The next chapters take a closer look at arguments in favor of spirit-beliefs. We start off with two arguments arguing that the existence of spirits is likely given the existence of something else (i.e. God or unusual events).

Notes

1 As historians of philosophy like to remind us, the distinction between philosophy and theology is a fairly recent invention that does not apply outside of the western world (Sharma 1990). Many ancient and medieval thinkers discussed theological questions alongside philosophical ones. For the purpose of this chapter, I assume the distinction between philosophy and theology.
2 The data included in the chart was collected from https://philpapers.org/browse/philosophy-of-religion on 2 November 2021.
3 Other arguments included in both categories are 'Arguments from miracles', 'Cosmological arguments', 'Moral arguments', 'Pragmatic arguments', 'Arguments miscellaneous', 'Arguments from naturalism', 'Atheism', 'Divine hiddenness' and 'Arguments against theism miscellaneous'.
4 Other topics indexed under this category are 'Divine goodness', 'Divine freedom', 'Divine hiddenness', 'Divine foreknowledge', 'Divine middle knowledge', 'Divine omnipresence', 'Divine providence', 'Divine immutability', 'Divine necessity', 'Divine simplicity' and 'Divine attributes, misc'.
5 Paraphrased from Spies (2013).
6 For a more in depth discussion of shared features of cognitive explanations of religion, see White (2018).
7 For various accounts of the influence of culture, see Turner et al. (2017).
8 Two beliefs can be cognitively and conceptually similar at the same time. Boyer's account indeed shows how human cognition often relies on (innate) concepts or conceptualization.
9 The discussion on defining 'supernatural' is drawn from my earlier discussion in 'Arguing from Cognitive Science of Religion' (Van Eyghen 2020) and 'The Retreat Argument' (Van Eyghen 2018).
10 This also holds for views on God. Adherents of the church of latter day saints tend to believe that God as a material being. Most adherents of Christianity believe that God took on human flesh when incarnating as Jesus of Nazareth. In both examples, God cannot be regarded as nonphysical.
11 See, for example, Luke 1:26–28, Exodus 23:20–23.
12 For example, Hebrews 11:1. I noted above that a large number of Christians believe that God became visible when incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. This, however, attests to the claim that the Christian God has the capacity of remaining invisible even though he showed himself at some times.
13 Some might argue that time and space did not exist before the beginning of the universe with the big bang and that there were things before the big bang (e.g. quantum waves).
14 For an in depth discussion, see Peterson et al. (2008: chapter 4).
15 Some authors distinguish the Christian God from 'limited deities' (Baker-Hytch 2018).
16 For a discussion of Barth's view on divine attributes, see Titus (2010).
17 It seems logically possible that there be two being that are equally perfect, sharing omniscience, omnibenevolence and other perfections.
18 A majority of religious traditions only appears to accept one god and regard all other supernatural beings as inferior. A few notable exceptions are Hinduism and ancient polytheisms. Hinduism, however, also accepts one primordial supernatural being called Brahman that is the source of everything (see below).
19 Some argue that (most) Hindu's are monotheistic. Ian Kesarcodi-Watson notes that Hindu's commonly accept that Brahman is the supreme being manifested in personalized form as Isvara (Kesarcodi-Watson 1976).
20 See, for example, Dasa (2012).

21 Similarly, Max Baker distinguishes 'limited deities' (Baker-Hytch 2018). This term, however, does not allow for degrees.
22 Although this account of agency is dominant, alternative accounts have been defended (see Schlosser 2015 for an overview). Discussing these in detail lies beyond the scope of this chapter. The same holds for account of what counts as a 'reason'. For an overview of discussion on 'reason', see Alvarez (2016).
23 For an extended discussion of the demonology of the New Testament, see Dunn and Twelftree (1980).
24 A major exception is of course the fallen angel Lucifer who rebelled against God.
25 For example, Judith 13:20.
26 See Surah 15:26–27: indeed, we created men out of clay from altered black mud. And the jinn we created before from the fire of scorching winds. And Surah 55:15: he created the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire.
27 For a fuller discussion of demons in the Old Testament, see Gruenthaner (1944).
28 See Deut 32:17: They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded (ESV), and Psalm 106:37: They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons.
29 See Job: 1–2; Zecharaiah 3; 1 Chronicles 21:1; Psalm 109.
30 Michael J Gruenthaner notes that there are some excerpts that may point to belief in fallen angels, like Ezechiel 28:14–16. He adds that excerpts like these are obscure and possibly corrupt (Gruenthaner 1944).
31 The term 'Rabbinical literature' refers to among others Mishna, Midrashim and Talmudim.
32 See, for example, Gen 16:7–14; Ex 3:2–4; Zechariah 3:4.
33 Many scholars have argued that the term 'Hindu' was a western (or even colonial) label imposed on indigenous Indian traditions (Jha 1999; Ranganathan 2022). Nonetheless, the term is still commonly used to refer to Indian traditions like Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism. Throughout this book, I will use the term 'Hindu' to refer to these and related traditions.
34 The tradition also goes by the name 'Voodoo'. The spelling 'Vodou' is commonly used to designate the Haitian form, whereas 'Voodoo' is used for the form practiced in Louisiana. West-African forms are also more commonly called 'Vodou'.

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2 From Theism to Spirit-beliefs

2.1 Introduction[1]

Having defined 'spirits', we now move on to the task at hand, assessing the epistemic status of spirit-beliefs. This chapter presents a defense of a metaphysical argument for the existence of spirits. I argue that the existence of spirits is more probable if God exists. The argument consists of three sub-arguments. All three can work in isolation and in conjunction. If the argument(s) is (are) successful, arguments for the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of spirits.

Some of the sub-arguments below support the existence of one particular kind of spirits. Most notably, sub-argument 2 primarily supports the existence of spirits who serve as spiritual messengers or intermediaries. In Christian, Islamic and Jewish tradition these are commonly called 'angels'. A number of African and Afro-Caribbean traditions also shares the idea that (some) spirits serve as intermediaries between God and man. Some even maintain that God is too transcendent or too far removed from human affairs to be addressed or worshipped directly. Therefore, the distance between both needs to be bridged by other supernatural agents. The second sub-argument also applies to such beings. The first and third sub-arguments have a broader scope beyond spiritual messengers or intermediaries.

If the existence of spirits is shown to be more probable given the existence of God, learning about the argument(s) can increase one's justification for spirit-beliefs. To my knowledge, the arguments below have not been defended in their presented forms. Some authors did make suggestions along the same lines, but their premises or conclusions were slightly different.

I noted in Chapter 1 that some authors attempt to drive a wedge between belief in God and belief in spirits. If the arguments below are successful, they show that both are much closer epistemically connected than is often believed.

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2.2 The Initial Outlook: Arguing for God Alone

As noted, the (non) existence of spirits is rarely discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion. The discussion over the existence of God, by contrast, is vast. As a result, arguments for the existence of God appear to argue for 'mere theism', a metaphysical view where only one supernatural being (i.e. God) exists.

Natural theology is an umbrella term that covers discussion on arguments for or against the existence of God. The arguments are numerous.[2] Although nearly all arguments conclude for or against the (likely) existence of God, they differ in the level of detail they allow for. Defenders of the ontological argument conclude to the existence of a perfect being (e.g. Malcolm 1960) or a maximally great being (e.g. Plantinga 1968). Being perfect implies having several properties such as omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. As noted in Chapter 1, spirits are commonly believed *not* to have these properties. Therefore, it seems as if the ontological argument is of little help or relevance in assessing the likely existence of spirits.

The same appears to hold for other arguments from natural theology. The most popular argument for the existence of God in recent years is arguably the design argument. In one of its most recent forms, defenders argue that the highly improbable alignment or fine-tuning of cosmological constants renders the existence of a designer God more probable than its negation (cf. Collins 2003; McGrath 2009). Unlike the ontological argument, the design argument does not conclude with a perfect being but with a designer. As some note, a designer God need not be perfect. David Hume famously suggested that the universe could have been designed by a not-so-powerful rookie angel who was prone to make a lot of mistakes (Hume 1970). Such a being is far from perfect. Nonetheless, design arguments appear to be of little help in establishing the existence of spirits as well. As noted in Chapter 1, spirits are usually *not* believed to have created the universe.[3]

It thus seems as if arguments merely establish the existence of God and do little to make the existence of spirits more probable. The arguments thereby raise the suggestion that there are no close epistemic links between the likelihood of God's existence and that of spirits. Below I present three arguments for a closer connection. All arguments conclude that a high likelihood of God's existence implies a higher likelihood of spirits existing. Therefore, if the arguments raised in the remaining sections are successful, arguments for the existence of God can indirectly lend justification to belief in spirits as well.

2.3 From Theism to Spirit-beliefs

As noted in Section 2.2, arguments from natural theology seemingly provide support for the existence of God alone. The arguments usually also allow for more qualified conclusions such as the (probable) existence of

a perfect being or a designer God. We noted in Chapter 1 that spirits are conceptually very different from God, the main difference being their powers and status. Therefore, it seems that Chapter 1 and Section 2.2 jointly support the conclusion that arguments from natural theology do not support the existence of spirits. By contrast, this section argues that arguments that support the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of spirits if a number of background beliefs concerning God are established. The claim defended in this section can be stated as follows (where 'B' is background knowledge):

$$P(\text{spirits} \mid \text{God} \,\&\, B) > P(\sim\text{spirits} \mid \text{God} \,\&\, B)$$

The probability of the existence of spirits increases if there is a God for a number of reasons, all of which are analyzed in greater detail below. They are the following:

a An omnibenevolent God wants to make himself known through messengers.
b The existence of spirits is more likely if there is a supernatural realm.
c The existence of spirits is more probable if sacred scriptures are reliable.

Below, I discuss each of these in more detail. In most cases, one needs to establish a number of background beliefs (B). All required background beliefs can be established by additional arguments concerning the nature or actions of God.

2.3.1 The Existence of Spirits Is More Likely If There Is a Supernatural Realm

The first argument needs no additional background knowledge concerning God's nature or actions to conclude to a higher probability of spirits. It notes that the existence of spirits requires the denial of naturalism, i.e. the claim that only natural entities exist. If the existence of God is supported by one or more arguments from natural theology, we gain support for the denial of naturalism, and therefore, the existence of spirits becomes more probable.[4] The argument can be stated as (where 'N' stands for naturalism and 'SN' for supernaturalism):

$$P(\text{spirits} \mid N) < p(\text{spirits} \mid SN)$$

The first reason why the denial of naturalism aids the case for spirits is by defusing prominent epistemic defeaters. An apparently major reason to reject the existence of spirits is drawn from naturalism. Adherents of naturalism deny the existence of any supernatural agent whatsoever.[5] By implication, adherents of naturalism deny the existence of spirits. Any

argument for naturalism is, therefore, an argument against the existence of spirits by implication. Learning of an argument for naturalism can therefore constitute an epistemic (rebutting) defeater for belief in spirits. Common arguments for naturalism are arguments that naturalism is more parsimonious than non-naturalism (Oppy 2020), arguments that naturalistic explanations proved more successful than non-naturalistic explanations in the history of science (e.g. Boudry et al. 2010) and arguments from the causal closure of the physical universe (Papineau 2009). Assessing these arguments falls beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to note that if any of the arguments are sound, any subject holding beliefs in the existence of spirits has a defeater for those beliefs.

Arguments for the existence of God can indirectly support belief in spirits by defeating naturalistic defeaters. If any sound argument concludes with the existence of God, it establishes the existence of at least one supernatural agent. As a result, naturalism is shown to be false. In doing so, arguments from natural theology can defeat naturalistic defeaters and leave room for the acceptance of spirits. In doing so, the arguments do not aid a positive case for spirits beliefs but merely counter the negative case against such beliefs.

Arguments from natural theology can also do more and aid the positive case for the existence of spirits. If sound, arguments for the existence of God show the existence of a supernatural realm. They show that the whole of existence is not exhausted by what is natural but includes at least something supernatural, i.e. God. The probability of spirits existing clearly becomes more probable if there is sound reason to believe that there is a supernatural realm than when there is not. To a subject without any evidence or reason to believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, the existence of spirits is what Charles Sanders Peirce calls a 'surprising fact' (Douven 2011). Evidence or reasons for the existence of spirits (such as an experience of a spirit or demonic activity) or an argument as discussed in Chapter 3 for such a subject are harder to fit with background knowledge. The existence of spirits fits much easier if the existence of a supernatural realm has already been accepted and naturalism was rejected.

One could object that showing the existence of a supernatural realm merely shows that spirits are logically possible yet not probable. The existence of highly advanced alien life forms on Mars is logically possible, yet not probable given the long history of observations on Mars. Contrary to this claim, the argument does more than merely establish logical possibility. By showing that there is a God, arguments show that there is at least one supernatural being. Accepting a spirit aside from God then no longer requires a subject to accept a new class of beings that is different in kind. Compared, before the invention of the microscope, the existence of micro-animals was not very probable. After the first observations of bacteria by Anthony van Leeuwenhoek (Lane 2015), the existence of other animals of the same class became considerably more probable.

The argument points out how the existence of God renders the existence of similar (supernatural) beings more likely. A similar argument could point to the similarities between non-physical (human) minds and non-physical agents. One could rely on evidence for the survival of human minds post-biological death to establish the existence of disembodied, non-physical minds (e.g. Braude 2003; Lund 2009). By pointing out how spirits are similar to those non-physical minds, one could raise the likelihood of spirits as well. However, establishing the existence of non-physical minds merely raises the likelihood of other non-physical agents. The argument defended in this section raises the probability of supernatural agents that, such as God, are (i) non-physical, (ii) invisible, and (iii) not bound to the spatio-temporal realm. Thereby, the argument defended here is less general and better tailored for the likelihood of spirits as defined in Chapter 1.

One must acknowledge that the probability of the existence of spirits gained from establishing a supernatural realm is still rather low. The argument can, however, aid in a cumulative case for the existence of spirits. The arguments I discuss next can provide a stronger case.

2.3.2 An Omnibenevolent God Wants to Make Himself Known through Messengers

The second argument does rely on background knowledge concerning the nature and actions of God. The argument states that the existence of spirits is more likely if there is a God who is omnibenevolent and is unable or unwilling to intervene directly in human lives.

Both claims can be established through rational argumentation. The claim can be stated as:

P(spirits | God & M) > P(~spirits | God & M) (where M = use of/preference for messengers)

The argument resembles an argument made by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Apuleius (124–170). Apuleius argues that intermediary beings are indispensable to transmitting divine communications to the human realm. Apuleius' argument presupposes an ancient worldview wherein there exists a hierarchy of gods and other supernatural agents that exist in different spheres of existence. Before investigating whether his argument can be adapted to a contemporary worldview, I first discuss his original argument.

Apuleius's argument hinges on two claims:

1 The most elevated beings are too far removed from the human sphere to interact with humans.
2 The most elevated beings are moved by human pleas.

Both claims are defended by Apuleius but not stated in this way. As noted, Apuleius's argument assumes a Neo-Platonist worldview (Mortley 1972). In this view, there are different spheres of existence. All these spheres are inhabited by supernatural agents or 'gods'.[6] His argument can be regarded as defending the need for supernatural agents in the lower realms because they act as a bridge to the gods of higher realms.

Concerning (1), Apuleius writes:

> You have, then, in the meantime, two kinds of animated beings, Gods entirely differing from men, in the sublimity of their abode, in the eternity of their existence, in the perfection of their nature, and having *no proximate communication* with them; since those that are supreme are separated from the lowest habitations by such a *vast interval of distance*; and life is there eternal and never-failing, but here decaying and interrupted, and the natures are there sublimated to beatitude, while those below are depressed to wretchedness. What then? Has nature connected itself by no bond, but allowed itself to be separated into the divine and human parts, and to be thus split and crippled, as it were? For, as the same Plato remarks, "No God mingles with men." But this is the principal mark of their sublime nature, that they are not contaminated by any contact with us.
>
> (Apuleius 2001: emphasis added)

Apuleius here argues that communication between the gods of higher spheres of existence and humans is impossible because of their different natures and the vast distance between them. Gods of higher realms are perfect, whereas humans are far from perfect. None of these gods want to 'mingle' with imperfect beings. Apuleius does not explicitly argue why this is the case, but probably gods would refrain from doing so for fear of contamination or because it does not befit their perfect status.

Apuleius also points to the vast difference between gods and humans. He likely did not have geographical distance in mind but rather pointed to the different spheres of existence wherein the gods and humans abide. Since both groups do not share the same realm of existence, communication is impossible.

Concerning (2), Apuleius writes:

> No God, you say, interferes in human affairs. To whom, then, shall I address my prayers? To whom shall I make my vows? To whom shall I immolate victims? Whom shall I invoke throughout my whole life, as the helper of the unfortunate, the favorer of the good, and the adversary of the wicked? And whom, in fine, (a thing for which necessity most frequently occurs) shall I adduce as a witness to my oath?
>
> (Apuleius 2001)

Here, Apuleius points to the problems raised by (1) for common religious practices of his time. Common Greek religious practices such as praying, making vows, offerings, invocations and making oaths all involve some kind of communication to the gods.[7]

Both claims (1) and (2) jointly raise a problem. Humans feel a need to send communications by means of various religious practices to the gods, but because of their vastly different natures and vast distances between them, such attempts appear to be futile. The same holds for communications in the opposite direction, from the gods to humans. Divine messages to humans are rendered impossible for the same reasons.

The problems raised by (1) and (2) can be solved by intermediary beings that act as a bridge between gods and humans, according to Apuleius.[8] He affirms that there are beings that are placed as messengers between humans and the gods. These beings can carry messages from humans to God and from God to humans (in the forms of prayers, invocations, revelations, etc.) and can act as interpreters (Apuleius 2001).

The intermediary beings are capable of their bridge function because they have a 'middle nature'. They are not quite of the same elevated nature as the gods and not quite of the same earthly nature of man but are 'composed of a mixture of both' (Apuleius 2001). The middle nature of intermediary beings not only pertains to their natures but also to their 'place of habitation' (Apuleius 2001).

The polytheism and Neo-Platonist ancient worldview affirmed by Apuleius have since left debates in the philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, Apuleius's argument can be updated to fit a contemporary worldview. Below, I discuss how Apuleius' two central claims can be adapted for this purpose.

Let us begin with claim (2). Some support for (2) in contemporary monotheistic traditions is gained from their sacred Scriptures. An additional argument for (2) is inferred from God's omnibenevolence. Adherents of all three large contemporary monotheistic traditions affirm that God's interventions in human life are good. Christians pray for God's help in their struggles and ask for divine guidance. Jews and Muslims do likewise. Both ancient Greek practices and contemporary practices thus give testament that divine interventions can be of aid for humans. The mere fact that humans want and need divine interventions does not imply that God will be moved by human needs. It does, however, if God is omnibenevolent. A God who is morally perfect will be inclined to act on human pleas because doing so constitutes a moral good. God's omnibenevolence is affirmed by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.

The discussion so far strongly suggests that Apuleius's second claim can be accepted by most contemporary theists. More problems arise concerning (1). Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm that God can reveal himself to humans without the need for any intermediary being. For example, the Old Testament narrates how God revealed

himself to Moses in the burning bush. The New Testament affirms that God took on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The examples show that contemporary Jews and Christians do not share Apuleius's ideas about an unbridgeable gap between God and humans or about God's nature preventing him from showing himself directly to humans.

Apuleius' first claim must therefore be adapted to fit an omnipotent God. Despite the possibility of God revealing himself to humans and therefore sending divine messages himself, the sacred Scriptures of the three largest contemporary monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) all affirm a role for intermediary beings that carry messages from God to humans. The Hebrew Bible frequently mentions appearances of the Angel of the Lord to deliver messages from God or to lead the Israelites.[9] The New Testament also mentions a role for angels in delivering divine messages. The most famous is the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus by the Angel Gabriel.[10] According to Islamic tradition, the divine message contained in the Quran was dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Therefore, despite being able to send messages himself, adherents of all three monotheisms affirm that God sometimes chooses to send intermediary beings.

A contemporary theist could rely on divine skepticism to answer why God sometimes uses angels to deliver messages and delivers messages himself on other occasions. Some excerpts give a hint as to why God would do so on some occasions. After his encounter with the Angel of God, Gideon is smitten with fear because he believes he saw God face-to-face.[11] Divine self-revelations are fewer in number in the Old and New Testament than messages sent by angelic messengers. Self-revelations only occur at the most important of times. God reveals himself to Moses to begin the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth to deliver mankind of sin. Both acts are beyond the power of angelic messengers. When God's goal is merely to provide information to humans, messages are usually sent by angels. Unless the circumstances exceed the power of angels, angelic messengers may be less awe-inspiring or trigger milder emotional responses than divine self-revelations. Therefore, messages delivered by intermediary beings might be easier to process by humans.

One might object that the first argument only shows how an increased likelihood of the existence of the Christian or Abrahamic God increased the likelihood of spirits. Apuleius's original argument, however, also shows that a god who lacks the power to deliver or receive human messages has an even stronger need for intermediary beings. Something similar might hold for traditions where the Supreme Being or supreme reality is not easily accessible to humans. For example, adherents of West African Yoruba accept the existence of a supreme being who possesses many perfections called Olodumare. Olodumare is, however, far removed from the human realm of existence and therefore relies on

other supernatural beings (Orisha's) to answer human concerns (Bewaji 1998).

The second argument connecting God's existence to the existence of spirits thus states that spirits likely exist if God exists because God is moved to intervene in human lives, and God has reasons to use angelic messengers for that intervention. Those reasons might be that encounters with angels are less fear inducing or emotionally charged than encounters with God or a reason unknown to men.[12] Caution must be made that the argument only holds if God is seen as omnibenevolent and unable or unwilling to intervene in human lives personally. The last point prevents one from making a connection between the likely existence of spirits and a deistic God or gods who are believed to intervene more often themselves.

The arguments so far focused on establishing that God is unable or unwilling to intervene himself and therefore makes use of spirits as messengers. Another element of background knowledge that needs to be established is God's omnibenevolence. A large number of arguments for the existence of God merely conclude to a creator or designer (see above) and do not allow for more conclusions about God's nature. Some arguments, however, do. For example, the ontological argument concludes with a perfect being or a maximally great being. The argument discussed in this section can therefore be joined with the ontological argument to raise the probability that spiritual messengers exist.

2.3.3 The Existence of Spirits Is More Probable If Sacred Scriptures Are Reliable

The next way in which the existence of God can support belief in spirits is by providing support for the reliability of sacred texts.[13] The argument adds the reliability of sacred texts as an extra intermediate step in arguing from a higher probability of the existence of God to a higher probability of the existence of spirits. This can be stated as follows, with 'RST' signifying the reliability of sacred texts:

1 P(RST| God) > P(RST| ~ God)
2 P(spirits|RST) > P(spirits | ~ RST)
3 Therefore, P(spirits |God) > P(spirits | ~ God)

The first premise seems almost trivially true. If there is no God, a lot of the information contained in sacred scriptures should be judged false since the vast majority of sacred scriptures assume the existence of God or narrates about God's actions. Solid evidence for the non-existence of God would therefore constitute an easy defeater for the reliability of sacred scriptures. Apart from trivial support by avoiding this clear

defeater, evidence for God's existence can support the reliability of sacred scriptures in different ways as well.

Some have argued that we can expect God to reveal himself if God exists. Richard Swinburne argues that since humans stand in need of guidance concerning proper religious and moral behavior, we can expect God to give propositional information with regards to these in the form of a revelation. He adds that if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of a God who is all-powerful and all-good, there is good evidence that God will answer this need (Swinburne 2007). Elsewhere, Swinburne famously argued that there is more than sufficient evidence for the existence of an all-powerful and all-good God (Swinburne 2004).

Swinburne's argument merely concludes with divine revelation and not with reliable sacred scriptures. His argument can, however, be expanded for this goal. Divine revelation is usually very limited in scope. In Christianity, God is believed to have revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Direct contact with Jesus was reserved for his immediate followers and people living in the region and age where he lived. The vast majority of Christians never had direct access to this revelation. Revelation is even more restricted in Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, God delivered his message solely to the prophet Muhammad. Others besides Muhammad never heard the message directly. In both traditions, the content or nature of divine revelations is transmitted to others through written reports collected in sacred scriptures. If humans stand in need of information from a divine source as Swinburne argues, an all-powerful, all-good God will not limit this information to subjects with direct access to his revelation. God would likely want reports of the revelation to be disseminated to as many people as possible. Written reports provide the best means of doing so.

Scriptures of Indian religions also provide a means of broader dissemination of truths than direct revelations. Although personal revelations or experiences of gods are more central to some Indian traditions (e.g. in Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism), their scope is still restricted. Many adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism rely on scriptures for knowledge concerning the divine or moral order (commonly called 'the Dharma'). Therefore, scriptures provide a means to reach more people as well in those traditions.[14]

The argument is not applicable to other Non-Abrahamic traditions. Traditional African religions, Afro-Caribbean religions, native American religions and many others do not have sacred scriptures containing revelations. The traditions rely more on personal experiences and oral transmission and tend to assign less authority to scriptures.

If God is concerned with providing humans guidance by handing information through written reports, God would also want to make sure that the reports are reasonably accurate. He would therefore make sure that the reports are written down carefully and transmitted without many errors.

Therefore, sacred scriptures should have certain 'virtues of divinity', such as truthfulness, as Thomas McCall argues (McCall 2009).

Now how does the reliability of sacred scriptures support the existence of spirits? The vast majority of sacred scriptures across traditions attest to the existence of spirits. The Hebrew Bible affirms the existence of angels (e.g. Exodus 33:2). The New Testament affirms the existence of angels and demons (e.g. Mark 5:1–20). The Quran affirms the existence of angels and Jinn, a class of supernatural, invisible beings.[15] The Hindu Mahabharata and Ramayana epics affirm the existence of a large number of demons and spirits such as Ravana.[16] The Sikh Guru Granth Sahib mentions demons that drive humans toward evil inclinations. The Japanese Kojiko largely consists of the exploits of Kami, which take on many characteristics of spirits. The Buddhist Pali Canon mentions the demon Mara who attempted to distract Siddhartha Gautama.[17] If sacred scriptures are reliable, we have reason to believe that the information they provide regarding the existence of spirits is reliable as well.

Against the argument, a number of objections can be raised. A first objection echoes a claim made by Rudolph Bultmann (Bultmann 1984). Bultmann argues that sacred scriptures[18] were written down in an era and cultural setting wherein a discarded ontological view was dominant. Around the time when sacred scriptures were composed, various superstitious beliefs that are now widely rejected were commonplace. For example, the authors of the books that make up the Old and New Testament accepted a pre-modern cosmological view wherein the earth was separated from the heavens by a firmament. Various texts such as the Genesis creation story attest to this cosmology. Now that the old cosmology has been discarded by scientific advances, sacred scriptures should be 'demythologized' and be cleansed from traces of discarded beliefs.

With Bultmann, one could argue that the existence of various spirits is a remnant of a by-gone ontology that is widely discarded as well. Therefore, just like sacred scriptures should be cleansed from references to old cosmologies, they should be cleansed from references to spirits as well. Passages that do refer to spirits should then be translated to fit with a modern view of the world. For example, the exorcism of the Gerasene demon (cf. Mark 5:1–20) should be translated as Jesus delivering a man of some psychiatric disorder rather than exorcising him from a demon. The argument does not deny the reliability of sacred scriptures but argues that regardless they do not support the existence of spirits. The mention of demons and spirits is merely an outdated means of stating that people suffered from various illnesses and does not really affirm the existence of supernatural beings.

As a counter-argument, referring to demythologizing is question-begging. The argument defended above aims to establish the existence of spirits by pointing to the reliability of sacred scriptures. The

counter-argument replies that sacred scriptures support no such claim because spirits do not exist (according to a modern worldview). The counter-argument thereby assumes the non-existence of spirits, the very claim the argument aims to deny. On the surface, there is no reason to believe that the authors of sacred scriptures refer to anything else than spirits when discussing spirit or demonic activities. Without accepting that such beings, in fact, do not exist, the Bultmann-style argument presents few reasons that they do not.

A second counter-argument refers to diversity regarding sacred scriptures. One could argue that sacred scriptures provide no evidence for the existence of spirits because many mutually conflicting sacred scriptures abound. Christians have the Bible, Muslims the Quran and Hindus the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Vedas. All are regarded as sacred scriptures within a particular tradition and rejected outside.

The argument is not so much an argument against drawing evidence for spirits from sacred scriptures but rather a general argument against the reliability of sacred scriptures. Several authors argued that merely pointing to diversity in revelations (d'Costa 1996) or testimonial chains (Baker-Hytch 2018) does not undermine the reliability of one revelation or testimonial chain. Applied to sacred scriptures, the mere fact of diversity does not show that one set of sacred scriptures is not more reliable than others. Assessing the reasons for preferring one lies far beyond the scope of this paper. Given that most sacred scriptures affirm the existence of spirits, it does not matter which sacred scriptures are on a better epistemic footing. One can conclude the existence of spirits if either the Bible, Quran or Mahabharata were shown to be the most reliable. Establishing the reliability of one set of sacred scriptures would, however, require additional arguments. Assessing these claims lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

One could argue from the fact of diversity that some parts of sacred scriptures are more reliable than others. Some authors, such as John Hick, advocate a focus on commonalities across religious traditions and rejecting particularities (Hick 1997). As noted in the previous paragraph, others have argued against the charge of diversity. Even if one would grant the charge and agree that conflicting parts in sacred scriptures should be rejected in favor of similarities, sacred scriptures still favor the existence of spirits. As noted, a lot of sacred scriptures affirm the existence of spirits. They disagree over the identities of spirits and some of their natures. These differences are, however, not the focus of the argument. Therefore, it is likely that the sacred scripture (or part thereof) that ends up being the most reliable one is one that affirms spirits.

Like the previous argument, the third argument relies on God's omnibenevolence, a divine attribute that is already supported by a number of independent arguments such as the ontological argument.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

I argued that the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents is more probable if God exists. I defended three reasons in favor of that position: the existence of a supernatural realm given the existence of God; the use of intermediary beings to accomplish interaction between God and humans; and the reliability of sacred scriptures which attest to the existence of spirits. If any of the three arguments is sound, accepting the existence of God can lend justification to the existence of spirits. As a result, arguments for the existence of God indirectly support the existence of spirits.

The arguments defended imply that belief in spirits deserves more epistemic credit than it is often given. Arguments for the existence of God are commonly regarded as serious endeavors to gain justification for belief in God. If the arguments in Section 2.4 are sound, justification gained from such arguments allows for justified belief in spirits.

Notes

1 Most of the content of this chapter was published in slightly different form as 'From Theism to Spirit-Beliefs' in *Religions* (Van Eyghen 2022). Reprinted with permission.
2 For overviews, see Craig and Moreland (2009) and Manning et al. (2013).
3 There is a subtle difference between being a designer and a creator. Concluding to a designer merely concludes to a being that brought order to the universe. The designer could have operated on pre-existing material or chaos. Concluding to a creator usually means that the creator was the cause or origin of the universe. In most discussions, however, the distinction between designer and creator is not drawn sharply.
4 As an anonymous reviewer noted, a similar argument can be made relying on pantheism. Establishing the (likely) truth of pantheism would also imply the denial of naturalism and leave more room for spirits.
5 Adherents of naturalism usually also deny the existence of other entities or things besides supernatural agents. They also deny the existence of supernatural forces such as karma or Dao and immaterial souls.
6 Apuleius appears to use the term 'god' as interchangeable with 'supernatural agent'.
7 This is less clear for the practice of making offerings. However, making offerings is a way of showing reverence or respect and addressing the gods in this regard. Therefore, subjects who make offerings are also addressing the gods in some respect and therefore also communicating with the gods.
8 Apuleius calls these intermediary beings 'daemons'. As Benjamin McCraw and Robert Arp note, the term 'daemon' did not have an intrinsic connection to evil according to the ancient Greeks (McCraw and Arp 2017).
9 See, for example, Genesis 16:7–14, Numbers 20:16.
10 See: Luke 1:26–28.
11 See: Judges 6.
12 An anonymous reviewer argued that using messengers to avoid inducing fear foregoes the fact that some intermediary beings, such as demons or fallen angels, induce a lot of fear in humans. While some spirits can surely induce

fear, a defender could respond that this was never the intention of an omnibenevolent God. spirits causing fear may be the result of God allowing spirits freedom, or they may have some other purpose.

13 Peter Williams made a similar argument in favor of the existence of angels. He argues that the authority of Jesus and the Bible provide positive reasons to accept the existence of angels (Williams 2006). Unlike the argument defended here, his argument relies on the faith-based authority of the Christian Bible.

14 One can object that gods in Indian traditions are not unambiguously omnibenevolent and therefore the argument does not hold. However, the argument can also rely on a weaker claim, that gods want knowledge concerning themselves or a moral order disseminated more broadly. Gods might not do so out of concern for humanity but out of concern for the moral order or concern for themselves.

15 See, for example, Sura 72.

16 See, for example, Ramayana. Book 3, chp. 31.

17 The last two examples may be problematic, as not all strands of Shinto and Buddhism have clear beliefs in God. It is also not clear whether the Pali Canon and Kojiko can be regarded as reports of revelations.

18 Bultmann defended his claim as applied to the Bible. The idea can, however, be expanded to other sacred scriptures as well.

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3 From Unusual Events to Spirit-beliefs

3.1 Introduction

Below, I discuss a next argument in support of the existence of spirits. The core idea is that some events are best explained by spirit-activity. Given that such events occur, support can be gained for the existence of spirits. The argument has not been defended at length to my knowledge but resembles a common sensical way of arguing for the existence of spirits.

In his ethnography on Cuban Santeria, Michael Mason narrates the following event:

> The animals' heads ultimately rest on top of the oricha, as do the feathers that the iyawó [initiate] pulls from each dead bird and sprinkles over the sacred objects. The iyawó cleans the floor with some of the feathers and places them in front of the orichas. In each of these cases, the iyawó physically relates to the animals that are feeding the orichas, animals being sacrificed to change the life of the initiate. The implications of this identification have deep ramifications for the iyawó: she will sacrifice herself to the orichas for the rest of her life. In return for these ongoing offerings, she will receive the blessings of the orichas.
>
> (Mason 2002: 237)

The example illustrates a common source of spirit-beliefs. A certain event occurs, in this case blessings which the initiate is said to receive. This event is in turn explained by an intervention by a spirit, in this case an oricha.[1] The whole process is embedded in a web of beliefs and practices. In the example, the event occurred after a plea by a human.

In what follows, I discuss this line of reasoning in greater detail and investigate its epistemic importance. This argument or line of reasoning does not refer to a direct experience or perception of a spirit. Instead, people appear to postulate the existence of some non-theistic supernatural agents to explain certain events.[2]

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I did not find published defenses of the argument and it is not clear how salient the argument is for people's religious beliefs. However, its intuitiveness and connection to other arguments in philosophy of religion make it likely that a considerable number of people appeal to it.

The argument goes as follows:

1 Event x occurred.
2 Event x is best explained by the actions of spirit y.
3 Therefore, the actions of spirit y caused event x.

As stated the argument does not conclude to the existence of anything. Subjects with prior beliefs in spirits or demons could appeal to a similar argument to explain some event. Their beliefs, however, need not be the result of the argument. In those cases the argument is not the sole source of justification. Since its conclusion does imply the existence of at least one spirit, the argument can also stand on its own. If sound, it could therefore render belief in spirits justified.

Before I discuss the argument in greater detail, I discuss a related argument for the existence of God, i.e. the argument from miracles, in Section 3.2. I return to the 'argument from spirit-events' in Section 3.3 and discuss two objections in Sections 3.4 and 3.5. I end with some concluding remarks.

3.2 The Argument from Miracles

An argument similar to the one I discuss below is sometimes used in defense of belief in God. Sometimes people point to a highly unusual event that is putatively best explained by the actions of God. Clear examples are miracles. Although the 'argument from miracles' did not receive nearly as much attention as other arguments for the existence of God, its historical and contemporary importance is very significant. Daniel Bonevac argues that the argument is the primary and likely only argument for the existence of God in the Bible (Bonevac 2011).[3] He states the argument as follows:

1 There are kinds of possible circumstances and events the best explanations for which invoke supernatural agency.
2 Some circumstances and events of those kinds have actually occurred.
3 Therefore, there is a supernatural agent.

(Bonevac 2011: 3)

Like the argument I sketched above, Bonevac's argument refers to some events that are best explained by supernatural agency. Bonevac lists the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and Moses's encounter with God in the burning bush as examples. He adds that any other events which can be classified as a miracle[4] would satisfy the second premise.

Bonevac's defense of the argument relies on the general reliability of testimony of miracles. He argues that testimony can usually be trusted. Denying that the same holds for reports of miracles is therefore unwarranted. He argues subsequently that many reports of miracles are more probable if a miracle did indeed occur (Bonevac 2011).

Richard Swinburne argues that the occurrence of miracles can lend some justification to belief in God's existence but it is fairly limited. He argues that attributing miracles to God depends to a large extent on background knowledge. The theist can attribute events to God's agency because she has solid reasons to think God exists (drawn from natural theology or revelation) but on its own miraculous events lend little justification to belief in God (Swinburne 2010).

3.3 An Argument for Spirits

Bonevac's version of the argument from miracles concludes to supernatural activity rather than activity of a specific God. His argument, therefore, has a broad scope that includes non-theistic supernatural agents like spirits. The examples he lists (resurrection of Jesus, Moses's encounter with the burning bush), however, only allow for more limited conclusions. Miracles that involve God himself or involve God's self-revelation cannot be explained in terms of activity of any other supernatural being than God. This shows that more fine-grained conclusions concerning the nature of the acting supernatural being (and its actions) can be drawn from more fine-grained examples of miraculous events. We will look at a few examples below.

I stated the argument as:

1 Event x occurred.
2 Event x is best explained by the actions of spirit y.
3 Therefore, the actions of spirit y caused event x.

Below, I discuss each step in the argument in greater detail.

3.3.1 Event x Occurred

Bonevac's and other versions of the argument from miracles refer to a certain class of events that is best explained by supernatural agency. Bonevac limits the discussion to miracles and how they are best explained by God's agency. Below, I investigate whether the argument holds water if more events are taken into account and whether they can be explained by agency from non-theistic supernatural agents. I start with broadening the class of relevant events.

Cases where miracles are attributed to the actions of a spirit are not hard to come by. For example, many spirits are believed to have healing

powers. Fiona Bowie notes that in many cultures spirits are believed to take possession of humans to heal others (Bowie 2011). Inhabitants of South Kanara perform rituals where they enact myths involving spirits using masks as a form of healing. Such rituals are performed especially to avoid leprosy and ensure the continuation of the family line. During rituals, a possessing spirit dancer hears out patients or family members on their problems and performs symbolic healing gestures. The spirit may also give some practical advice. The patient or family member makes a small monetary offering in return (Shields 1987).

Healing need not involve possession or enacting. Adherents of Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo make offerings to Damballah to gain healing. Adherents of the general Doàn Thong's cult in Vietnam also regularly present offerings to spirits to obtain healing from various illnesses (Gordienko 2021). People also regularly present offerings to gain other things like a stable marriage or fertility. In all cases, spirits are believed to bring about events without taking possession of human bodies. They are moved by human pleas and offerings to take action. How spirits intervene in the world in these cases is usually left unspecified.

Presenting offering to obtain an intervention from spirits is similar to the practice of petitionary prayer in Christianity. A large number of Christians asks for interventions of God to achieve similar goals (healing, marriage, fertility, etc.). The main difference is that petitionary prayer is far less reciprocal. Prayer is mostly one directional where the human makes a plea and God gratuitously grants a favor (or refrains from doing so).[5] Whether the favor is granted is thus entirely up to God and not depended on the actions of the praying humans. In the case of spirit offerings, spirits demand something in return in the form of an offering. In some cases, the nature and quantity of the offering is clearly defined but often it is not. An insufficient or wrong offering can be a reason for not granting the favor.

In traditions like Vodou or Doàn Thong, the results of offerings are attributed to the interventions of spirits. These interventions cannot be classified as miracles when miracles are defined as violations of the laws of nature. They might count as miracles if the term is defined broader.[6] Whether they do or do not is largely irrelevant for the argument. In any case, the event is explained by an act by a supernatural agent.

The events needed for the argument to work are not limited to events humans pleaded for. Humans also attribute misfortunes or other perceived evils to the actions of spirits. Victor Turner notes a belief in the anti-social, destructive power of witches and sorcerers (called Aloji) among the Ndembu in Zambia. Witches and sorcerers would be driven by familiar spirits which act as instruments of their carriers malevolent desires and ambitions (Turner 2018). Nakalawa et al. note the case of a massive demonic attack in Uganda where a large number of students started running around hysterically and biting each other, allegedly because they

were possessed by demons (Nakalawa et al. 2010). Spirits can also cause havoc without human intermediaries. Niko Besnier describes how spirits in Nukulaelae Polynesia are believed to be able to kill people by strangling, smothering, suffocating or eating them (Besnier 1996). Harvey Whitehouse notes that inhabitants of Dadul, New Guinea, believe that spirits can act as diabolical agents to lure humans into doing bad things to strike them down (Whitehouse 1996).

The event explained in terms of spirit activity need not be as dramatic as in the examples above. In Afro-Caribbean religions or neo-pagan traditions, humans make offerings to gain monetary gifts or attraction. In ancient Greek religion, spirits were invoked for assistance in art or writing. In both cases, the event explained by spirit activity is rather mundane or ordinary. Usually such events are not explained by any supernatural activity. The fact that they occur after a human plea to a spirit makes it open for a supernatural explanation.

3.3.2 Event x Is Best Explained by the Actions of Non-theistic Supernatural Being y

Having some examples of events that are explained by actions of non-theistic supernatural agents, we now turn to the key premise. Consciously or not, humans conclude that the event is *best* explained by that supernatural activity.

The term 'explanation' should be read as 'causal explanation'. Humans infer that some supernatural agent was responsible for bringing about the event in question. The supernatural agent need not be the sole cause. In cases where supernatural agents respond to human pleas for healing, healing is also caused by bodily changes. A supernatural agent merely needs to be part of the causal chain leading up to the event in question.

In many cases, the inference to supernatural activity does not take the form of a well-articulated argument. More frequently, humans find themselves linking the occurred event to the actions of a supernatural agent intuitively. They might do so because they made an offering to that supernatural agent or because reports of interventions by that being are common in their surrounding culture. Although elaborate defenses of the argument are lacking, it is not unlikely that at least some people did conclude to supernatural activity after careful deliberation of potential causes of the event.

A key question for the argument is whether spirits are able to bring about events like healing, good fortune or fertility. A common criticism against divine intervention states that God (if he exists) cannot intervene in the natural world because the natural world is physical in nature while God is not (cf. Bossoh 2021). An additional reason for doubt is that the natural world is governed by deterministic laws that preclude a divine intervention (cf. Koperski 2020). A quick response states that God can

intervene in the natural, physical world because he is omnipotent. Since there is no logical contradiction in a non-physical God who intervenes in a physical world, referring to God's omnipotence suffices as reply.

A reply in terms of omnipotence does not work for spirits because they are rarely regarded as omnipotent. Intervention is less problematic in the examples where spirits intervene by taking possession of human bodies. Here, spirits are able to bring about changes in the world by using the bodies of subjects they take hold of. In the examples without possession, a defender has a number of options available in response. She can argue that spirits can manipulate the natural, physical world in ways unknown to humans. Since spirits have greater intellectual powers, they could know of ways to intervene without a physical body. Since humans have more limited intellectual powers, we may never know how they do so. A defender could argue that some spirits have some kind of body. For example, Augustine argued that demons have an ethereal body of a different kind than human physical bodies (McCraw 2017). An ethereal body can allow spirits to interact with physical matter.

3.4 Criticism 1: Naturalistic Alternative Explanations

Given that the argument is formally valid, sound criticisms need to undermine one of both premises. One can deny premise (1) by showing that the event in question did not occur. Sometimes authors go through great efforts to 'debunk' alleged miraculous healings or hauntings. For example, journalistic research showed that an alleged haunting in Hydesville New York was entirely fabricated by the alleged victims. After increased pressure, one of the alleged victims admitted to having staged the whole event (Ashe 2018).[7] While initially an event (i.e. a haunting) was explained by ghost-activity, evidence that the event did not take place prevents conclusions that the ghost actually exists.

Although responses denying that the event, which allegedly involved spirit activity, took place are popular, their impact is rather weak. The main reason is their idiosyncratic nature. A successful debunking of one haunting merely precludes one from concluding to spirits based on that haunting. It does nothing for conclusions based on other events. A related criticism could point to a series of debunked hauntings or other spirit activities. Given that many explanations in terms of spirit-activity turned out to be false, a critique could inductively conclude that future claims to spirit-activity are likely false as well. Such an inductive argument, however, relies on much more examples of debunked spirit-stories than are usually provided.

Another critique denies premise (2) by arguing that explanations that refer to spirits can never be the best. Such 'spirit-explanations' would suffer from too many inherent weaknesses to ever be called good and hence naturalistic, alternative explanations will always be preferable.

David Kyle Johnson argues that explanations in terms of demonic activity will always score lower in comparison to alternative, naturalistic explanations on most theoretical virtues. While Johnson's argument solely targets 'demon-explanations', his argument can easily be rephrased in terms of 'spirit-explanations'. First, spirit-explanations are less parsimonious. They require one to accept the existence of more entities, i.e. spirits. Alternative explanations, for example, that the reporter was lying, do not. Second, spirit-explanations would have a more narrow explanatory scope. Naturalistic explanations can explain a host of phenomena, ranging from alien abductions and UFO sightings, to Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. Spirit-explanations by contrast only explain a narrow range of events. Third, spirit-explanations are less conservative. Naturalistic explanations fit better with what we already know, while spirit-explanations are surprising and new. Fourth, spirit-explanations are less testable, since they generate fewer predictions, if any (Johnson 2022).[8]

While Johnson gives voice to a widely shared critique of religious explanations in general, his critique is problematic for a number of reasons. A first problem concerns the alternative, naturalistic explanations. Johnson confidently states that naturalistic alternatives are always available (Johnson 2022). It is not obvious that this is always the case. In some cases of healing, it is not at all clear how naturalistic causes could bring the healing about. An objector could argue that the cause remains unknown in these cases. Such an explanation is, however, rather weak.

If we were to grant Johnson's assertion that alternative, naturalistic explanations are always available, a second problem lurks. The alternative explanation may have very low initial probability, which disqualifies it from being the best. For example, one could explain repeated miraculous healing events in terms of a vast conspiracy by a secret society. Such an explanation could score better on parsimony, explanatory scope, conservativeness, testability and perhaps other theoretical virtues. Yet because of its low initial probability, it was never really a live option to begin with. The same holds for hand-waiving explanations like 'he probably made the whole thing up'. This shows that explanatory virtues are not the only criterion in assessing explanations and settling which is preferable. Other considerations like lower or higher inherent probabilities are of importance as well.

Third, Johnson appears to assume wrongfully that more parsimonious explanations are always preferable. As Alan Baker notes, parsimony is often used in philosophical practice to weed out *superfluous* entities (Baker 2010). When an entity is not superfluous in explaining an event, parsimony is overruled. Reasons that an entity is not superfluous may refer to another theoretical virtue, for example, an increase in explanatory scope. Applied to spirit-explanations, an adherent can argue that adding spirits is warranted because it allows for a better explanation (see also below).

Fourth, contrary to what Johnson argues, spirit-explanations can have a rather large explanatory scope. Adherents of spirit-beliefs can and do attribute a wide range of events, including good fortune, fertility, financial success and healing to spirit activity. Some rival naturalistic explanations explain far less. For example, referring to the placebo effect merely explains (some) events of unexpected healing and none of the others.

Fifth, it is not clear whether spirit-explanations are less conservative than naturalistic explanations. Johnson argues that naturalistic explanations are preferable because they cohere with what we already believe (Johnson 2022). A defender could argue that her spirit-explanation coheres well with beliefs that are widely shared in many cultures and religious traditions (see chapter 1). As Johnson himself notes, belief in spirits is widespread in some western nations.[9] Spirit-beliefs are likely even more widespread in South-America, Polynesia, Africa and Asia. The defender could therefore rebuke Johnson by claiming that her spirit-explanations cohere well with beliefs that are widely shared.

Sixth, other theoretical virtues can favor spirit-explanations. Another widely discussed theoretical virtue is empirical accuracy. Michael Keas distinguishes two kinds of empirical accuracy.[10] Evidential accuracy measures how well a theory fits the empirical evidence regardless of causal claims. Causal adequacy measures how well a theory's causal factors can plausibly produce the events in need of explanation (Keas 2018). A defender could plausibly argue that on many occasions spirit-explanations fare better than their naturalistic rivals. Cristine Legare et al. cite the following observation made by Evans-Pritchard:

> In Zandeland, sometimes an old granary collapses. There is nothing remarkable in this. Every Zande knows that termites eat the supports in [the] course of time and that even the hardest woods decay after years of service. Now a granary is the summerhouse of a Zande homestead and people sit beneath it in the heat of the day and chat or play the African hole-game or work at some craft. Consequently it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured, for it is a heavy structure made of beams and clay and may be stored with millet as well. Now why should these particular people have been sitting under this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed? That it should collapse is easily intelligible, but why should it have collapsed at the particular *moment* when these *particular people* were sitting beneath it?
>
> (Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 69; cited by Legare et al., 2012)

Legare et al. see the example as evidence of how natural and supernatural explanations can coexist in people's minds (Legare et al. 2012). A defender can argue that a spirit-explanation does a better job at

explaining why the granary collapsed at the particular moment injuring those particular people that sat underneath. She could argue that those people had angered some spirit shortly before and therefore the spirit made the granary collapse. So while both a naturalistic explanation that merely refers to the activity of termites and a spirit-explanation can explain why the granary collapsed, the spirit-explanation can explain more. The spirit-explanation explains more observable facts (particular persons, particular time) and therefore does better on evidential accuracy. The spirit-explanation also explains what caused the granary to collapse on those particular persons at that time, namely the spirit's wrath or grudge. The naturalistic explanation does not provide a clear cause for those particularities. Therefore, the spirit-explanation does better on causal adequacy as well.

3.5 Criticism 2: The Importance of Background Beliefs

So far, we discussed one prominent critique of the argument from spirit-events. I now turn to a next critique. The inference from the occurrence of certain events to spirit activity would hinge on background assumptions concerning spirits and their natures that are not readily justified by the event itself. Therefore, a conclusion to spirit activity based solely on the event in question is not justified.

We noted in Section 3.4 that defenders explain events in terms of spirit activity. While the conclusion that the event was caused by a spirit may come easily or naturally to the defender, it will not to all observers. In the introduction, we saw an example of how an adherent of Santeria attributed blessings or good fortune to activities by orichas after an initiation. The initiate makes the connection between the event (receiving blessings) and the spirit (the oricha) because he holds beliefs concerning such beings and their natures. These beliefs are crucial in making the attribution of the event (x) to an intervention by a spirit. Without these or similar beliefs it is not obvious that the event is best explained by spirit-activity.

The counterargument resembles a reply to the argument from miracles defended by Albert Oya (Oya Márquez 2019). He argues that we are not justified in attributing any event to a supernatural cause because we have no sufficient knowledge of whether such a supernatural cause exists and of the intentions and purposes of that supernatural cause.[11] Richard Swinburne similarly argues that attributing miracles to divine activity relies too much on background knowledge (Swinburne 2007).

While many attributions of events to spirit activity probably rely heavily on background knowledge, this need not always be the case. An explanation that refers to a supernatural agent can be superior to a human or material explanation without relying on background knowledge. I argued above that spirit-explanations are not inherently inferior

to naturalistic explanations for events. In some cases, a spirit-explanation can be preferable in terms of explanatory power or other theoretical virtues. One need not rely on background knowledge to judge them as superior. For example, adherents of South African traditional religion sometimes claim that spirits bring about healing (Mokgobi 2014). If an event of unexplained healing can be identified and if an explanation in terms of spirit-activity proves superior to an alternative (naturalistic) explanation, background knowledge is not decisive. Subjects that do not hold prior beliefs concerning the existence of spirits, their natures and their actions can judge a naturalistic explanation wanting for a host of reasons (e.g. because it is not sufficiently simple, insufficient explanatory power, etc.). When they do so, they can argue that an agential explanation (one that depends on the actions of an intelligent being that acts for reasons) is superior. If they also add that the event cannot be attributed to a human agent (e.g. because bringing about the event stretches beyond the powers of any human), attribution to an invisible agent is forthcoming. Subjects without background beliefs about spirits can therefore reach the conclusion that an event is best attributed to an invisible agent. Background beliefs concerning agents in general and the limits of human agency can suffice.

While attributing events to invisible agents need not rely on prior beliefs concerning spirits, attribution to culturally particular spirit does. When the adherent of Santeria attributes good fortune to the oricha Erzulie or Ogun, she is depending heavily on background information by her cultural tradition. The connection between the event and the culturally specific spirit cannot be inferred from the event and the limitations of alternative explanations. A distinction must thus be made between attributing an event to a spirit in general and a culturally specific spirit.

While I argued that the argument does not rule out all spirit-explanations, it does hold water against a large number of inferences to spirit activity. In the example in the introduction, the adherent of Santeria appears to be concluding to orisha activity based on background information. The same likely holds in many cases of attribution of other events to spirit activity. Therefore, careful consideration of what kind of conclusions the event in question allows for and if the conclusion depends on background information is required before the argument can work.

3.6 Concluding Remarks

I discussed an argument that concludes to the existence of spirits by arguing that certain events are best explained by spirit-activity. I critically discussed two criticisms, one arguing that naturalistic explanations are always superior and one arguing that any inference to spirit-activity relies on background knowledge. I argued that both criticisms are unconvincing.

While I provided reasons to accept the premises of the argument and found the criticisms wanting, the discussion above does not constitute a defense of the existence of spirits. As successful argument critically relies on (1) trustworthy accounts of events and (2) good explanations in terms of spirit-activity. The discussion on the second criticisms strongly suggests that both ought to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Rather often, explanations in terms of spirit activity do not show why such an explanation is superior to alternative (naturalistic) explanations. A general argument for spirits based on events is therefore difficult. Like some defenders of the argument from miracles (e.g. McGrew and McGrew 2009), defenders would likely do better by pointing to one or more clear examples of events that were allegedly brought about by spirits.

Notes

1 Orishas are spirits commonly worshipped in West-African Yoruba traditions and Caribbean religions like Santeria.
2 In many cases, similar forms of argumentation or postulation likely work in tandem with experiences or perceptions to produce belief in spirits. This paper only applies to cases where subjects rely on argumentation alone.
3 Defenders of design arguments sometimes point to Rom 1:19–10 as a rudimentary design argument:
Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse (NIV).
Therefore, one can doubt whether Bonevac'c claim is true.
4 Bonevac adds that a miracle need not satisfy the Humean definition of being a violation of the laws of nature since many examples of miracles from the Old Testament, like the ten plagues, do not (Bonevac 2011). Discussions on the proper definition of miracles lies beyond the scope of this chapter.
5 Emily Pierini notes that some groups approach spirits in a different way. In Brazilian Kardecism, interventions by spirits are usually seen as an act of grace without the need for reciprocity. In other Brazilian groups closer affiliated to African traditions, like Candomblé and Umbanta reciprocity is seen as necessary (Pierini 2020).
6 For example, Timothy and Lydia McCrew define 'miracle' as a violation of the natural order of things (McGrew and McGrew 2009).
7 Ashe discussed six more examples of debunked ghost stories.
8 Johnson distinguishes testability from 'fruitfulness'. The former designates an explanation's ability to generate novel, observable predictions and the latter successful corroboration of its predictions. He treats them jointly in his assessment of competing explanations.
9 Johnson cites a study wherein 71% of citizens of the United States reported belief in at least some kind of spirits (Johnson 2022).
10 Keas also distinguishes explanatory depth, which measures how well a theory fares in causal history depth, such as the range of counterfactual questions answered concerning the item being explained (Keas 2018). I omitted this one because it is less relevant for our discussion.

11 Oya's argument has been rephrased to fit the terminology used in this paper. In his own words, he argues that we are not justified in claiming that an event is a miracle (defined as a supernaturally caused event) because we have no sufficient knowledge of God's intentions and purposes (Oya Márquez 2019).

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4 Justification from Experiences

4.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1, contemporary defenses of theistic belief rely heavily on rational argumentation. The preceding chapters discussed if rational argumentation may support belief in spirits as well; be it by drawing support from theistic belief (Chapter 2) or by reasoning from unusual events (Chapter 3). The conclusions of both chapters were somewhat wanting. Arguing that an increased probability of God's existence implies an increased probability of the existence of spirits makes the existence of spirits conditional. Only if God's existence is sufficiently supported can conclusions be drawn on the likely existence of spirits. While recent defenses of theistic arguments were able to move beyond traditional objections,[1] the debate continues to loom and new objections were raised.[2] While Chapter 3 concluded that some objections to inferring to spirits from unusual events are wanting, I refrained from drawing general conclusions about the likely existence of spirits.

Furthermore, arguments similar to the ones defended in preceding chapters are not on the radar of most people. Few people probably conclude to the existence of spirits by reflecting on the implications of the existence of God. Some more may draw conclusions from unusual events but it is unlikely that this is the only source of (justification for) spirit-beliefs for many. In all likelihood, many subjects who hold spirit-beliefs rely on something else, experience.[3]

In the remaining chapters, we move toward another source of justification. Besides theistic arguments, considerable attention was given to the epistemic import of religious experience by contemporary philosophers of religion. They argue that religious experiences can provide justification to religious beliefs without the need for argumentation.[4] Instead religious beliefs are justified in virtue of how they are formed. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss how religious experiences can support theistic belief. I also discuss initial worries when a similar line of reasoning is applied to belief in spirits. I end with discussing how support from religious experiences can transfer to support from religious testimony.

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4.2 Religious Experience and Theistic Belief

Contemporary philosophy religion developed a venerable tradition of defenses of religious experiences. The best-known are arguably William Alston's defense of Christian doxastic practices (Alston 1991) and Richard Swinburne's defense of the 'principle of credulity' (Swinburne 2004). Below, I will focus on Swinburne's account because his is more in line with a dominant epistemic approach to experience in general, i.e. phenomenal conservatism.[5] Below, I summarize the main tenets of phenomenal conservatism and Swinburne's account of the principle of credulity.

4.2.1 Phenomenal Conservatism

The contemporary discussion on justification through religious experiences leans heavily on the more general discussion on justification through experiences. Epistemological reflection of the past three decades looks generally more favorable toward the justificatory power of experiences. Below I survey some arguments in favor.

An influential position toward the justificatory power of experiences is known as 'phenomenal conservatism'.[6] Its main thesis is that subjects are justified in believing that things are the way they appear to them in the absence of counterevidence or more formally:

> If it seems to S as if *p*, then S thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that *p*.
>
> (Huemer 2001)

Defenders of phenomenal conservatism argue that epistemic justification is gained quite easily by means of perceptual experiences. A subject does not need anything beyond her experience of x to be justified in believing that x exists and is present. She is also justified in holding beliefs concerning the nature or attributes of x based on her experience.

The 'prima facie' condition signals that the justification of experiences (or seemings) can be overruled by other evidence. Most defenders admit that experiences can fail to correspond to reality, like in the case of hallucinations. They therefore do not advocate that experiences provide an infallible source of justification or not even that experience is generally reliable. They simply assert that assuming that things usually are as they appear to subjects is a rational default position. Holding such a position is rational to maintain unless grounds for doubt or defeaters occur (Huemer 2013).

Usually two kinds of defeaters are distinguished.[7] A rebutting defeaters is a reason for accepting the negation of a proposition or a reason for accepting a proposition incompatible of one's proposition. Take the

following example from Michael Sudduth. Mary appears to see a sheep in a meadow. She therefore forms the belief that there is a sheep and her belief is justified. However, if Mary later encounters the owner of the meadow who informs her that there are no sheep out there, she received a rebutting defeater. She now has good evidence to accept the negation of her claim that there is a sheep out in the meadow (Sudduth 2008).

A second kind of defeaters are undercutting defeaters. An undercutting defeaters is a reason for not longer believing a proposition that is not a negation. Usually, undercutting defeaters provide evidence to doubt that one's ground for believing a proposition is sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief (Sudduth 2008). For example, a subject may have repeated experiences of grass being red. She thereby forms the justified belief that grass is generally red. However, when she learns that she suffers from color blindness and confuses green for red, she has solid reasons to doubt the accuracy of her past experiences of grass. The evidence does not show that grass is not red but makes it highly doubtful that the subject's eyes gave a good indication of its color.

Both kinds of defeaters can undo the justification provided by experiences. Undercutting defeaters are usually considered less defeating than rebutting since they some leave room for compatibility between defeater and the content of the experience. Undercutting defeaters do at least force a subject to hold her perceptual belief in a less committed way.

Both rebutting and undercutting defeaters can come in many forms. Considerable discussion in moral and religious philosophy focuses on how scientific explanation can defeat (moral or religious) beliefs. We will return to defeaters further along in this chapter.

Advocates argue that accepting phenomenal conservatism is required to avoid far-reaching skepticism or even that its denial is self-refuting. Refutation of beliefs rooted in experience often relies on other experiences (see also both examples above). Some advocates argue that this is the case for all relevant beliefs. Mathematical or a priori intuitions would also be justified in the way things appear to subjects. Other sources of beliefs beyond experience, like wishful-thinking are generally considered not to lend justification. Therefore, unless beliefs can be justified by experiences or seemings, no belief can be justified in the end (Huemer 2007).

Some critics argue that one needs only accept the justificatory force of some experiences as a foundation for further justification (e.g. BonJour 2004). To this, some replied that limiting justificatory force to some seemings is arbitrary (Huemer 2007). Other arguments against the alleged self-refutation of denying phenomenal conservatism have been defended (see Huemer 2013: section c). A through discussion of these lies beyond the scope of this chapter. It is clear that self-refutation is a serious worry for those who deny the truth of phenomenal conservatism.

A second main argument in favor of phenomenal conservatism is that its denial would imply far-reaching skepticism. Advocates argue that it is rather hard to deny external-world-skepticism or moral skepticism without relying on some kind of experience or seeming. Our experiences of an external world seem to constitute fairly good evidence to believe there actually is an external world (Huemer 2013). Our experiences of the validity of moral claims (e.g. seemings that recreational torture is wrong) are often brought forth in defense of moral realism (e.g. Pölzler 2018). Objectors could reply that non-experiential evidence for both the external world and moral claims is available. For example, the existence of an external world could be supported by evidence from contemporary physics. The validity of moral norms could be argued for in a Kantian way from the dignity of man. However, even if such defenses are sufficient, the defender can note that the evidence is not available to a large share of the population. Most people are not familiar with contemporary physics or Kantian arguments for moral norms. Denying the justificatory force of experiences would render a lot of their beliefs unjustified.

The main counterarguments against phenomenal conservatism are that it allows justification through crazy experiences and that the justificatory force of experiences requires meta-justification.[8] Concerning the first, some discard phenomenal conservatism because it allows justification of crazy beliefs through crazy experiences. For example, if one sees a tree and it seems to you that the tree was planted on 24/04/1914, one would gain justification for this exact belief according to advocates (Markie 2005). Most defenders bite the bullet on such objections and claim that most subjects have defeaters (rebutting or undercutting) for such beliefs rooted in such crazy experiences (Huemer 2013).

Others argue that one needs meta-justification before one can rely on experiences to justify beliefs (e.g. BonJour 2004). To this, defenders argue that such a requirement risks far-reaching skepticism and perhaps vicious infinite regress. Huemer argue that requiring meta-justification for justification of seemings raises the question why such meta-justification should not be required for all forms of justification. For any claim 'P is justified by some state of affairs X', we could always ask why X is a reliable indicator of the truth of P. This can go on ad infinidum (Huemer 2013).

4.2.2 Phenomenal Conservatism and Religious Experiences

Richard Swinburne draws on ideas similar to phenomenal conservatism to defend the reliability of religious experiences. His main strategy in defense of the justificatory force of religious experiences is arguing that there are no epistemically relevant differences between religious and non-religious experiences. Given that non-religious experiences are usually regarded as reliable, denying the same status to religious experiences

is uncalled for. The argument thereby relies on some form of phenomenal conservatism.

Apart from presenting arguments in favor of the general justificatory power of experiences similar to Huemer's, Swinburne argues that there is no epistemically relevant difference that discards religious experiences. Swinburne does note that a considerable number of religious experiences are different from 'ordinary' sense experience in so far that they are not public (i.e. not all humans with normally functioning cognitive faculties present share in the same experience). He denies that this discards the evidential value of religious experience. The only reasons to deny that any experience can be taken at face value for Swinburne are:

1 that the experience was made under conditions or by a subject found in the past to be unreliable,
2 that the experience was made in circumstances where similar perceptual claims have proved false,
3 that the object of experience was not present at the time of the experience,
4 that the experience was not caused by the presumed object of experience.

(Swinburne 2004: chapter 13)

With (1), Swinburne refers to experiences that occurred under distorting influence, for example, under the influence of mind-altering substance. With (2), he refers to circumstances that prevent human subjects from having good access to objects of experiences, like watching objects from a great distance. According to Swinburne, (1) to (2) may discard some religious experiences but certainly not all. Most occur under 'normal' conditions and circumstances. The third does not apply to religious experiences because its presumed object (God) is believed to be omnipresent. Condition (4) would apply to religious experiences if an alternative cause than God was pointed out but the onus of proof is on the attacker.

Although Swinburne denies that (1) to (4) or a combination furnish a blanket rejection of the justificatory force of religious experience, he does open the door to defeaters for individual cases of religious experiences. An opponent could rely on (1) (if sound) to deny the force of Terence McKenna's religious experiences that occurred under the influence of LSD (see Meyer 1994). She could rely on (2) to discard some vague experiences people had a hard time explaining. She could rely on information indicating a proneness for hallucinations in a subject and thereby rely on (4) to discard her experiences. Given that God is omnipresent as Swinburne notes (3) will never cause harm.

Swinburne's defeaters may also support a more general argument against religious experiences. By having many individual religious experiences

discarded by relying on (1), (2) or (4), an inductive argument can be stated:

1 Religious experience A is discarded because it occurred under unreliable conditions.
2 Religious experience B is discarded because it occurred under unreliable circumstances.
3 Religious experience C is discarded because it was caused by something else than God.
4 …
5 Religious experience x will be discarded because it occurred under unreliable conditions, occurred under unreliable circumstances or was caused by something else than God.

The inductive argument concludes from past discarded religious experiences to a general conclusion about all future religious experiences. it is generally accepted that inductive arguments leave more room for doubting the conclusion whilst accepting the premises than deductive arguments. A defender can therefore consistently accept that many, if not most religious experiences were discarded but deny the general, negative conclusion. However, without at least some examples of undiscarded religious experiences, the evidential balance for religious experience seems quite meager.

Swinburne suggests that a majority of religious experiences do not fall prey to (1) to (4) and therefore remain undiscarded. A number of opponents tends to be more negative and points to examples of discarded religious experiences. Evan Fales argues that mystical experiences like the ones experienced by Theresa of Avila are caused by an urge to gain reputation or power rather than by God (Fales 1996). Graham Oppy argues that many experiences of revelation, miracles, selective appearances or mystical experiences are not had under normal conditions. Subjects enjoying those kind of experiences often did use some kind of drug, engaged in fasting or were deprived of sleeping (Oppy 2006: chapter 7).

While having a large number of examples and information on the conditions, circumstances and potential non-theistic causes could suffice for an inductive argument, most arguments only rely on a very limited set of examples. This problem can be avoided by looking at general human dispositions or biases to have religious experiences. Evidence that natural factors can cause religious experiences in a large number of cases. For example, Michael Persinger argues that changes in electro-magnetic radiation can cause the experience of an invisible presence (Persinger 1983) (see also Chapter 4). His theory is widely controversial (cf. Granqvist et al. 2005). If Persinger is right, however, his theory could show that *many* religious experiences fall prey

to Swinburne's defeater (4). Some have also argued that hallucinatory drugs had a key role in the emergence of many religions. Foundational figures in many religions would have made regular use of psychedelic substances, which led them to have experiences of revelation (Miller 2013). While such claims (if valid) can discard a far larger number of religious experiences, they still leave many cases of religious experiences undiscarded.

An inductive argument against religious experiences in general therefore seems to be beyond reach or at least very hard to achieve. However, a more localized argument might have more success. A large number of subjects report experiences of meeting Mother Ayahuasca after ingesting the psycho-active substance of the same name. Given that the vast majority of experiences of Mother Ayahuasca is enjoyed under the influence of mind-altering drugs, an inductive argument is easy to come by if one accepts Swinburne's first kind of defeaters. Evidence that humans with a certain brain lesion are prone to have experiences of supernatural being X would also provide stronger evidence against the justificatory force of those experiences for belief in X.

In the next section, I look at the prospects for a localized defeater based on Swinburne's defeater (4).

4.3 Alternative Causal Explanations as Defeaters

In rather stark contrast to the general optimism displayed by authors like Swinburne, a number of authors called the epistemic reliability of religious experiences in doubt. The arguments often remain tacit or are transferred from related discussions. An argument can, however, be distilled that could cause considerable havoc on religious experiences if true.

Over the last two decades, a new discussion emerged on the 'debunking' of religious beliefs. The debate has older roots[9] but was rekindled by a related discussion concerning moral beliefs and new cognitive and evolutionary explanations of religious beliefs. Defenders of debunking arguments draw on these explanations to argue that belief in God in general is epistemically deficient. They do so in various ways. I have elsewhere argued that the most promising way forward for a debunking argument is arguing that things are misperceived or information is misapprehended by human minds.[10] Such an argument applies best to processing of information at a subconscious level. Moving to the conscious level of experience, I argued that the best way forward for debunking arguments is showing that a putative experience of God was not caused by God (Van Eyghen 2020).[11] The argument resembles Swinburne's fourth kind of defeaters and is also a common argument against the veracity of experiences of God, namely by arguing that such experiences can be explained naturalistically.[12] By arguing that religious experiences have a natural cause (e.g. brain lesion, psychological cause), we have evidence

that the experience was not caused by God. With Swinburne (see above), we can therefore conclude that the experience is defeated.

As Gregory Dawes notes, merely pointing to an alternative causal explanation for experiences of God does not suffice. The alternative needs to be superior (Dawes 2016). A causal explanation that does not involve God may be superior because it is better supported by empirical evidence, more parsimonious or more in line with generally accepted knowledge.[13]

Authors tend to respond to debunking arguments that point to different causes in two ways. A first, most straightforward response argues against the plausibility of alternative causal explanations[14] or argues that regarding God as the cause of experiences of God is more justified. A second response accepts the alternative causal explanation but argues that it does not show that God was not involved as a cause somewhere down the line. For example, Jonathan Jong argues that while cognitive or evolutionary explanations might explain how religious beliefs are formed in the human mind, they do not explain how the human mind and the universe it lives in was brought about. Further down the causal chain, God could have designed the universe and the human minds therein in such a way that they would be prone to develop belief in God. At the proximate level, religious belief may have different causes, but this does not rule out that God was the ultimate cause (Jong 2013).[15]

The second argument can be transposed to conscious experiences of God. Experiences of God may have a naturalistic cause. This does not rule out that God may have designed the human mind in such a way and created the naturalistic cause to make himself known to humans. Jong's argument has been criticized for making God into a deceiver. A God who is merely the distant or ultimate cause of a belief yet gives the sense of being the proximate cause is deceiving human subjects (Leech and Visala 2011).[16]

Similar to experiences of God, spirit-experiences can be shown to have a cause different than a putative spirit. To such a debunking argument, only one of both responses discussed above is available. The alternative causal explanation can be argued as not plausible or inferior to an explanation involving spirits. Arguing that spirits caused the experience indirectly is not available because spirits are not regarded as having created humans or the universe.

Although they disagree on the final status of some beliefs, most authors tend to agree that alternative causal explanations can do epistemic damage to experiences, at least in potential. Such alternative causal explanations can be regarded as undercutting defeaters. They do not directly show that a belief is false or provide evidence for its denial as rebutting defeaters do. Instead, they provide a reason to no longer hold a belief,

namely because the belief results from an experience that was not caused by the putative object of belief.

4.4 Beyond Idiosyncrasy in Spirit-beliefs

When arguing that experiences (whether experiences of God or spirit-experiences) can be defeated by alternative causal explanation, the threat of idiosyncrasy returns. While showing that spirit-experience X was indeed caused by something which was not a spirit, one can undermine any spirit-beliefs formed after that experience. The defeater does nothing to other spirit-beliefs. Again one can collect a larger number of alternative causal explanations for more spirit-experiences to build an inductive argument against spirit-beliefs. While such a project seems possible, it will require an enormous amount of work considering the prevalence of spirit-beliefs.

An easier way forward is pointing to a prone-ness or inclination to have spirit-experiences that were not caused by spirits. Such a proneness is often called a 'bias'. There are ample examples of general human biases that easily produce beliefs. There are also ample examples of biases to have certain experiences. For example, humans tend to see sticks in water as bended even when straight. Humans also tend to see inanimate objects moving that are seemingly goal-oriented as endowed with agency (Heider and Simmel 1944). information about such biases can show how a large number of experiences have an alternative cause. If such a bias can be found for spirit-experiences and its scope is sufficiently wide, a large number of spirit-experiences can be knocked out in one stroke. Again depending on the scope, the bias may allow for a more general argument against spirit-belief rooted in spirit-experiences.

A large part of the remaining chapter will consist of reviewing various proposals for biases or dispositions for spirit-experiences. Before engaging on this task, I first discuss some remaining issues considering the epistemic status of spirit-experiences.

4.5 Spirit-experiences vs. Experiences of God

Most of the subsequent chapters will be concerned with assessing various localized arguments against various experiences concerning spirits. Before we embark on this endeavor, I end this chapter with some general issues concerning experiences of spirits.

Swinburne himself does not deny that experiences of other supernatural being besides God have justificatory force. He adds, however, that counterevidence for the beliefs they furnish is often available. He also adds that belief in such beings does not receive the same support from natural theology that belief in God enjoys (Swinburne 2004).

Other authors do suggest a wedge between experiences of spirits and experiences of God. Anthony Flew writes:

> Religious experiences are enormously varied, ostensibly authenticating innumerable beliefs many of which are in contradiction with one another … The varieties of religious experience include not only those which their subjects are inclined to interpret as visions of the Blessed Virgin or senses of the guiding presence of Jesus Christ, but also others more *outlandish* presenting themselves as manifestations of Quetzalcoatl or Osiris, or Dionysus or Shiva.
>
> (Flew 2010, emphasis added)

While Flew's main point is noting the wide plurality of (mutually contradicting) beliefs that religious experiences can support, he suggests a reductio. Because people had experiences of outlandish beings like Aztec, Egyptian or Greek deities, religious experiences cannot be trusted. Flew thereby presupposes that such beings obviously do not exist.

While Flew points to experiences of non-Abrahamic deities, Herman Philipse writes:

> The (…) problem is more serious, since for monotheists it will risk being a reductio ad absurdum. If the Principle of Credulity really applies to religious experiences, we may find ourselves 'landed in the swamp of gullibilism'. In the absence of defeating considerations, we must not only accept the existence of God, but also the existence of numerous Hindu deities, of flying saucers, of Martians who rape American ladies, of witches, of all kinds of *demons* and devils, of wood *elves* and goblins, etcetera, since with regard to all these things there are or were many people who claim(ed) to have experienced them. The burden of proof for the (mono)theist now is to show that in the case of each experience purportedly of such a queer thing, there are defeating considerations showing that the experience is illusory, whereas with regard to of-God experiences such defeating considerations do not apply. Although Swinburne attempts to establish the latter point, he does not extensively argue for the former.
>
> (Philipse 2012: 65, emphasis added)

Philipse sees the fact that a liberal view toward religious experiences might support belief in demons or elves as sufficient reason to deny the overall justificatory force of religious experiences. Like Flew, Philipse appears to assume that such beings (and Hindu deities, Martians) do not exist.

Like Swinburne suggests, defenders of religious experiences could reply to Flew and Philipse that defeaters are available for justified belief

in non-Abrahamic deities or spirits while not for God. Such a reply resembles to general reply by Huemer that seemingly crazy experiences can be discarded because defeaters are usually available. However, this reply remains little more than hand-waiving unless convincing (undefeated) defeaters against such experiences are presented.

Flew and Philipse suggest that defeaters against belief in non-Abrahamic deities or spirits are not required because their non-existence is obvious. While empirical evidence is not available, it appears that this sentiment is widely shared in western, academic circles. If we move beyond this minority, the non-existence of spirits is far less obvious as I noted in Chapter 1. Therefore Flew's and Philipse's reductiones are initially unconvincing.

4.6 Spirit-experiences and Diversity

So far, I mainly discussed similarities between spirit-experiences and experiences of God (or other perceptual experiences). Spirit-experiences are, however, different in one important regard because their epistemic standing does not suffer from diversity.

Diversity is often regarded as a problem for the reliability of experiences of God. People report numerous, mutually conflicting experiences of God. As Swinburne notes, experiences of God often include experiences of qualities or attributes of God (Swinburne 2004). Christians may experience God as personal and/or as trinitarian. Muslims may experience God as strictly monotheistic (e.g. as vastly different than all other beings). Adherents of Indian religions may experience God as impersonal or as one among the many. Sometimes experiences of God are thus mutually conflicting. Defenders of the problem of diversity argue that the large number of mutually conflicting experiences of God makes it unlikely that they are genuine perceptions.

A common response to the problem of diversity makes a distinction between a core-experience of God and culturally dependent interpretations of that experience.[17] According to some, experiences of God are rather vague and are subsequently 'fitted' in a culturally specific worldview. The contradictions would stem from the later step rather than the first. A similar reply can be stated that does not rely on the distinction. A defender can argue that experiences of God are theory-laden. Experiences of God could draw on beliefs concerning the nature of God held by the subject. If we were to abstract from such culturally-specific theory-ladenness, we could note commonalities between experiences of God that point to a grasping of a real transcendent entity.[18]

In any case, the status of experiences of God and the problems raised by diversity do not affect spirit-experiences. The reason is that no spirit is seen as the one sole existing spirit. Two subjects experiencing a spirit with (vastly) different qualities or attributes therefore allows for the conclusion

that both just experienced two different entities. Such a response is not available for experiences of God unless one accepts polytheism.

A diversity problem for spirit-experience can occur when two or more subjects have diverging experiences of the same spirit. For example, some adherents of Haitian Voudou experience Ezili as a loving mother-like figure while others experience her as a jealous lover. Such differences are, however, not mutually conflicting. Like humans, spirits may have alternating moods or temperaments. As a result, humans may experience the same spirit in different ways because the spirit is in a different mental state or behaves differently. Such a response is again not available for experiences of God because God is not regarded as anthropomorphic like spirits often are.

4.7 Testimony of Spirit-experiences

In his landmark study of religious experiences, William James famously denies that religious experience had any force on outsiders (James 1902). While agreeing that subject who had a religious experience can justifiably believe in the existence of what appeared before them, others are under no such obligation. Elsewhere he does suggest that other may accept the validity of third person experiences, but they may also strictly rely on their own experiences or other forms of evidence.[19]

Richard Swinburne takes a very different stance. He argues that others *should* accept testimony of religious experiences they did not enjoy themselves. He notes that subjects usually do rely on testimony of experiences. Denying that the same holds for religious experience would again amount to special pleading and is unwarranted. Swinburne does add that justification gained by testimony of religious experience is less strong than justification by having the experience itself. However, given the large number of reports of religious experiences, testimony provides ample justification (Swinburne 2004).

Like he did for religious experiences themselves, Swinburne adds that testimony of experience merely provides prima facie justification. Justification may be defeated by evidence that the testifier is a notorious liar or was hallucinating (Swinburne 2004).

Others argue that testimony in general is worthy of trust in the absence of defeaters. Linda Zagzebski argues that one ought to regard testifiers as usually reliable because one regards oneself as such. Regarding oneself as reliable is in dispensable if subjects ever hope of achieving true beliefs. Without basic trust in one's own abilities, any quest for truth is doomed to fail. Since other subjects are not radically different than ourselves, subjects ought to extend the same courtesy to them (Zagzebski 2011).

In line with Zagzebski and Swinburne, we can claim that spirit-experiences enjoyed by others ought to be granted justificatory force. There appears to be no solid reason to believe that subjects who report

spirit-experiences are sub-par testifiers. One can object that many testifiers report spirit-experiences for monetary gain, for example, by offering medium-readings. This, however, does not apply to the majority of testifiers of spirit-experiences. Their reports can be defeated but should be prima facie accepted.

The importance of testimony of spirit-experiences is not trivial. In all likelihood, a large number of people who hold spirit-beliefs did not have spirit-experiences themselves. They instead rely on oral or verbal reports of spirit-experiences. In some cases, the reports take the form of a religious tradition that features stories of encounters with spirits from history. The experiences in these traditions are much further removed from contemporary believers. A number of epistemologists argue that long testimonial chains can lend justification to religious beliefs (e.g. Baker-Hytch 2018). Some even go as far as claiming that lasting testimonial chains are a source of epistemic good. Long testimonial chains would 'tend to make false beliefs dry up' or 'die out', especially if the chain is protected by a community (Clark and Rabinowitz 2016). Clark and Rabinowitz's claim might be somewhat optimistic. There, however, does not appear to be strong reasons not to prima facie grant the same positive status to testimonial chains as that enjoyed by more proximate testimony. Granting epistemic force to spirit-experiences and testimony thereof can therefore provide justification to subjects that rely on religious traditions for their spirit-beliefs.

A note must be made that testimonial chains are likely of less importance to spirit-beliefs than to belief in God. Especially in the large contemporary monotheistic traditions, beliefs about God (both his existence and his attributes) draw heavy on revelations. Revelations were experienced by a very limited number of people. The vast majority of believers needs to rely on reports of those revelations. In most contemporary traditions where spirit-beliefs are widespread, historical revelations do not take such a central role. Adherents of West-African voudou do orally transmit reports of stories about spirits but rely more heavily on recent experiences of spirits enjoyed by mediums. These experiences are repeated regularly. Something similar holds for traditions of the African diaspora and Siberian shamanism. So while justification by means of testimony and testimonial chains is important for spirit-beliefs, it is arguably less important than for belief in God.

4.8 Conclusion

I provided a brief overview of phenomenal conservatism and how it is applied to experiences of God. I discussed how phenomenal conservatism can serve to support spirit-experiences and how such experiences could be undermined. I also argued that spirit-experiences are epistemically immune to charges or pluralism or diversity.

Notes

1 See Swinburne (2012).
2 See, for example, Lovering (2013); Philipse (2012); Oppy (2006).
3 As noted, many likely rely on testimony of the existence of spirits. I briefly discuss testimony near the end of this chapter.
4 Some 'arguments from religious experience' are construed as arguments. On such construals, authors usually argue that the wide prevalence of religious experiences is best explained by God's existence. See, for example, Kwan (2009).
5 Alston's account can likely be adapted to defend spirit-experiences as well. Unlike Swinburne, Alston highlights the importance of 'good' experiential practices. The Christian community would be on good grounds to regard Christian mystical practices as good experiential practices and therefore to rely on experiences of God. Religious communities (including some forms of Christianity (see chapter 1) could be on equally good grounds to regard experiences of spirits as good experiential practices. They could draw on their own traditions and effects of earlier putative spirit-experiences to bolster a case for 'spirit practices'. An elobarate defense of this argument lies beyond the scope of this chapter.
6 Phenomenal conservatism should be distinguished from epistemic conservatism, the thesis that a proposition is justified solely by being believed by a subject (Foley 1983). Epistemic conservatism is clearly much broader than phenomenal conservatism, which primary applies to beliefs rooted in perceptual experience.
7 The distinction was introduced by John Pollock (Pollock 1986).
8 Other arguments refer to cases of cognitive penetration of experiences and point to inaccurate seemings concerning inferences (Huemer 2013: sections c–d). I will discuss the first later on in this book. The last is not relevant for our purposes since we focus on perceptual experiences of spirits.
9 The arguments put forward by Ludwig Feuerbach (Feuerbach 2018) and Freud (Freud 2012) can be regarded as earlier forms of debunking arguments.
10 I have also argued elsewhere that other debunking arguments can be restated in these terms (Van Eyghen 2022).
11 This is drawn from Swinburne's discussion on potential defeaters for perceptual experiences.
12 See, for example, Fales (1996).
13 For a discussion, see Johnson (2022).
14 This is roughly the approach I took with regard to naturalistic cognitive explanations of experiences of God (Van Eyghen 2020).
15 A similar argument was defended by Kelly Clark (Clark 2019).
16 I believe the criticism is more apt when applied to conscious experiences of God. When belief in God is produced unconsciously, it is unlikely that people get the sense that God is proximate. Humans do get this sense when having a conscious experience of God.
17 See, for example, Swinburne (2004).
18 John Hick makes a similar argument (Hick 1985).
19 James's point ties in to his claim that justification may to some extent depend on one's own standards (William James 1979).

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5 Justification from Perception-like Experiences

5.1 Introduction

Having set the stage in the previous chapter with a general introduction on phenomenal conservatism and defeaters, we can now make matters more concrete. I argued that spirit-experiences have justificatory force in the absence of defeaters. The claim is thus contingent on the actual occurrence of spirit-experiences and absence of defeaters. The next step is thus taking a closer look at spirit-experiences and at potential defeaters.

Spirit-experiences come in a wide variety of forms. This chapter discusses spirit-experiences that resemble ordinary perception. The next chapters investigate three other forms: experiences of mediumship, experiences of possession and experiences of animism. The first 'perception-like experiences' are also called 'apparitions' or 'visions'. This kind of spirit-experience arguably resembles experiences of God most closely.[1]

The next section provides a description of perception-like spirit-experiences and distinguishes indirect and direct experiences. The third section moves to epistemology and discusses how both kinds of experiences can provide justification for spirit-beliefs. The fourth section critically examines proposals for defeaters.

5.2 Perception-like Experiences of Spirits

As noted in Chapter 1, most discussions in philosophy of religion focus on God and far less on other supernatural beings. The debates on religious experience are no different. While an experience of a spirit can properly be called 'religious', such experiences are rarely discussed in detail.[2]

Experiences of spirits come in many forms. Some concern sensory (mostly visual, tactile or auditory) perceptions of spirits.[3] Some perceptions are similar to sensory perception but occur in states of trance or dreams. This chapter looks into such perception-like experiences. Other kinds of experiences are experiences of mediumship, where a spirit

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communicates with a human subject within the subject's mind, or experiences of possession, where a spirit takes control of a subject's agency. These kinds of experiences are the topic of subsequent chapters.

Like Richard Swinburne, I do not employ 'experience' as a success term. Restricting experiences of spirits to those that are caused by actual spirits would render the epistemic questions discussed in this chapter question begging. Experiences of spirits are rather putative experiences where it *seems* to a subject that a sensation, thought or awareness was caused by a spirit. For this reason, Swinburne calls experiences 'seemings'. The experience may turn out to be of something else or have a different cause.

Like experiences of God, perception-like experiences of spirits come in a wide variety of forms. Various typologies of religious experiences have been put forward. For example, Richard Swinburne distinguishes the following categories:

1 Perception of a supernatural being in an ordinary object.
2 Perception of a supernatural being in an extraordinary object.
3 Perception of a supernatural being in a private sensation describable by normal vocabulary.
4 Perception of a supernatural being in a private sensation not describable by normal vocabulary.
5 Perception of a supernatural being without sensations.

(Swinburne 2004)

According to Swinburne, there are no epistemically relevant differences between all kinds of experiences. Swinburne's categories are equally applicable to experiences of spirits as they are to experiences of God.

Other typologies that refer to epistemically relevant differences between experiences are possible. Spirit-experiences can be distinguished according to sense modalities (sight, auditory and tactile). They can also be distinguished according to their directness. Take the following examples of experiences of spirits:

- Anne believes a spirit visited her because she felt a strong cold shiver when entering the room.
- Adam believes a spirit visited him because he saw a strange being moving around in his garden at twilight.

On the face of it, Adam appears to have stronger justification for his belief than Anne although it seemed to both of them that a spirit visited them. Both experiences are also similar insofar that they involve one of the senses. There nonetheless appear to be clear differences in more and less forceful experiences. Anne's experience can be called an 'indirect experience'. Anne did not have a direct sensation of a spirit but

interpreted certain bodily sensations as triggered by a spirit. Adam by contrast, did have a direct visual image of the spirit itself. Adam's experience can therefore by called a 'direct experience'. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the distinction in greater detail and provide real life examples.

5.2.1 Indirect Experiences

In response to an online question 'How do you know if a spirit present?, Stephen Willoughby replied the following[4]:

> There are many ways to know if a spirit is present. The temperature may drop suddenly and you may feel a breeze in an otherwise warm room. On the other hand you may feel sudden intense heat. You may hear tapping or one sudden bang in an otherwise silent room. In my home these tapping sounds come from corners or from my wardrobe door. Sometimes you may hear a creaking sound. A few times I have felt rumbling under my feet and nobody else in the room has felt it. You may feel like you have walked through cobwebs especially around your head. You may tingle intensely. For me, it starts around my ankles and works its way up, sometimes to my head. You may feel unsteady, dizzy even and also a little nauseous. This is just the energy and if it is uncomfortable you can ask spirit to take a step back and the feeling should ease. You may feel a pain in some part of your body or maybe that you are struggling to breathe.
>
> (Willoughby 2019)

Here Willoughby points to a number of ways how one might sense that a spirit is around. Most refer to one of the sense modalities (feeling heat, hearing sounds and feeling tingly) while others refer to different sensations (feeling dizzy, feeling nauseous and feeling uncomfortable). In none of the examples is there a mention of sensing the spirit directly. It is not clear from the experiences themselves that the sensation is brought about by a spirit; it is not even clear that all sensations are brought about by something external. Instead, Willoughby argues that spirits can be detected through their effects (on the subject's body or another medium). The effects can be strong, like in the case of a sudden drop of temperature, or more subtle, like sensations of walking through cobwebs.

Although Willoughby does not make this explicit, he suggests that many sensations are (often) triggered by the actions of spirits. In some sense, subjects would respond to spirit activity in a similar way as they react to other invisible phenomena like gas leaks or radiation. Humans do not perceive these directly but rather notice nausea or a change in awareness. The analogy breaks down because phenomena like gas leaks or radiation are not agential. Both are similar in the sense that moving to

a claim or belief 'X is around' from its alleged effects on the human body requires an interpretative step. Subjects need to know that the spirit or phenomenon in questions often produces certain effects and need to identify their bodily sensations as these effects.

The analogy points to another similarity, the importance of expertise and/or training. Being able to identity nausea or smells as indicators of a gas leak requires a minimum basic level of knowledge about what gas smells like.[5] Trained professionals like firefighters will be able to identity effects of gas leaks or other chemical spills more easily than common people. This is mainly due to better training and more experience. Similarly, subjects who claim indirect spirit experiences could argue that subjects must learn to identify certain bodily sensations as stemming from spirit activity. They could add that experts can do this more easily.

Recently, some authors pointed to the importance of indirect experiences of God in evangelical churches. Similar to what I discussed above for indirect spirit-experiences, these experiences would require expertise and training. Tanya Luhrmann noted that members of charismatic Vineyard churches are encouraged to identify bodily sensations or thoughts as messages from God. Luhrmann also noted how some churches have experts that can help congregants in this identification process (Luhrmann 2012).

5.2.2 Direct Experiences

Not all religious experiences are indirect. In some cases, experiences wear its 'religious origin on their face' (Swinburne 2004: p. 296). Similarly, some spirit-experiences wear their spirit-origin on their faces. Inhabitants of Nukulaela (Polynesia) report of encountering spirits roaming in the bushes (Besnier 1996). Actress Demi Lovata reported having experienced a 'spiritual presence' while filming a tv show (Price 2022). People also often report feeling sinister presences or uncanny noises of demonic origin.

The examples so far were fleeting and (very) short-lived. Some spirit-experiences are more elaborate. Consider the following vision of the spirit Ezili by an adherent of Haitian Vodou:

> I dreamed an old woman, a white woman, very old—very, very, very old. The old lady called out: 'Philo! Vin pale ou [Come talk to me].' She asked me: 'You are pregnant?' And I put my head down … because I was ashamed … and I said to her. 'Yes, I am pregnant/The old lady asked me: 'Why do you drink things to put that baby down? Why do you do that? That baby is going to be born, and that baby is going to be a girl.' 'How do you know?' I asked. She said, 'I know.' Then the old lady said to me: 'Stop what you are doing. Don't take

> anything more. I will support you. I will give you everything. M'ap ba ou bwe; m'ap ba ou manje [I'll give you drink; I'll give you food].' And I said, 'How are you going to do that?' And the old lady just turned and walked away.
>
> (Brown 2010: 209–210)

An inhabitant of Nukulaela describes a struggle with a spirit:

> Than I-I grabbed it like this, […] his tiny legs were just *tiny* things! So thin! And I was about to get startled, thinking that it was something- something like out of the ordinary.
>
> (Besnier 1996: 79)

The inhabitants added that the spirits in Nukulaelae can change appearance rapidly, becoming very big or very small.

Unlike in the example of Willoughby, the subject does not need to go through any interpretative steps to get the sense that a spirit is near. It is immediately clear to the subject that she is experiencing a being that is of a different kind than humans and is likely a spirit.[6] A subject might also immediately identify the perceived being by recognizing some of its attributes. While the subject needs some guidance or background knowledge to correctly identify the attributes, she does not need either to recognize that she perceived a spirit.

Spirits need not always be experienced as having a human-like form. Like the examples in the beginning of the section show, human can immediately get the strong sense that a spirit is near without having any visual experience. They may experience it as benevolent, uninterested or malicious. The common factor is that they have an experience of an agent. Such experiences without strong sensory sensations resemble Swinburne's fifth category of religious experiences (see Section 5.2). The only difference is the object of experience (spirit rather than God).

5.3 Justification from Perception-like Spirit-experiences

So far in this chapter, we distinguished indirect and direct experiences of spirits. Both kinds raise different epistemological questions, which are addressed in this section.

5.3.1 Justification from Indirect Experiences

A subject who undergoes an indirect experience of a spirit is directly aware of a sudden drop of temperature, breeze, noise or another bodily sensation. She then infers from those sensations that a spirit is present.

Indirect experiences are fairly common. In some cases, experiences where subjects learn to associate bodily sensation with something else

occur as well. We noted the example of identifying a gas leak above. Another clear example are how some people are able to recognize an impeding heart attack by being mindful of bodily sensations. Major symptoms of heart attacks are chest pain, feeling weak, pain or discomfort in in the jaw, neck, or back, pain or discomfort in one or both arms or shoulders and shortness of breath.[7] One of the main goals of prevention training is teaching subjects at risk of heart attacks to identify the major symptoms in time to prevent a late response. A subject who identifies a heart attack by using information on its major symptoms seems to be justified in believing she is suffering from a heart attack.

Malcolm Gladwell provides us with another example. He narrates how a number of experts were called in to investigate a newly acquired artifact at the Paul Getty Museum in California museum. Due to their extensive background knowledge and expertise, they could intuitively note that the artifact was in fact a fake. Later testing confirmed their suspicions (Gladwell 2006). The experts did not directly perceive that the artifact was a fake but likely (unconsciously) noted traits of the object that indicated a later origin. Like the patient suffering from a heart attack they noted various signs that indicated something else. The association between the signs and their conclusions depended on associations or inferences the experts had learned to make. The experts appear to be justified in their beliefs.

Both examples are uncontroversial cases where subjects are justified in holding beliefs after having indirect experiences. The key question is whether they are justified in virtue of the experience alone or not. An intuitive stance is that in both examples justification crucially depends on background knowledge obtained by the subjects. A subject who does not know what the major symptoms of a heart attack are is not justified in believing that she suffers from a heart attack upon noting chest pain or any of the other major symptoms. A subject without proper training in archeology or art history would not be justified in making the intuitive call that the artifact was a fake. The only difference is the presence or absence of background knowledge. It therefore seems as if justification crucially depends on the presence of the right background knowledge in the experiencing subject. As a result, more is need than the mere experience or seeming to be justified.

A next question is whether the connection between that what was perceived directly and that what is inferred needs to be brought to the fore or be able to. Intuitively it seems that a subject who infers a heart attack from bodily symptoms needs to be able to explain how both are connected to justifiably infer a heart attack. The same holds for the art-experts in the example above. If a group of art historians walked into a museum claiming that a statue was fake without any explanation to back-up their claims, their views would likely be discarded.[8] It therefore seems as if justification by means of indirect experiences requires

a justified story of how what is directly perceived is connected to what is inferred.

Some externalist theories of justification imply a different verdict. On process reliabilism, a belief is justified if it is produced by a belief forming process that is reliable, i.e.: that produces a high ratio of true beliefs to false beliefs.[9] How and why the process is reliable need not be known to the subject. Reasons for the reliability of a process may be available but the mere fact that the process yields a considerably higher degree of true beliefs suffices.

What does this mean for spirit-experiences? We noted an intuitive requirement for a justified explanation for how directly perceived things are connected to what is inferred. It seems no such explanation is available for indirect spirit-experiences. Medical experts know how bodily indications like fatigue or chest pain are causally connected to heart-attacks. We also have information available why the symptoms indicate a heart-attack rather than a lung-emboly or broken leg. When pushed, art-historians may be able to explain how observable features of a statue indicate that it is a fake. They may also explain why the observable features do not indicate something that should be there, like a different art-style or function. Especially the issue of ruling out alternatives is not clearly available for indirect spirit-experiences. Bodily sensations as discussed by Willoughby might indicate spirit-activity. They might, however, also indicate a host of other things, like drafts, shivers, etc. Because many plausible connections to other things besides spirit-activity seem available, we seem unable to justifiably infer that the sensations were brought about by a spirit.

If one were to accept process reliabilism, indirect spirit-experiences initially seem to fare better. People like Willoughby could argue that attributing the bodily sensations to spirit-activity reliably produces true beliefs and therefore deny the need to explain why both are connected. However, on process-reliabilism, truth-conduciveness of processes is a statistical, objective notion. Common examples of reliable processes are those for which we have strong independent evidence that they are truth conducive. A favorite of authors if the gas gauge. Defenders of process reliabilism argue that any subject can gain justification for beliefs concerning the amount of gas left in the tank by reading the gauge. They need not know how the gauge and tank are connected. They do need to know that reading the gauge usually produces true beliefs. The reliability of gas gauges is rather uncontroversial; that of indirect spirit-experiences is not. It therefore seems as if resorting to process reliabilism is of little help for indirect spirit-experiences.

I started the section by noting that indirect experiences of spirits appear to have less justificatory force than direct experiences. The discussion so far, however, shows that some indirect experiences can have at least some justificatory force. As noted, people do seem to be

justified in believing that people are suffering from a heart attack after noting bodily symptoms. They are more justified when properly trained to identify such symptoms or when they are experts. Justification by means of indirect experiences hinges on a justified connection between the sensation and their putative cause. Strong justification for a connection between the symptoms and the heart attack is available. An equally strong connection between bodily sensations as described above and the presence of spirits is not. Defenders could reply that the connection is still sufficiently justified. They could argue that subjects had repeated, similar bodily sensations after calling upon the same spirit or visiting a place where the spirit is said to roam. However, even after support from repeated observations, the support for a connection remains rather weak. The sensations could easily have a different, non-spirit cause.

Concluding, the verdict on indirect spirit-experiences is overall negative. While we lack strong defeaters for the claim that certain bodily sensations can be caused by spirits, many alternative explanations for why the bodily sensations occur are available. As a result, we lack a strong case to believe that spirits are the cause.

A defender could reply that I am flipping the tables. The main point of the previous chapter was that spirit-experiences can provide prima facie justification for spirit-beliefs. As long as no case was made that a spirit-experience was *not caused* by a spirit, spirit-experiences can continue to justify spirit-beliefs. In reply, I note that on phenomenal conservatism, experiences only provide justification for what seems to be the case. We noted that identifying bodily sensations as indications of spirit-activity is not given or does not immediately seem the case. The identification requires considerably more than is given in the experience (i.e. training and/or expertise). Therefore, a positive case for the connection between sensation and spirit-activity is required for justification.

5.3.2 Justification from Direct Experiences

Justification of direct spirit-experiences is much more straightforward. No interpretative steps are needed to move from what is directly observed to spirits or spirit activity. In line with the conclusions from the previous chapter, subjects who had a direct spirit-experience can gain prima facie justification for spirit-beliefs.

Also in line with our conclusions from the last chapters, subjects can gain justification of a spirit's attributes from direct experiences. In the example above, the subject does not merely perceive a spirit but also various traits that make it clear that the spirit is Ezili. Identification of a spirit's identity may depend on background knowledge. The same problems discussed for indirect experiences, however, do not arise because fewer (if any) alternatives are available.

We noted that prima facie justification can be defeated, especially by alternative causal explanations. In the next section, we look at some candidates for defeaters.

5.4 Defeaters

We saw in Chapter 4 how the epistemic status of experiences can be called into doubt by advancing defeaters or debunking arguments. Unsurprisingly, defeaters for spirit-experiences have been less discussed than defeaters for experiences of God. Some of the discussion on debunking religious experiences is applicable to our discussion, especially debunking arguments that target experiences of anthropomorphic gods. This sections draws from that discussion and other scientific explanations for perception-like spirit-experiences to investigate whether a defeater is available.

The type of defeater we focus on is one showing that a putative experience of X was not caused by X. Given the versatility of perception-like spirit-experiences, defeaters will likely target a subclass. This is mainly the case because different kind of experiences require different kinds of causal explanations to show that they had a different cause. A defeater for indirect spirit-experiences will likely focus on the interpretative step between tactile or other sensations and attribution to spirits. For example, a defeater for Willoughby's experience could show that the breezes or tapping sounds he mentions were in fact caused by draft or leaking water. If the defeater is sufficiently supported by evidence, it would suffice to undermine Willoughby's experience. Since we noted various difficulties with the interpretative steps in indirect experiences, I will focus on defeaters of direct experiences in this section. Defeaters for direct experiences will take on various forms as well because of the different sense modalities involved. Below, I discuss various possible defeaters.[10]

5.4.1 Hypersensitive Agency Detection

A first defeater takes on visual spirit-experiences. It attributes spirit-experiences to a proneness to overdetect (invisible) agents. A similar defeater was put forward against belief in God (cf. Law 2018; Nola 2018). Because the theory on which the defeater draws foremost explains experiences of invisible agency, the defeaters seems more apt for spirit-experiences.

Stewart Guthrie argues that humans are overly sensitive in the detection of agents.[11] Given the importance of detecting predators or human enemies, it was and is evolutionary beneficial to be on guard for agency and signs thereof (e.g. noises, patterns). Because of its importance, it makes sense to be overly sensitive. Detecting too many agents at worst

leads to loss of time and energy while detecting too few agents could mean imminent death. According to Guthrie, an overly sensitive urge to see agents could easily foster belief in *invisible* agents. When humans get an urge that an agent is around (because of over sensitivity) and do not get visual confirmation, they could get the sense that an invisible agent caused the urge. Given enough of these experiences, humans could thus grow a belief in invisible agents.

If true, Guthrie's explanations can provide a defeater for visual experiences of spirits or the sense that some spirit is around. On his theory, at least some spirit-experiences are not caused by actual spirits but rather by mistaken various things as indicative of agency. The spirit-experience (however vague), therefore, has a different cause than spirits and should therefore be discarded as a non-genuine perception.

Though Guthrie's explanation seems to defeat at least some spirit-experiences, some problems arise. The problems are (1) the explanation's scope and (2) its evidential support. Concerning (1), Guthrie's explanations only pinpoints an alternative cause for spirit-experiences in a very particular setting. On his theory, humans are overly sensitive for agents. Much of this over sensitivity can be rectified when humans take time to assess the situation better. Misidentification of alleged signs of agency also occurs rather fast and does not lead to longer, stabile spirit-experiences. The visual experience of Ezili discussed above is therefore not explained by a hypersensitivity for agency. The same hold for similar, longer-lasting visual spirit-experiences. Given that such longer experiences tend to be more effective in affecting human beliefs and behavior, the first defeater (if the underlying theory is true) does not harm that much.

A graver concern for our first defeater is the evidential support for its underlying causal explanation. Guthrie's explanation is intuitively plausible. It also makes sense in the light of evolutionary considerations. Few support has, however, been found for the kind of hypersensitivity he draws attention too. As Johnson et al. and Van Leeuwen and Van Elk note, the logic of Guthrie's explanation had not been backed up by empirical confirmation (Johnson et al. 2013; Van Leeuwen and Van Elk 2019). Van Elk and Van Leeuwen also note that Guthrie is making a leap from hypersensitive agency detection to beliefs about invisible agents. Hypersensitivity would likely lead to anthropomorphic illusions. It is not clear how it would lead to illusory perceptions of less anthropomorphic beings. Guthrie's theory also does not explain why the sense of invisible agency is not easily discarded (Van Leeuwen and Van Elk 2019).[12]

Our first defeater therefore does little or no epistemic harm to most spirit-experiences. Although Guthrie's explanations is one of the more popular explanations for supernatural experiences. His is certainly not the only one.

5.4.2 19 Hz Stimulation

A second defeater draws on the claim that human eyes can be affected by sounds at a frequency of 19 Hz. Like the first defeater, the second takes aim at visual spirit-experiences.

The general idea of the second defeater is that noises at 19 Hz make the human eye vibrate in such a way that humans see person-like figures. The influence of noises at 19 Hz was discovered by Vic Tandy and Tony Lawrence following personal experiences of Vic Tandy himself. Tandy worked in a lab that was presumed haunted by spirits. Various people who worked there reported having seen strange beings. By coincidence, Tandy discovered that a fan in the extraction system was making a noise of 19 Hz. Noises at this frequency are not consciously heard by humans. Tandy discovered how such noises can affect the human eye by making it vibrate. He claims that the vibrations can account for the strange experiences (Tandy and Lawrence 1998).

If true, the second defeater has the force to undermine some experiences. If a spirit-experience indeed does result from visual distortion brought about by noise, the true cause of the spirit-experience are the distortions on the eye potentially joined by some misperceived visual input. The experience is not caused by any spirit whatsoever.

Our second defeater runs into similar problems as the first. Again, the defeater has (1) a limited scope and (2) lacks evidential back-up. Concerning (1), Jason Braithwaite and Maurice Townsend argue that distortions of the eye as described by Tandy cannot explain longer, sustained experiences. They therefore also cannot explain our example of the experience of Ezili and similar enduring experiences. Concerning (2), Braithwaite and Townsend also note that a recent overview of studies on the effects of low frequency sound did not report visual distortions (Braithwaite and Townsend 2006).

The second defeater therefore runs into similar problems as the first. As a result, it does little damage to the epistemic force of spirit-experiences.

5.4.3 Micro-seizures in the Temporal Lobes

A third defeater relies on a theory which attributes experiences of a sensed presence to micro-seizures in the temporal lobes. The defeater targets non-visual experiences where subjects sense the presence of a spirit. Again, a similar defeater has been defended against belief in God.[13]

Michael Persinger argues that changes in magnetic fields could result in the subjective sense that someone is present. Changes in magnetic fields would cause small seizures in the human temporal lobe. The temporal lobes are linked to subjective experiences of the self. When triggered by magnetic fields, the temporal lobes would not represent the input of the actual self but a distorted sense of the self, i.e. as a sense

of an external invisible self. The temporal lobes would be more susceptible for such micro-seizures after dramatic events, like drug use or energy deprivation. Common experiences of an invisible presence could be brought about by magnetic changes resulting from tectonic stress within the earth's crust. The theory also explains why patients suffering from temporal-lobe epilepsy often have more and more vivid religious experiences (Persinger 1985). Persinger also claimed to have artificially evoked experiences of sensed presence by direct stimulation by means of a helmet (Persinger and Koren 2005). Additional support for Persinger's theory was collected by Richard Wiseman. Wiseman measured the magnetic radiation in allegedly haunted areas and notes higher variability than in non-haunted areas (Wiseman et al. 2003).

The theory can support a defeater for non-visual spirit-experiences where subjects feel that a spirit is near. If changes in magnetic radiation can bring about the sense that an invisible agent is near, that experience is not caused by an actual spirit but by the changes in magnetic fields (brought about by tectonic changes) and the reaction in the temporal lobe.

The defeater also runs into problems regarding scope and evidential support for its underlying theory. It is unclear whether micro-seizures can explain longer, sustained spirit-experiences. Some have noted problems regarding the evidential back-up of the theory. A Swedish team attempted to artificially evoke experiences like Persinger did but failed to note an effect of magnetic changes. Instead, they attributed the sense of sensed presence to suggestion (Persinger and Koren 2005). Similar attempts at replication of Persinger's results failed as well (Van Elk 2014). Christopher French attempted to build a haunted house by manipulating magnetic fields. Some subjects did report unusual experiences but they were not correlated strongly to variance in magnetic fields. French also suggested that the experiences were due to suggestion (French et al. 2009).

While the evidence does not appear to support the third defeater, they suggest a next defeater. Spirit-experiences could be caused by sheer suggestion and confabulation. We return to this defeater later.

5.4.4 Hypnagogic Hallucinations

A next defeater attributes spirit-experiences to hypnagogic hallucinations. This explanation has not been applied to spirit-experience in detail to my knowledge.[14] The general idea is that (some) spirit-experiences can be regarded as confabulations of the human mind when humans fall asleep or wake up.

The term 'hypnagogic hallucinations' covers illusory visual, tactile or auditory perceptions that occur when humans move from waking to sleeping state or back. A large part of the population reports high-pitched noises or popping noises. A smaller share reports more vivid sensations, like visual hallucinations or the sense that bugs are crawling on

their bodies. Hypnagogic hallucinations occur more frequently among teens than adults and are more common among women than men. The risk of having a hallucination increases because of alcohol or drug use, insomnia, anxiety, stress, narcolepsy or mood disorders (Soliman and Cirino 2021).

Stating that spirit-experiences are not veridical because they are hypnagogic hallucinations is question begging. Given that the term 'hallucination' means something like 'non-veridical experience', the statement merely states that spirit-experiences are not veridical because they are not veridical. To bolster the defeater, a closer look at the mechanism behind hypnagogic hallucinations is needed. According to Mavrodides (Mavromatis 1987), hypnagogic hallucinations can be explained by the altered functioning of the cortical and subcortical regions in the brain. Whereas cognition during waking state is mediated strongly by activity in the brain's cortical regions, brain-activity in cortical regions is diminished in hypnagogic state. As a result, experience is more heavily mediated by sub-cortical regions (like the amygdala and hippocampus). One of the functions of the hippocampus is the maintenance of a distinction between images arriving from actual perceptions and internal imagery (Mavromatis 1987). Alterations of the workings of the thalamus might therefore lead to a state where internally produced sensations are processed as external. Sensations 'stored' in memory during waking state might therefore be relived in a slightly changed form during the hypnagogic state.

What does this mean for spirit-experiences? If the theory discussed above is true, spirit-experiences might be the result of sensations being re-experienced by subjects when they fall asleep. The sensations of seeing, feeling or hearing spirits might be nothing more than a revisiting of earlier sensations of human persons. If the explanation holds water, spirit-experiences in hypnagogic states are caused by reliving memories and misprocessing them as external rather than internal. This would clearly constitute a defeater because the experiences are not caused by external spirits.

A number of problems can be raised. First, the fourth defeater also has a fairly limited scope. The explanation on which the defeater relies only explains experiences that occur in hypnagogic states. Therefore, it does not explain spirit-experiences during normal waking states. Second, the explanation remains speculative to some extent. A third and bigger problem is the nature or phenomenology of spirit-experiences. The defeater relies on the idea that subjects revisit memories of persons. Spirit-experiences are, however, often not like memories of human persons. In the example above, the subjects is having a vision of Ezili. While it is possible that Ezili resembles a person the subject encountered before, the experience seems considerably different from encounters with humans. Explaining spirit-experiences as revisited memories of

persons also has a hard time explaining why many people seem to have experiences of the same spirit. The experience of Ezili was not an isolated event but similar experiences were had by others in the Caribbean or Western-Africa. Since subjects very likely had different encounters with humans in waking state, similar spirit-experiences in hypnagogic states are unlikely if Mavrodides's theory is true.

A final problem is more speculative. A common idea in traditions where spirit-belief is common is that spirits can enter the human mind. Tanya Luhrmann notes that people in Vanuatu believe that the human mind is not clearly bifurcated from the outside world but porous. The porosity allows outside forces to enter the mind and produce thoughts or guide behavior (Luhrmann 2020). If such porosity is real, spirits could enter the human mind during hypnagogic states and reveal themselves internally. If porosity of the mind indeed does occur, external spirits can make themselves manifest internally in the human minds. If that is the case, attributing spirit-experiences to hypnagogic cognition is compatible with spirit-experiences being caused by actual spirits. The theory then no longer constitutes an alternative causal explanation and does not defeat.

The theory on which the fourth defeater relies is more elaborate. Like previous defeaters, it gives a plausible account of how spirit-experiences can have alternative causes. Especially the problems concerning its scope and problems in explaining experiences very different than memories make it unlikely to be successful.

5.4.5 Self-monitoring Gone Astray

A next defeater attributes spirit-experiences to errors in self-monitoring. The explanations on which the defeater draws resembles that on hypnagogic hallucinations insofar as entities perceived as external to the self are identified with internal perceptions. It does, however, not refer to hypnagogic states.

Humans are usually able to distinguish between externally produced sensations and sensations stemming from their own actions or beliefs (e.g. sensations coming from memory).[15] Some have proposed that knowledge of our own intentions is used to make this distinction (e.g. Frith 2015). A clear indication of how humans usually make the distinction is that (most) are unable to tickle themselves (see Weiskrantz et al. 1971). Self-monitoring is probably mediated by several brain-regions, including the insula and orbitofrontal cortex (Parthimos et al. 2019). Some have proposed that a defect in self-monitoring may explain auditory hallucinations and passivity phenomena (phenomena where subjects feel that some aspect of themselves is under the control of others) in schizophrenia. Errors in self-monitoring may be the result of a lack of awareness of intended actions (Frith 2015). Subjects might form an

intention but forget about it or lose track of it. They may also recall of a voice and forget about the process. Because of the lack of awareness, the internally generated sensation can be perceived as external. Sean Spence suggested that the error could be explained by the timing of awareness. The awareness of the outcome of a movement could precede the awareness of the predicted outcome. Because this is contrary to normal experience of agency, the sensation may be attributed to an external agent (Spence 1996).

Errors in self-monitoring are well reported in patients suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. To inspire a defeater of broader scope, the question is whether the explanation can be generalized to normal functioning humans. It has been noted that normally functioning adults can be tricked to perceive stroking of an external rubber hand as stroking of one's own hand. Some argue that the effect arises because pre-existing representations of one's own body may affect tactile processing (Golaszewski et al. 2021). Put simply, because humans remember tactile perceptions on their own hand while perceiving similar movements on a rubber hand, they get the sense that their own hands are touched. With rubber hand illusions, we get a reverse movement, namely from external to internal. Since spirit-experiences are generally regarded as perceptions of something external, the explanation does not account for them. Others argue that also reverse errors (processing internally generated sensations as external) can be explained by pre-existing representations as well. Blakemore et al. argue that internally produced sensations to which the subject is less attenuated and are therefore more surprising can be misperceived as external. This would be so because the actual sensory feel of a movement would not correspond to the predicted feel (Blakemore et al. 1999).

A defeater can be constituted using the explanation discussed above. Some spirit-experiences could be the result of misidentifying internal sensation (from memory or unconsciously initiated) as stemming from an external, invisible agent (i.e. a spirit). The sensations are perceived as caused by a spirit but would in fact be caused by the subject herself. Unlike some of the previous defeaters, this one draws on a theory that is well supported by empirical evidence.[16] Some problems do arise. A first problem is the defeater's scope. The explanation appears to mainly explain tactile perceptions. Auditory and visual hallucinations in schizophrenic patients are explained by the same mechanism as well, but it is not clear whether this can be generalized to normally functioning humans. A second larger problem concerns the nature of spirit-experiences. The theory predicts that sensations that are misperceived as external will resemble previous sensations. If seemingly external sensations are in fact generated internally, the (seemingly external) sensations will resemble other internally generated sensations. This is not always the case in spirit-experiences. Sometimes humans experience something

new or unexpected (see also the example above). Since the underlying theory has a hard time accounting for those experiences, they stand undefeated.

5.4.6 Suggestion

A next way to defeat spirit-experiences is by arguing that they are caused by misperceptions resulting from suggestion. We have seen how authors dissatisfied with other explanations made hints along those lines. The defeater is also frequently appealed to in common sense. People sometimes explain spirit-experiences in non-western traditions by claiming that 'their world-view makes them expect spirits'. Some authors moves beyond common sense and pointed to how perception can be shaped by prior beliefs.

A view known as 'predictive processing'[17] is gaining increased popularity in cognitive neuroscience. On the view, all cognition is governed by an internal model of the world. Humans would have such a model that includes information about themselves, the world they live in and properties of both. This information allows them to make predictions about the causes of what they will encounter. Put crudely, when humans go hiking in the woods they expect (among other things) tactile sensations caused by a rough terrain, visual sensations caused by trees and animals and auditory sensations caused by wind, animals and other humans. These predictions are checked with incoming sensory stimuli. If the sensory stimuli does not match the prediction, the internal model is updated to prevent future mismatches. The drive toward reducing the number of mismatches is governed by the 'free-energy principle' (Friston 2010). Like many biological systems, human minds drive to reduce entropy or an excess of free-energy. States of much entropy are characterized by (among other things) uncertainty, disorder and unclarity. A model of the world that allows for few mismatches reduces uncertainty, disorder and unclarity.

On predictive processing, prior beliefs influence experience. The internal model generates predictions which shape experiences. If there is no mismatch between the generated prediction and sensory stimuli, experience is very heavily determined by the internal model. Predictive processing has been applied to religious experiences. Marc Andersen argues that subjects who hold religious beliefs (i.e. that God or other supernatural beings exist) are more likely to perceive incoming stimuli as caused by God or a supernatural being. The prior beliefs would mainly affect processing of ambiguous, unclear things, like vague tactile sensations of vague patterns. Because of the ambiguity or vagueness, religious beliefs are harder to revise because of mismatches with sensory input (Andersen 2019). Where non-religious would perceive these as caused by natural entities (the self, other humans, the wind, animals, etc.), religious people are more prone to perceive these as caused by something supernatural.

Returning to spirit-experiences, debunkers could argue that humans perceive certain stimuli (tactile, visual, auditory) as caused by spirits because they hold prior beliefs concerning the existence of and likely encounter with spirits. Such an attribution would go well if there is no mismatch between the prior spirit-belief and the encountered sensory stimulus. Observed vague patterns, strange noises or tactile sensations could in theory be caused by a spirit.[18] Therefore, the perceived stimuli does not cause friction with the internal model and does not prompt a revision.

To argue for a defeater, attribution to prior spirit-beliefs does not suffice. One needs to argue that prior beliefs lead subjects astray or cause them to *wrongfully* attribute phenomena to spirits. There are two ways to argue for this. First one can show that spirit-beliefs are false and misinform people's experiences. Doing so would require an argument against the existence of spirits, which is rarely provided. Second, one can point to cases where people who hold spirit-beliefs process sensations that are clearly not caused by spirits as caused by spirits. To my knowledge, no such experiment has been performed. Without either of two, the subject of spirit-experiences could argue that her prior spirit-beliefs guide her on the right path and allow her to detect spirits where others see none.

Although the defeater that draws on predictive processing has a broad scope (visual, auditory and tactile experiences in normally functioning humans), it runs into problems showing that spirit-experiences are not caused by spirits. Therefore, the defeater fails.

5.5 Conclusion

I distinguished two kinds of experiences of spirits that resemble perceptions, indirect and direct experiences. I argued that indirect spirit-experiences critically hinge on background beliefs that are not obviously justified. Therefore such experiences do not justify spirit-beliefs on their own. Direct spirit-experiences fare better. There are no inherent reasons to doubt their veracity and the defeaters I surveyed do not provide good grounds to undermine them. This all prompts the conclusion that direct spirit-experiences can justify spirit-beliefs.

Perception-like experiences are not the only kind of spirit-experiences people report. In the next chapter, we continue with experiences of mediumship, where subjects report receiving messages from spirits in their minds.

Notes

1 Considerable scholarly attention is also given to mystical experiences of oneness with God. These do not resemble perception nor other forms of religious experiences.

2 A noteworthy exception is Richard Swinburne's original defense of religious experiences, where he briefly discusses experiences of Poseidon (Swinburne 2004). Another exception is Philip Wiebe's book-length discussion of demonic and angelic experiences in Christianity (Wiebe 2004).
3 Some people report 'smelling' demons, for example by noting a profound stench. I do not discuss those experiences in this chapter.
4 It is difficult to find similar clear statements of indirect experiences in ethnographies on indigenous religions. Niko Besnier does note that inhabitants of Nukulaelae report sensations of fear which they attribute to spirits (Besnier 1996).
5 Leaving aside the fact that natural gas does not have an odor and that the odor is due to adding Mercaptan.
6 People may of course use different terms like 'ghost' or 'vodoun'. They may also use more specific terms like 'angel' or 'demon'.
7 The list of symptoms is drawn from Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021).
8 Readers proficient in recent epistemology will likely see similarities to Keith Lehrer's 'Mister Truetemp' example (Lehrer 2018).
9 The definition of 'process reliabilism' draws on Becker (2009). Process reliabilism was first developed by Alvin Goldman (Goldman 1979).
10 I have omitted theories on visual hallucinations associated with deteriorating visual abilities (e.g. Charles Bonnet's Syndrome) or deteriorating mental abilities (e.g. Alzheimer's disease). While such diseases can likely explain some spirit-experiences as visual or other hallucinations, their scope is limited to people with deteriorating abilities. Since a great deal of spirit-experiences occur to seemingly normal functioning subjects, the scope of defeaters drawing on such diseases is likely too limited. The same holds for defeaters that draw on severe pathogenies like psychosis. Therefore, those have been omitted as well.
11 The theory was also defended in updated form by Justin Barrett (Barrett 2004).
12 Pascal Boyer made a similar comment to Guthrie's theory (Boyer 2008).
13 Hints in this direction were made by Michael Persinger himself (Persinger and Healey 2002) and Todd Murphy (Murphy 1999). It was criticized by James Houran (Houran 1997) and Kelly Clark (Clark 2019).
14 Some authors do suggest that some spirit-experiences might be explained by hypnagogic hallucinations. See, for example, Grover et al. (2018). Adam Powell applies hypnagogia to religious experiences (Powell 2018).
15 This paragraph draws heavily on Blakemore et al. (2000). Apart from giving a general overview of the discussion on self-monitoring and its relation to hallucinations, the paper discusses an experiment with subjects suffering from schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder or depression.
16 See, for example, Blakemore et al. (2000).
17 The presentation of predictive processing is necessarily brief. For a more complete discussion, see Hohwy (2020).
18 I leave worries about how non-physical beings like spirits can interact with the physical world aside for now.

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6 Justification from Mediumship-experiences

6.1 Introduction

Apart from believing in the existence of spirits and their ability to show themselves to humans in ways resembling sensory perception, adherents of many traditions believe that a subclass of humans can translate messages from spirits to fellow humans. The practice is known as 'mediumship'.

Mediumship is perhaps best known to western audiences through advertisements of people claiming to be able to contact deceased loved ones. Some westerners might also know of the practice through depictions of 19th and early 20th century spiritualists or adherents of mesmerism (cf. Tatar 2015). Mediumship is, however, a core element of some African, Caribbean, Native American, Polynesian and Asian religious traditions.

The experience of mediumship is rather different than perceptions or perception-like experiences of spirits. Mediumship-experiences are also much less diverse. They consist of a subjective sense of hearing voices (allegedly of a spirit) or getting the sense that someone (a spirit) is implanting ideas or thoughts.

The outline of this chapter is similar to the previous. We will look closer at examples of experiences of mediumship and the epistemic questions raised by them. Most examples below are of Zimbabwean and Tibetan mediums. We will also look at some contenders for alternative causal explanations that could furnish a defeater.

6.2 Experiences of Mediumship

In his study on mediums operating during the Zimbabwe war of liberation, David Lan narrates the following event:

> In the morning, my grandfather showed me the field where I could plough. We walked all around the field and went home. When we reached there we saw a man who was the medium of the *mhondoro*

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> [Zimbabwean spirit] called Chiwawa. (…) I greeted him but he didn't answer me. I sat down near to him. Then he started to sing and his spirit came out saying 'Eee. Aaa. Who are you? Get away. I don't want to see you here.' I got up and was about to go but my grandfather said to him 'this is your *muzukuru* [grandchild DL] and my grandchild. He wants to live with his father in this area. Welcome him and look after him well.' Then the *mhondoro* said 'Well, he can stay here but the field you give him, he musn't plough it. I will be there checking. Tomorrow I want to give a chicken to this boy.' Then he stood up and went away. (…) Grandfather said 'This is the one who looks after us.' I said 'Why does he say I musn't plough my field?' Grandfather said 'He means you musn't go to the field early in the morning or you will be beaten by the lions. That is the time that he is working in his land.' (…) I said 'He wants to give me a chicken. How ill he give it to me?' He answered 'The chicken is not a real chicken. It might be a buck or another wild animal. He means that he will let you catch the buck easily in the forest and that means that you are welcome here.'
>
> (Lan 1985)

The example displays some distinctive elements of mediumship-experiences. The medium performs some act to induce the experience (in this case singing), a spirit enters his mind, the medium's tone changes and he delivers a (symbolic) message.

Mediums often take on an important role in communities. In Zimbabwe, mediums and their interaction with spirits is believed to be vital for securing rainfall and preserving the social structure (Lan 1985). In other traditions, the role of mediums is less intertwined with that of worldly government. Mediums are, however, often key figures in religious communities and sometimes foundational figures for new religious groups. For example, Brazilian Candomble or Umbanda groups are often clustered around one medium or a small group of mediums (Schmidt 2017; Seligman 2005). The Brazilian Vale do Amanhecer group was formed around the experiences of medium Tia Neiva (Pierini 2020). Famous historical examples of mediums are the oracles of Delphi and the Nechung oracles of Tibet.

Mediumship goes by the name of 'channeling' as well. The term 'channeling' is commonly used for phenomena similar to mediumship in 19th century spiritualism or new age traditions. Although there are many similarities, the messages allegedly received during channeling tend to concern metaphysical questions about the nature of the universe, reincarnation or the soul. Messages allegedly received during mediumship-experiences tend to concern practical matters like food production, family relations or procreation.[1] Because of the similarities, the distinction is often not made in proposed explanations.

Mediumship is usually believed not to be for everybody. In African traditions, mediums are often selected by older mediums and go through long training. In some cases, subjects are actively prepared to be mediums. In other cases, subjects report strange experiences from childhood onwards and are selected as mediums as a result.

An important feature of mediumship-experiences is that they usually occur under an altered state of consciousness. This state is often called 'trance'. The phenomenology of trance states is hard to pin down. Trance states are sometimes regarded as states of reduced consciousness. More often, trance states are regarded as altered states of consciousness, where subjects are in a different mode of awareness. Trance is sometimes likened to dissociative states (see also below) (e.g. Danforth 1989). In dissociative states, human awareness is separated from the external world or ordinary reality. According to Richard Castillo, trance states are the result of intense focusing of attention. Under normal circumstances, attention can be directed in four directions: the external environment, the body, memory or imagination. Intense focus on either of these (broad or in more specific forms) renders the subject unaware of the others and would alter subjective awareness allowing for unusual experiences. Practices like singing, drumming, hypnosis, sensory deprivation or meditation help subjects achieve the required attention. Specific cultural input would give content to the subjective experiences under trance (Castillo 1995).

Erika Bourguignon notes from a sample of 437societies that 90% of them had some form of institutionalized altered state of consciousness (Bourguignon 1973: 11). The sample consisted of societies from Sub-Saharan Afrika, Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, the Insular Pacific, North America and South America (Bourguignon 1973: 10). The sample therefore mainly consists of non-Western societies.

Mediumship-experiences differ from possession-experiences (see Chapter 7), mainly in the sense that a medium retains much of his control and personality. The role of the spirit in mediumship is fairly limited, often to delivering messages. During possession-episodes, spirits take over a subject's whole personality. While possessing spirits also deliver messages, this is not the center focus of possession-experiences. It is much more central in mediumship-experiences and usually the reason why mediums engage in the practice.

6.3 What Beliefs do Mediumship-Experiences Justify?

Mediumship-experiences are different from perception-like spirit-experiences and possession-experiences. They likely differ with regard to the state of consciousness of experiencing subjects but also with regard to the content. The content of perception-like spirit-experiences usually is the appearance of some spirit with some qualities or attributes. In

mediumship-experiences, spirits do not appear to the subject in the same way. They appear as a presence in the subject's mind that gives certain messages. The spirit can appear as having certain qualities, like being wild or being loving. Spirits are not experienced as having visible qualities because mediumship-experiences are not visual.[2]

Because mediumship-experiences have different contents than perception-like spirit-experiences, they (prima facie) justify different beliefs. Beliefs justified by perception-like experiences are mainly about the spirit's existence and visual attributes. Subjects who enjoy mediumship-experiences usually take active steps to contact a specific spirit and plead with it to enter the subject's mind. For example, Tibetan medium bsTan-grag lha-pa states that he normally presents an offering of beer, barleycorn, butter, rice and incense before invoking spirits.[3] He also puts on a costume made of antique cold-colored silk and a headdress attached to a peaked red hat. He displays amulets that appeal to the spirits. To invoke the spirits, he recites prayers from memory, bangs a large hanging drum and rings a flat-bell with his right hand (Bellezza 2005: 53). It is clear that the Tibetan medium holds beliefs concerning the existence of spirits prior to the mediumship-experience. While there could be spontaneous mediumship-experiences where the subject did not have prior beliefs. Many descriptions of such experiences include descriptions of careful preparations and addressing specific spirits beforehand.

While mediumship-experiences do not provide initial justification for beliefs concerning the existence of a spirit, they can provide corroborating evidence. Defenders of the justificatory force of experiences (see Chapter 4) tend not to specify the amount or level of justification gained from experiences. They merely argue that experiences provide 'some' (prima facie) justification. It is intuitively plausible that repeated experiences of the same object, person or phenomenon lead to stronger justification. One experience can be discarded more easily as a mistake or misperception. Ten experiences of the same thing are harder to discard. Therefore, mediumship-experiences can provide additional support for beliefs concerning the existence of a spirit. This holds for the subject enjoying the experience and also for subjects observing the mediumship-experience.

Apart from not justifying beliefs concerning existence (or only partly so), medium-ship experiences differ from perception-like experiences by not justifying beliefs concerning visual attributes. We saw in the preceding chapter how spirits can appear with various anthropomorphic traits or attire (see Chapter 5). They can therefore provide prima facie justification for these visual attributes of spirits. The non-visual nature of mediumship-experiences precludes this. Subjects can get the sense that a spirit is behaving in a certain way during mediumship-experiences. For example, Belleza notes how Tibetan mediums get the feeling that spirits

are eager to help relieve humans of ailments and illnesses (Bellezza 2005). This behavior gives an indication that the spirits are merciful or caring toward (some) humans.

A next class of beliefs for which mediumship-experiences can provide justification is proper ritual practice. Tibetan medium Pho-bo dbang-phyug claims that he learned the importance of devotion to Buddhism and bodily cleanliness to his practice. He learned to refrain from eating garlic and chillies and drinking alcoholic beverage. He also learned not to consume meat before his performances (Bellezza 2005). Such beliefs only indirectly concern the nature of spirits. They may indicate what a spirits prefers (purity) or frowns upon (meat or alcohol). The beliefs, however, mainly address what humans ought to do to enter into mediumship-experiences or gain the spirit's favor.

6.4 Defeaters

So far, we have seen examples of mediumship-experiences and discussed what kind of beliefs they justify (i.e. mainly beliefs concerning the nature of spirits and proper ritual behavior). Next, we look at defeaters. Rebutting defeaters could argue that spirits do not have the nature displayed during mediumship-experiences. They could also argue that specific spirits or spirits in general do not exist. As in previous chapter, the focus is not on rebutting but on undercutting defeaters.

Undercutting defeaters can again be furnished by explanations that attribute mediumship-experiences to other causes. Most defeaters discussed below were not defended as defeaters but were distilled from suggestions by authors or self-constructed. The explanations on which they draw mostly come from cognitive neuroscience. Some come from evolutionary biology.

6.4.1 Dissociation

A first defeater attributes mediumship-experiences to episodes of dissociation. Such an attribution is often hinted at (McCauley and Graham 2020; Radford 2013; Wahbeh and Radin 2017) but I did not find elaborated defenses. The short hints tend to argue that mediumship-experiences arise from within rather than outside and argue that mistaken attributions arises because of a mild form of dissociation.

Dissociation is often discussed as pathological but is also common in normally functioning adults. The most dramatic manifestation of dissociation occurs in patients suffering from dissociative identity disorder (DiD).[4] Patients get the sense that multiple identities,[5] with different patterns of thinking and relating to the world, are inhabiting their minds. Some patients report having one main, 'host' identity along with a number of 'visiting' identities. Different identities may have memories

or experiences that conflict with those of others. Different identities can take control of patients at different times. Patients may experience amnesia of episodes when a different identity took control. DiD is often a way of coping with childhood trauma, neglect or abuse (Dissociation and Dissociative Disorders 2019).

People who do not suffer from DiD can also experience dissociation. Many people feel a 'disconnect' from the world on occasion. This may manifest as daydreaming or emotional detachment from the immediate surroundings (Wiginton 2021).

According to Vesuna et al., dissociation (whether pathological or non-pathological) would be caused by alterations in brain-wave oscillations mediated by ketamine or phencyclidine. When ketamine or phencyclidine was administered to mice, Vesuna et al. observed a 1–3 Hz rhythm in neurons of the retrosplenial cortex. EEG-measurements showed rhythmic coupling of the retrosplenial cortex with anatomically connected components of the thalamus and decoupling with most other brain-regions. The group found that the changes in frequency (and associated decoupling) correlated with dissociation behavioral effects. In one patient with focal epilepsy, similar EEG-recordings revealed a similar rhythm-pattern that correlated with pre-seizure self-reported dissociation. Local, brief electrical stimulation elicited dissociative experiences (Vesuna et al. 2020).

The function of the retrosplenial cortex is not well understood especially because of difficulties in isolating this area. Studies on rodents suggest a role in learning and navigation. These roles are likely exercised jointly with the hippocampal formation and the limbic thalamus. Attributing this function to the retrosplenial cortex is confirmed with studies on Alzheimer patients with damage to this region. FMRI-studies on healthy humans suggest that the retrosplenial cortex is involved in a wide array of cognitive abilities, including spatial navigation and episodic, autobiographical memory. Retrosplenial activity might also have a role in scene construction, i.e. the process of mentally creating and manipulating a complex scene. This process might underpin functions like autobiographical memory, navigation and thinking about the future. Retrosplenial cortex might also have a role in translation between different perspectives of the external world, namely viewpoint-dependent and viewpoint-independent frames of reference (Vann et al. 2009).

All links between measured brain-activity and human behavior remain speculative to some extent. The decoupling between the retrosplenial cortex and other brain-regions may indicate that information is processed by the retrosplenial cortex in isolation. The isolation may prevent the information from being linked to information about the self or to be stored in long-term memory. The involvement of the retrosplenial cortex in autobiographical memory might lead to memories being replayed in isolation of other cognitive functions giving rise to alternate personalities.

The proximate brain-based explanation of dissociation is speculative. The explanation again suggest a confusion between internal and external. Internally produced sensations (from memory) would be experiences as external or as not produced by the self. If dissociation indeed does explain mediumship-experiences, voices or experienced different personalities can be traced back to sensations originating in the self.

If the explanation holds water, it can serve in a defeater. Mediumship-experiences can then be explained as caused by misapprehended internal sensations. If this is the case, they are not caused by an external spirit entering the subject's mind and we have an alternative causal explanation.

Stephen Broade notes than although mediums display behavior that is similar to behavior of patients suffering from dissociation, they also display other behavior (Braude 2016). Stanley Krippner also notes differences in behavior. He notes that mediums[6] are usually quite aware of the process they are going through, even when they claim not to recollect the experience. Krippner argues that dissociation might match certain forms of involuntary possession by lower, earth-bound spirits. Most mediumship-experiences, however, would not be sufficiently similar (Krippner 1987).

A related problem is that the explanation does not readily explain 'new' mediumship-experiences that do not resemble episodes from memory or diverge sharply from the subject's personality. Mediums are reported to have altered personalities during mediumship. This is not what we would expect if mediumship-experiences are brought about by internally generated experiences. Mediums are also said to deliver messages with new information (see examples above). This also doesn't fit the explanation on which the defeater draws. If all mediumship-experiences come from within the subject, it is highly surprising to hear new, different messages.

The defeater therefore runs into similar problems as the previous one. Explaining perceived external entities as misrepresented internal information does not account for the profound different nature of spirits encountered in mediumship-experiences.

6.4.2 Absorption

A next defeater attributes mediumship-experiences to auditory hallucinations arising from absorption. Absorption is a tendency to become immersed in experience and thought (Powell and Moseley 2020). The absorption state resembles dissociation as both involve increased attention on one thing with reduced attention to other things. Absorption is different as it does not necessarily involve detachment from self-awareness. Absorption is phenomenologically related to ADHD-symptoms and OCD-symptoms (Soffer-Dudek 2019). Nirit Soffer-Dudek notes that

absorption may involve reduced self-awareness (Soffer-Dudek 2019). States of absorption that do involve reduced self-awareness are usually called 'dissociative absorption'. States of absorption have also been associated with an altered sense of self (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974). This altered sense, however, involves greater empathy rather than confusion between what is internally or externally generated.

Being prone to absorption is linked to greater hypnotizability (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974). The term 'hypnotizability' refers to experiencing suggested alterations (experiential or behavioral) during hypnosis (Elkins et al. 2015). Like absorption, subjects can be more or less prone toward hypnotizability but most people are likely hypnotizable to some extent (Elkins 2021).

Absorption has also been linked to fantasy proneness. Fantasy proneness is a personality trait which indicates a proneness for deep involvement in fantasies (Lynn and Rhue 1988). The trait can be described as a disposition to 'live in a dream world' or 'have an overly active imagination' (Glausiusz 2011).

Pointing to a role of absorption has been applied to explain certain experiences of God and experiences of spirits. Tanya Luhrmann did extensive fieldwork in charismatic, evangelical, Christian communities. She found that members were encouraged to regard their minds as porous for outside, divine influences. By following instructions and cultivating certain practices, members believed to gain the skill of identifying thoughts that are implanted by God. Some members were better at this practice than others (Luhrmann 2012). Subsequent research strongly suggested that subjects with a proclivity for absorption were more likely to report sharper mental images and more unusual spiritual experiences (Luhrmann et al. 2010). Lifshitz et al. conclude from various strands of evidence that Luhrmann's claim can be broadened to other religious traditions as well. They conclude that a high proclivity for absorption correlates with a general proclivity for having spiritual experiences. Absorption can also explain naturalistic experiences like experiences of awe or joy (Lifshitz et al. 2019).

Moving from absorption to a defeater for mediumship-experiences can go in two ways. A defeater could draw on the connection between absorption and suggestibility (and to some extend hypnotizability). If subjects with a high proclivity for absorption are more susceptible for suggestion, they could develop auditory hallucinations because someone (or something) made suggestions in that direction. A subject might develop such hallucinations because she saw other mediums active in her community. She might also develop hallucinations after having read or heard about alleged mediumship-experiences. We discussed a similar defeater before (see Chapter 5) and noted that suggestion does not obviously show that an experience has an alternative cause. This defeater falls prey to the same weakness.

A second defeater drawing on knowledge of absorption points to its associated proneness for fantasy-immersion. If subjects with a proclivity for absorption tend to have a more vivid imagination, they may get convinced more easily that their fantasies are real. A subject with a high proclivity for absorption may hear about spirits talking to people, fantasize about such experiences and (slowly) get convinced that such fantasies are real. If such a process gives rise to mediumship-experiences, those experiences are not caused by an actual spirit reaching out but by a general human tendency to fantasize and a tendency to get more immersed in fantasies (absorption).

Although the second defeater that draws on absorption is on better footing than the first (suggestion-based) defeater, some problems again arise. Attributing mediumship-experiences to fantasy has a hard time accounting for similarities between mediumship-experiences and for surprising mediumship-experiences. Different subjects are sometimes believed to host the same spirits as mediums. For example, David Lan notes that mediumship of the same mhondoro (spirit) passes on to new mediums in Zimbabwe. New mediums are believed to deliver messages from the same spirit (Lan 1985). Given that people tend to have diverging fantasies, the similarities are surprising. Similarities could be explained by adding a role of suggestion. Mediumship-experiences could arise from overly active fantasy, which is subsequently molded by suggestions from elders or teachers.

The rejoinder does not attribute mediumship-experiences solely to suggestion; it argues that mediumship-experiences are the result of shared fantasies passed on through suggestion. In this way, it avoids the charge against the first defeater. Even if a role for suggestion is added, problems still arise. Some mediumship-experiences are (highly) surprising. David Lan how Zimbabwean mediums were decisive in convincing locals to join to uprising against colonial rule. Mediums were also reported to give apt instructions for the rebels (Lan 1985). Given the new situation in which mediums found themselves, messages concerning the rebellion are somewhat surprising if such messages should arise from fantasy molded by suggestion.

The second defeater also has a hard time explaining one of the most famous predictions made by a medium. In 1947, Lobsang Jigme, the official Tibetan state medium, predicted that Tibet would face great difficulties in 1950 (Pearlman 2002). In 1950, Tibet was indeed invaded by the People's Republic of China. Nine years later, the medium had to flee Tibet along with Tibetan state officials to India. If the account of the prediction is true, the message is highly surprising. In 1947, the Chinese civil war was still ongoing and Chinese attention toward Tibet was unlikely.

The example of Tibet is somewhat speculative. However, one need not accept it to see the weakness of the second defeater. Mediumship-experiences are much different than elaborations on fantasy both by

experiencing subjects and witnesses. As Lifshitz et al. suggest, absorption (and its relation to vivid fantasy) might be better suited to account for experiences where subjects feel the presence of God or another supernatural being (Lifshitz et al. 2019). More information on how fantasy can be transformed into experiences of other agencies entering the mind is required to account for mediumship-experiences.

Absorption can inform two defeaters for mediumship-experiences. The second fares somewhat better than the first but is ultimately not successful.

6.4.3 Auditory Hallucinations and Schizophrenia

Mediumship-experiences involve hearing voices or implemented thoughts from spirits. Hearing voices is a common symptom of schizophrenia. Patients suffering from schizophrenia have general difficulties in distinguishing what is real and what is not. Important symptoms are various hallucinations, among which are hearing voices.

It is unlikely that all subjects of mediumship-experiences suffer from some form of schizophrenia. It is more probable that they might suffer from a milder form, which is less pathological. Merely stating that mediumship-experiences are hallucinations is not very informative. Studies on patients suffering from schizophrenia might, however, shed light on the mechanisms that give rise to auditory hallucinations.

Auditory hallucinations in schizophrenia are known as 'auditory verbal hallucinations'. These are correlated to increases in activity of the thalamic and striatal subcortical nuclei, hypothalamus and paralimbic regions (Gaser et al. 2004; Silbersweig et al. 1995). The thalamus's functions include relaying sensory signals to the cerebral cortex; the Striatum mediates movements, rewards and the conjunction of both (Báez-Mendoza and Schultz 2013). The hypothalamus controls many different functions, among which are sex drive, behaviors and emotions. The paralimbic system is involved in emotion processing, goal setting, motivation and self-control. More relevant for explaining auditory hallucinations is reduced grey matter volume in the superior temporal gyrus, including the primary auditory cortex, which is involved with the perception of pure tone and pitch. One study also reported volume reduction in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which may provide a sense of the voluntary versus involuntary nature of auditory awareness. This suggests that erroneous interactions in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex may contribute to the experience of hallucinations as involuntary. fMRI-studies on patients suffering from schizophrenia also showed altered connectivity among temporal, prefrontal and anterior cingulate regions.

Functional activation studies of actively hallucinating participants have generally reported increased activity in language areas and in the primary auditory cortex, strongly implicating the superior and middle

temporal gyri, although various other non-sensory cortical and subcortical areas have also been implicated. Several studies examining neural connectivity using diffusion tensor imaging or functional magnetic resonance imaging in patients with schizophrenia who experience auditory hallucinations have concurred in showing altered connectivity among temporal, prefrontal and anterior cingulate regions, which are involved in processing heard speech (Boksa 2009).

Another hypothesis attributes auditory hallucinatory experiences to decreased levels of N-acetylaspartate, which suggest reduced neuronal density in this region (Renshaw et al. 1995). A different study, however, did not observe similar differences when comparing patients suffering from schizophrenia to a control group (Bartha et al. 1999).

The brief discussion shows that although there are indications of different brain-activation and corresponding changes in information processing in patients suffering from schizophrenia, it is not clear what they are and whether they are shared by all patients. Important for our purposes, it is not clear whether the alterations point to a distortions of information processing or a mere alteration. The changes could lead to subjects misidentifying certain input as coming from an external spirit. If this is the case, (some) mediumship-experiences could be caused by such misapprehensions and not by actual spirits and we have a defeater. It could, however, be the case that the alterations are not causing misapprehensions but allow subjects to perceive what others cannot.

I thus argued that pointing to neural processed common in schizophrenia to explain mediumship-experiences does not readily show that they have an alternative cause. Without this, the explanation does not inform a defeater.

6.4.4 Spontaneous Activation of the Auditory Network

A next defeater is fairly straightforward. It draws on the ideas that the brain's auditory network can be activated spontaneously, without being triggered by anything external.

The auditory network consists of the left superior temporal gyrus, transverse temporal gyri and the left temporal lobe. The auditory network's function include processing auditory information like tonal sounds, pitches, speech and processing of language (Kuiper et al. 2020). In abnormal states, the auditory network can give rise to the occurrence of phantom sounds of tinnitus (Cai et al. 2019).

It is not exactly clear how abnormal states of the auditory network give rise to phantom sounds or other auditory hallucinations. The network might misinterpret sensory or other signals. It is clear, however, that such abnormal states correlate with sounds occurring without external triggers.

If auditory sensations that make up mediumship-experiences are caused by something going awry in the auditory network, they are very

likely not caused by spirit-activity. One cannot rule out that spirits have the ability to tweak with the auditory network in such a way that it produces the sound. Most spirits are, however, not deemed to have such powers. Therefore, initially, pointing to spontaneous activity of the auditory network can feed a defeater for mediumship-experiences.

To support a defeater, abnormal states of the auditory network need to be able to produce more than phantom sounds of tinnitus. Sounds of voices are very different from tinnitus sounds and the latter do not constitute messages. It is therefore not at all clear whether mediumship-experiences fall within the explanatory scope of spontaneous activity of the auditory network and therefore not clear whether it can support a defeater.

6.4.5 Social Glue

Robin Dunbar advanced a theory where various religious phenomena were selected for to foster human social cohesion. Experiences during trance, like mediumship, would be one among them. The theory might support an alternative causal explanation for mediumship-experiences if additional hypotheses are taken on board.

Cohesion is of vital importance for humans. More than most other species, humans rely on cooperation to survive. Few individuals are wholly self-reliant for food, shelter, raising offspring and defense. This holds both in our own time and the distant past. All human societies have forms of specialization or professionalization. Some humans are responsible for collecting food, others for building shelter and still others for raising offspring. Outsourcing these task requires a certain level of trust that others will live up to their task. Humans have been known to shirk from their responsibilities or free-ride on the work of others. As a result, humans usually show some reluctance to outsource tasks. Some evolutionary psychologists suggests that such reluctance is deeply ingrained in human psychology because of evolutionary pressures. Humans who were very trusting would have had greater odds of suffering from the consequences of free-riding or abuse and therefore have had less chances to procreate. Humans who were not trusting at all would have had less chances as well because cooperating humans tend to be more successful.

If cooperation can be beneficial (more success) and detrimental (risk of free-riding), humans need some kind of mechanism to weed out the bad from the good cooperators or to increase the odds that most humans will cooperate well. Human's closest related animal, the chimpanzee, do so by grooming. Grooming (i.e. removing dirt, plants, dried skin and bugs from each other's fur), reduces stress and increases familiarity with other chimpanzees.[7] Religious practices would provide another of those mechanisms for humans.[8] Religious practices would lead to greater human cohesion. Cohesion in turn leads to more assurance that humans will cooperate faithfully and trust.[9]

How do religious practices bring about more human cohesion? Dunbar notes that the earliest forms of religiosity (i.e. earliest known rituals) were *immersive* rather than based on shared doctrines. Experiences of trance and mediumship under trance are clear examples. The practices were (and are) communal. They often involve a (temporarily) doing away with social dissatisfactions within the community. In many cases, trance practices are even held to diffuse tensions that build up in a community. Such experiences would aid in fostering a stronger sense of unity and community. Religious practices of this kind have an edge over other bonding experiences (like grooming) because more subjects can take part (Dunbar 2020).

Dunbar adds that early forms of religiosity, like trance were superseded by other, more doctrinal-based, forms after the neolithic revolution. Early forms, however, did not disappear completely. Modern examples like the quakers, Methodists, Indian yogi's and Sufi's attest to the continued presence and importance of trance rituals (Dunbar 2020). Dunbar suggests that an inclination for such practices is hardwired in the psychology of at least a subset of human subjects by evolutionary pressures.

Dunbar's explanation does not solely explain mediumship-experiences. It can also account for why other experiences under trance (like visual apparitions or possession experiences) were selected for by natural selection.

To provide an alternative causal explanation and hence a defeater for mediumship-experiences, some elements need to be added to Dunbar's explanation. Dunbar's explanation, if true, shows why mediumship-experiences were retained by natural selection. The reason is that they allowed for more cohesion and hence more and better cooperation among humans. It says nothing about how mediumship-experiences are brought about. Natural selection can retain mediumship-experiences if they are responses to actual encounters with spirits, result from an internal process of confabulation (e.g. spontaneous activation of the auditory network) or result from mistaking internal stimuli for external stimuli (e.g. dissociation). Therefore it seems as if the evolutionary explanation must be wedded to another, more proximate explanation for how mediumship-experiences are brought about.

Contrary to what I just argued, some suggest that an evolutionary explanation like Dunbar's explanation of trance-experiences can indeed count as a defeater. In a related discussion, John Wilkins and Paul Griffiths argue that evolutionary explanation for belief in God can undermine the rationality of belief in God. The main reason is that most evolutionary explanation do not refer to the truth of the beliefs they explain. On the most popular evolutionary explanations, belief in God arose for similar reasons like trance-experiences in Dunbar's theory, i.e. to foster cooperation.[10] It did not arise because belief in God tracks any truth. Therefore, belief in God would have been selected whether it were true or not. From this, Wilkins and Griffiths conclude that the

rationality of belief in God is undermined (Wilkins and Griffiths 2012). As a result one should lower one's confidence in belief in God.

If we apply Wilkins and Griffiths line of reasoning to Dunbar's explanations, we could argue that mediumship-experiences likely were selected because they fostered cohesion and not because they were actual encounters with spirits. As some responders have noted, the fact that a belief (or belief-forming process like experiences) was selected for a different reason than truth-tracking does not imply that the belief does not track truths. Our rational faculties were very likely not selected to track truths concerning quantum-physics but nonetheless appear to be able to do so (Leech and Visala 2011). Wilkins and Griffiths do not argue for a conclusion this strong but rather that truth-tracking of x is unlikely unless truth features in the evolutionary explanation of x. they note that science can be regarded as reliable because there are positive reasons for thinking so (Wilkins and Griffiths 2012). In the absence of positive reasons to trust mediumship-experiences (or processes leading to belief in God), skepticism is due.

Note that Wilkins and Griffiths' claim does not share the core idea of phenomenal conservatism. According to defenders of phenomenal conservatism, any experience or seeming merits prima facie justification. Justification can be removed by successful defeaters but should not be dependent on positive reasons to trust experiences. Wilkins and Griffiths are advocating that any process (including experiences) should have positive reasons, in the form of additional evidence (e.g. science) or that truth features in the evolutionary explanation of that process.[11] Such a view falls prey to objections noted by defenders of phenomenal conservatism. We noted how Michael Huemer argues that all forms of meta-justification of experience likely need to rely on experience as well.

A defender could also point out that Dunbar's explanation mainly explains trance and not mediumship-experiences. Dunbar appears to rank mediumship-experiences under the general header of trance-experiences quite easily. To foster cohesion, trance-states and associated communal rituals appear to do most of the work. To (temporarily) overcome social stratification and jointly engage in various practices, no messages from spirits are required. Trance-rituals without mediums being inspired by spirits do occur in a number of cultures. While Dunbar's theory may aptly explain those, it does not explain why some of these rituals involve mediumship.

While Dunbar may have provided an explanation for why trance-rituals are common throughout cultures, he did not readily explain mediumship-experiences. As a result, his theory does not provide an alternative causal explanation and does not defeat. A defeater based on Dunbar's theory would also have to take additional assumptions, like unguided evolution, on board which are likely not shared by many who hold spirit-beliefs.

6.5 Conclusion

I discussed what mediumship-experiences are like and for what beliefs they can provide prima facie justification. I also discussed a number of candidates for undercutting defeaters and argued that none of them are successful. Therefore, beliefs rooted in mediumship-experiences can retain their justified status if no other defeaters are found. Other defeaters may be available (for example, arguments against the existence of spirits or their ability to enter minds), but these would require more evidence.

Notes

1 For example, John Belezza writes 'bsTan-grag lha-pa [a Tibetan medium] affirms that the main purpose of spirit-mediumship is to cure a host of diseases afflicting human beings' (Bellezza 2005: 55).
2 I could not find detailed descriptions of what exactly mediums are subjectively experiencing during mediumship-experiences. The description is based on personal conversations with two mediums active in a group of Brazilian and Cuban worshippers.
3 The author recounting bsTan-grag lha-pa's practice calls the spirits 'deities'. In line with how spirits were defined in Chapter 1, they can be regarded as spirits.
4 DiD was previously known as 'multiple personality disorder' (MPD).
5 Some prefer to call different identities 'different aspects of identities'. The term signals a commitment to the unity of identity in patients suffering from DiD.
6 Krippner's claim addresses similarities between patients suffering from DiD and mediums in Brazilian spiritist (Kardecist) traditions. His claim can be generalized to other traditions as well.
7 The discussion of mechanisms to expand cohesion is an expansion of the 'social brain hypothesis'. Roughly states, the hypothesis holds that group size correlates strongly with brain size. Since chimpanzees and humans have larger brains, they have larger groups. Mechanisms like grooming allow chimpanzees to move beyond the upper limits of group size imposed by their brain size. They do so by triggering the productions of endorphins (Dunbar 1998).
8 Dunbar distinguishes two forms of religiosity that fostered human cohesion, 'shamanistic' religiosity and 'doctrinal' religiosity. The later aims to explain how human were able to live in larger communities after the neolithic revolution. The shamanistic form of religiosity involves, among other things, trance experiences like mediumship, the doctrinal form does not or to a far lesser extent. Therefore, I focus exclusively on Dunbar's account of how shamanistic religiosity fostered cohesion.
9 Dunbar stresses how cooperation is a *consequence* and not a cause of cohesive, bonded groups. Cooperations would have emerged long after bonded groups evolved in primates (Dunbar 2020).
10 The general idea is that belief in God fosters cooperation because humans get the sense that someone (God) is watching their actions and intentions and will reward or punish them in accordance to their actions. For defenses of various theories, see Johnson (2016) and Norenzayan (2013).
11 For a thorough discussion of evolution-fueled skepticism, see Bennett (2021).

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7 Justification from Possession-experiences

7.1 Introduction

A practitioner of Santeria reports the following experience:

> When a spirit or Egun comes in, I feel a pressure on me, or an entwining feeling within my body. An old medium once described it as feeling like being a mailbox, and the spirit comes in like they are a letter entering the slot of the mailbox. I experience this on the back of my neck and down my spine. Sometimes the coming possession of a spirit feels like the body of a spirit walking into my upper torso, or my whole body.
>
> (Filan and Kaldera 2009: 120)

See also Waldemar Jochelson's report of practices among the Yukaghir in Siberia:

> The shaman half-opens the door and inhales his spirits in deep and noisy breaths. Then he turns to the interior of the house, holds his hands like claws, rolls his eyes upwards, so that only the whites are seen, sticks out his tongue, curling it under the chin and, without uttering a word, walks to the centre of the house and sits down on the ground. Having sat down, he straightens his hands and pulls his tongue in with his eyes still turned upwards and a blown up belly he sits there and already one of the spirits speaks through him.
>
> (Jochelson 1924: 201)

Experiences of possession are probably best known to most westerners from movies like *The Exorcist (1973)* or more recently *The Conjuring (2013)*. Such experiences are not central or important to the lives of most western Christians, Jews or Muslims. If possession is discussed by western philosophers or theologians at all it is mostly within the context of exorcism.[1] In Christianity, exorcism is the practice of freeing a subject from demonic possession.

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Outside of Christianity, possession does not take an exclusive negative connotation although practices similar to exorcism do occur in many traditions. Whereas possession is almost exclusively regarded as demonic in Christianity (and to a lesser extent also in Judaism), possession is sometimes actively sought and welcomed by adherents of a large number of traditions. Ceremonies involving possessions are even central to Haitian Vodou and some African indigenous religions. Whether spirit possession is inherently bad or in some occasions beneficial is immaterial for the remainder of this chapter. Our interests lie in whether experiences of possession (henceforth possession-experiences) can justify beliefs concerning spirits and their natures.

In his 2005 paper, Betty Stafford notes that evidence of evil spirits and possession is voluminous and observed in many cultures, both ancient and modern. He also notes the comparative success of exorcism compared to psychiatry. Betty therefore calls on psychiatrist to abandon their materialist assumption that mental illness is strictly an issue of the brain and should take the existence of evil spirits seriously (Betty 2005). This chapter does not aim at assessing the epistemic or therapeutic success of exorcism. It does follow Betty in taking experiences of possession seriously and evaluating their epistemic import.

The outline of this chapter is similar to that of the previous two. In the next section, we look closer at what possession-experiences are. In Section 7.3, I distinguish what beliefs possession-experience provide prima facie justification for. In Section 7.4, I discuss potential defeaters. Like before, the defeaters attribute experiences to a different cause. I end with a conclusion.

7.2 What Are Possession-experiences?

Spirit possession can be defined as an altered state of consciousness with associated altered behavior that is understood in terms of the influence or control of an alien spirit or deity. In systems of law and economics, the term possession means 'having ownership of'. Similarly, subjects believe that a spirit temporarily 'owns' a subject's mind and rest of body.

Possession is very widespread. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon found that 74 percent from a sample of 488 societies had reports of possession experiences. The highest incidence was found in Pacific cultures. Similar experiences are also widespread in African and Asian cultures. Possession experiences occur more frequently in agricultural societies and women seem to be more afflicted than men (Bourguignon 1965).

In Haitian Vodou, possession is said to occur when a subject's 'gross bon ange' (life force or soul)[2] is temporarily replaced by a loa (spirit) (Wittkower et al. 1964). Possessed subjects act as though another (supernatural) agent has entered their body and mind and has taken control. That control may be total so that the subject loses any sense of

ownership of her speech and actions. Oesterreich made an often used distinction between 'somnabulic' and lucid forms of possession. In the first, subjects lose all sense of awareness. Somnabulic possessions are usually not remembered by the possessed subject. Sometimes the loss of control is only near total and the subjects retains some control and remains lucid. As adherents of Vodou in Togo note '[E]we and Mina spirit hosts say that they are not performing; they are being performed' (Rosenthal 1998: 101). Ari Kiev reports a Haitian mambo ('priestess') stating: 'You loss your consciousness. You have only your body. Your soul is replaced by the loa [spirit]. The loa controls your brain, you forget everything' (Kiev 1961: 134). Adeline Masquelier reports that schoolgirls struck by possessing spirits in Niger had no memory of the event afterwards (Masquelier 2020).

Usually, possession produces dramatic changes in physiognomy, voice and manner.[3] The changes are said to depend on the nature and identity of the spirit or other entity taking possession. For example, Emma Cohen narrates the following encounter during fieldwork in Brazil:

> On arriving, I was led to a small room about halfway through the typically elongated Belenense dwelling-place. Pai was sitting behind a little square study table that occupied most of the closet-sized space known as his 'consultation room' (sala de atendimento). (…) Despite what I considered to be an almost unbearable level of heat, exacerbated by the tight confines of the tiny room, he was sporting an old, tatty brown hat and was enjoying a freshly lit cigar. He motioned to me to have a seat. 'Oi, minha filha' (Hi, my daughter), he smiled, lulling me into a false sense of ease before announcing that he was going to interview me. Nevertheless, my unease would prove to be uncalled for as, in what was to become characteristic fashion, Pai commanded conversation and I listened, intrigued and at times more than a little confused, for as long as he could spare the time. As I was showered with names, dates, and places that placed Pai's house and lineage in its Afro-Brazilian historico-religious context, I became increasingly aware that there was something a little unusual about Pai's behavior. Not only did I feel like I was drowning in this constant stream of information, but I was struggling with the way that Pai spoke about himself, as if he weren't actually there. He used the third-person singular, saying things such as, 'The pai-de-santo was about to turn four years of age when…' and 'The pai-de-santo has really been studying his religion' and so on. 'Pai-de-santo X?' I quizzed, mentioning a close colleague of his from another terreiro. 'No, no', he answered, 'Pai!' returning to take up his original point. Perhaps it had something to do with his use of Portuguese, I pondered, when suddenly the uncanny realization dawned on me: Pai was possessed. (…) 'I am Ze´ Pelintra', he finally announced toward

> the end of the conversation. 'I am known throughout Brazil as a marijuana smoker and cachaça - drinker, anything at all you want to call me. In this house I work doing charity, doing good, taking out feitiço [i.e., undoing sorcery], healing, and giving guidance. I don't drink, unless it's coffee, tea, or soft drinks—I don't drink any alcoholic beverage. I smoke tawari cigars, the curer's cigar, and I work in the way that you are seeing, this simplicity. …I am a caboclo, my daughter, I am black, of African descent'.
>
> (Cohen 2007: 3–4)

The possessing entity (Ze Pelintra) explicitly mentions some character traits and behavior that distinguish him from the possessed subject (Pai), i.e. smoking, (not) drinking, charity work, taking out feitiço. Ze Pelintra also states that he is of African descent whereas Pai is Brazilian. The distinction is also clear because the spirit talks about the possessed subject in the third person.

In some cases, possessed subjects display animal behavior. A Togo Vodoist states: 'When the vodus came upon their hosts or wives so that they turn into human forms, they also literally turn about, whirl, suddenly change directions … all of which bespeak the unstudied, state-of-grace perfection of the *animal* and godly changeability' (Rosenthal 1998: 62 emphasis added).

Possession experiences differ considerably from mediumship-experiences. During mediumship-experiences, human subjects retain most control over their bodies and minds.[4] Mediumship-experiences also do not involve loss of awareness and dramatic changes in behavior and physiognomy. Unlike in mediumship, delivering messages is usually not the main focus of possession episodes. Spirits are also called on to take control of a human subject in order to take direct action, for example to provide healing or to receive offerings. For example, an adherent of Vodou in Togo involved with possession ceremonies motivates possession as follows: 'There is sickness and our children die easily. The vodus can heal them and keep them from dying' (Rosenthal 1998: 41). Both kind of experiences are similar in the sense that an alien entity is believed to enter the subject's mind. The impact of that alien entity is much more profound in possession-experiences.

Possession experiences can occur spontaneously or can be willingly induced. David Jordan reports the spontaneous possession of Guō Qīngshuǐ in Taiwan[5]:

> Guō Qīngshuǐ set about the usual tasks of shutting up the house. (…) The routine required that he hold the incense and bow before the pictures of gods over his family altar, before his ancestral tablets at the left end of the same altar, and out into the night, through the door of the house. (…) Guō Qīngshuǐ was possessed very unexpectedly.

> After great initial agitation, during which he smashed the top of the lower table of his family altar, he remained under the altar all night (…). As he was holding the sticks and standing before the altar he suddenly gave a shout and began jumping around the room, shrieking and leaping like a mad man. (…) Guō Qīngshuǐ continued to scream unintelligibly and to jump and flail his arms. (…) By the time he settled down, he had broken all the boards out of the top of the table, leaving the four legs and the outline of the top. He sank down into this frame exhausted. As he hung in the frame, bracing his foot against one side and holding to the side supports with his arms, his body became rigid. He hung in this position until morning. (…) Guō Qīngshuǐ's mouth announced that he was possessed by the Great Saint Equal to Heaven, a popular south Chinese deity who often possesses mediums.
>
> (Jordan 1976)

Guō Qīngshuǐ performed ritual acts associated with traditional Chinese worship of spirits (burning incense, bowing before the alter) but did not call upon spirits to take possession of him or engage in practices for this purpose. The possession-experiences instead came over him unexpectedly.

Most examples described in ethnographies are not spontaneous but willfully induced. Inducing possession-experiences can happen by a number of means. Sometimes a subject calls upon a spirit to take possession of him or her. The possession of Pai above occurred by these means. Often possession occurs in ritual sessions. Most possession rituals involve dancing, singing and/or drumming. Rosenthal describes how practitioners of Ewe Vodou in Togo gather in a large outdoor place. Offerings are made to appease the spirits. Some practitioners play the drum while others dance. Some of the dancer sink into a trance-state and get possessed. They make agitated movements, including exaggerated facial expressions. Some shout instructions to the drummers and demand a change of clothing (Rosenthal 1998). Possession can also be induced by psychedelic substances like Ibogaine or ayahuasca, although this is quite rare in comparison to ritually induced possession (see Luke 2022).[6]

An often occurring means of inducing possession states is drumming. In various traditions, adherents believe that specific drumming-rhythms call upon different spirits. Wittkower notes that several drums were used during a Vodun ceremony in Haiti. Drummers used three drums of which one was regarded as the mother drum. Each of the drums was dedicated to a different loa (spirit) (Wittkower et al. 1964). The use of different drums and different drum sounds to address different gods is also present in Indian traditions. Sukanya Sarbadhikary notes how worshippers of goddess Durga use different

drum sounds than worshippers of the god Shiva in West Bengal (Sarbadhikary 2022).

Some ethnographers note a blend of spontaneous and induced possession during rituals. Asaf Sharabi notes how an induced possession in Northern India led to spontaneous possession among spectators in the audience (Sharabi 2021). Wittkomer notes the same in a Haitian Vodou ceremony. He notes how a houngan (Voudou 'priest') engages in practices to induce possession by dancing and drumming sounds. After some time, some other people who were dancing as well gradually approached possession states as well and were pushed toward the drums. The houngan called on the spirit Erzulie (Ezili) at which point one of the participants reached a state of possession. The woman continued to dance with more seductive movements (for which Erzulie is known) and had a facial expression of blissful experience. Still later, most of the crowd entered a frenzy state (Wittkower et al. 1964).

Ritual-embedding is sometimes regarded as a means of controlling possession. Kiev notes how Haitian houngans ('priests') both encourage and control possession in ceremony-participants. The houngan draws on his experience and knowledge to guide participants into and during possession experiences. Kiev also notes that experience and expertise often allow the houngan to retain more control and awareness during possession states (Kiev 1961). The urge to control also features in focus on preparation or initiation before subjects can get possessed. By making accurate preparations for a ceremony and lengthy processes of initiation, malicious possession could be avoided.

Like experiences of mediumship, most episodes of possession occur when the subject is in trance. Trance is defined as 'a condition of dissociation, characterized by the lack of voluntary movement and frequently by automatisms in act and thought, illustrated by hypnotic and mediumistic conditions' (Drewer 1971: 38). Trance is achieved by various methods, including sensory overload, sensory deprivation, ritual gestures, inhaling fumes and consummation of psychedelic plants. Trance is also induced by dance. For example, adherents of Ewe Vodou use dance, along with drum-rhythms to enter into possession during rituals (Rosenthal 1998: 6). The function of dance in possession is sometimes linked to phenomena like Tarantism and the medieval St. Vitus dancers (see Bartholomew 2001).

Erika Bourguignon, however, notes that not all possession-experiences are endured under continued trance. She notes that possession-episodes can take up longer stretches of time wherein possessed subjects move in and out of trance. The episode may include moments of lucidity and moments where consciousness appears to be completely surrendered to the possessing entity. She also notes that often there is a 'doubling of consciousness' whereby one 'consciousness' is observing the spectacle. Being in or out of trance often correlates with partially

or completely losing control and how much of the episode is remembered (Bourguignon 1965).

Like mediumship, spirit possession tends to be reserved for a subclass of adherents in a tradition. This 'elitism' has two aspects. First, not all subjects are capable of being possessed. Some are seen as more open or more prone for possession by foreign spirits (McDaniel 1989). Second, possession vessels usually need to go through a period of initiation and training. Proper preparation is mainly important to avoid harm during possession-experiences. For example, an initiate in Brazilian Candomblé must learn everything relating to the rituals and possessing entities. She must learn how to take care of sacred objects; how to behave during rituals and learn the chants, dances and appropriate gestures. In candomblé, the initiate is not formally instructed but must learn by observation during rituals and festivals. Sufficient observations ensures that gestures, words and dances become automatisms. Adherents believe that letting an initiate be possessed too early can lead to discontentment among the spirits and can induce madness or even death (Cossard 1970).[7]

7.3 What Spirit-beliefs Are Justified by Possession-experiences?

The beliefs which can be (prima facie) justified by possession-experiences are similar to those justified by mediumship-experiences, although more varied. They can provide additional justification for the existence of spirits. To witnesses who observe possession for the first time, they could provide the initial justification to believe that spirits exist. For example, James MCClenon and Jennifer Nooney note how anthropologists can consider or get convinced of new theories or explanations after having anomalous experiences (McClenon and Nooney 2002).

Like mediumship-experiences, possession-experiences can show subjects the nature of a spirit. We noted, for example, how Erzulie appears as a mother-like figure in Haitian Vodou. More so than in mediumship-experiences, possession-experiences can provide justification for a spirit's behavior. In the example of Pai above, the possessing spirit shows himself as having a preference for cigars and alcoholic beverages. The Vodou-adherents being possessed by Erzulie display her feminine and sensual nature (see above). Episodes of demonic possession can show that the possessing entity has an evil nature.

Given that possession-experiences are for the most part not remembered, the experiences provide justification for wittnesses rather than for the subject herself. The possessed subject may learn about the spirits from testimony but did not have direct experiential access herself or at least no memory thereof.

7.4 Defeaters

The examples of spirit-experiences in Section 7.2 suffice to grant prima facie justification to the beliefs discussed in Section 7.3. In this section, I evaluate proposals to defeat that justification. Like in earlier chapters, I focus on alternative causal explanations, i.e. those that attribute possession-experiences to something else than a possessing spirit.

7.4.1 Means of Gaining Power

A first defeater draws on one of the most common explanations for possession-experiences. I. M. Lewis argues that possession-episodes serve as means to regain power in contexts with severe power imbalances. Various ethnographies on possession discuss Lewis's theory at length (e.g. Cohen 2007; Pierini 2020; Schmidt 2017) but to my knowledge it has not been recruited as a defeater for possession experiences. Lewis himself does suggest that his theory supports his own skepticism about the veridicality of possession-episodes (Lewis 2003). Evan Fales does rely on Lewis's theory to argue against the veridicality of experiences of God (Fales 1996).[8]

Lewis's explanation is functionalist in nature. He argues that possession-experiences serve a particular social function, i.e. gaining power or gaining an elevated social status. He notes that subjects who have possession-experiences are often less privileged. Possession-experiences occur more frequently among women than men. In most areas women enjoy a far lower social status than men. Frequently women do not have a voice in the public domain and are dominated by males. Possession-experiences would also occur more frequently among lower social classes like Dalits in India or the Christian minorities of Sudan. Being possessed by a deity or spirit lends subjects a higher prestige. Deities and spirits are usually treated with respect, so humans who are hosted by such beings are as well (Lewis 2002).

Several ethnographers noted shortcomings in Lewis's account. Emily Pierini notes that possession-experiences are not unambiguously reserved for people of low social standing. A survey of membership of religious groups where possession occurs regularly shows that a considerable number of members are of high social standing (Pierini 2020). Emma Cohen argues that Lewis's account does not do justice to the wider social, cultural, aesthetic and psychological factors involved in possession experiences (Cohen 2007: 92). One can therefore get the sense that Lewis's account is not sufficiently broad to account for the majority of possession-experiences and incomplete.

To serve as a defeater, Lewis's account is incomplete in a different sense. While many ethnographers do agree that possession occurs more

frequently with underprivileged subjects (e.g. Cohen 2007: 92), this implies little about the cause of those experiences. Possession-experiences may occur more frequently in certain groups and be caused by an actual spirit or have a different cause. To argue that social factors support an alternative causal explanation, one has to show how those social factors are likely better connected to an alternative cause. For example, it might be the case that underprivileged are more prone to suffer from dissociation (see below). The explanation does not provide such a connection to more proximate causes. Without those, no alternative causal story is provided that can support a defeater.

Although Lewis's explanation is probably one of the most popular naturalistic explanations for possession, it does little damage to the reliability of possession-experiences. The explanation has little bearing on the causes of possession-experiences and merely points to a class of people that would be more susceptible. We noted above that many traditions agree that possession is not for everyone. It is unlikely that many spirit-believers would be worried by the content of Lewis's theory.

7.4.2 Schizophrenic Delusions

Like mediumship-experiences, possession-experiences have been explained as symptoms of schizophrenia. Some defenders of similar claims unambiguously call possession delusional or hallucinatory (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021). By doing so, they tacitly point out how an explanation in terms of schizophrenia-symptoms can amount to a defeater for possession-experiences.

I noted in chapter 6 how schizophrenia can involve auditory hallucinations. Schizophrenia can also affect other sense modalities like vision, taste or touch. Schizophrenia also often involves episodes of psychosis, i.e. difficulties determining what is real and what is not,[9] and dissociative symptoms. Such hallucinations are likely caused in a similar way like auditory hallucinations. They could be caused by altered activity in the thalamic and striatal subcortical nuclei, hypothalamus and paralimbic regions or decreased levels of N-acetylaspartate (see Chapter 6). Such changes may lead subjects to misinterpret endogenously generated representations for exogenous.

Some authors see an additional role of religious contexts in generating possession-experiences. Subjects who believe that spirit-possession occur or live in a context where such belief is widespread would be more prone to regard hallucinations stemming from schizophrenia related pathologies as possession-episodes. When confronted with strange experiences, believers in possession are more likely to seek help from a religious specialist rather than a medical specialist. A religious specialist is more likely to frame the strange experience as spirit-possession. Family members can also help in framing strange experiences in this way (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021).

Another reason why subjects would be prone to regard strange experiences as possession-episodes resembles Lewis's cultural explanation. Framing the experience as a possession-episode can give the subject an increased sense of power, control or dignity. Pietkiewicz et al. note how subjects who report possession-experiences often endured traumatic experiences like abuse. Regarding strange experiences as possession-experiences can give them the power to confront traumatic histories or make changes for the better (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021). They provide the following example:

> Kathy said her parents abused alcohol and quarreled, and her elder brother insulted and hit her. When she was 14, she started talking with a warrior in her head, who instructed her how to become powerful like him. [Kathy wrote:] They were violent. My mother's partner used to call me a 'cunt' or 'lunatic'. This Mayan warrior helped me. I discovered during meditation that we had met in a previous life. He always made comments about my behaviour. I wanted to gain weight and prepare myself to be like a Mayan warrior myself (…).
>
> (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021)

The explanation put forward above is a blend of three compatible sub-explanations. (1) A (mild) form of schizophrenia furnishes the 'raw material' for possession-experiences, i.e. strange experiences from hallucinations or delusions resulting from misattributing endogenous representations as exogenous. (2) Religious context provides a proneness to regard the strange experiences as possession-experiences. (3) A psychological need to regain power or dignity provides an additional impetus to regard the strange experience as a possession-experience. All jointly explain why a subject might experience possession-episodes. If true, (1) to (3) provide a causal explanation that does not refer to actual spirits taking hold of the subject. In doing so, they jointly inform a defeater for possession-experiences.

Several objections can be noted for the defeater. The defeater suffers from similar problems as did the related defeater for mediumship-experiences. The nature of a number of possession-experiences makes it unlikely that they stem from internal representations. If they were, we would not expect clear differences between the personality exhibited during possession and the normal personality of the possessed subjects. For example, Emma Cohen noted that Pai acted in a way that is rather different than when he was not possessed. The same holds for many other possession-episodes, including that of the Mayan warrior.

Regarding (2) and (3) another problem arises. It is not clear whether religious context or psychological needs are distorting factors in regarding strange experiences as possession-experiences. While the influence of

religious context is hard to call into doubt, it does not show that context leads to erroneous attributions. Interpretations from religious specialists and religious family members could very well set subjects on the way toward a correct attribution. The same hold for psychological needs. While psychological needs sometimes have a strong influence on how a subject perceives the world, noting this does little to see this influence as distorting. Regarding an experience as a possession-experience can serve a psychological need and be veridical at the same time.

An objector could reply that religious context and psychological need render an attribution less sensitive to truth.[10] A strong impetus to regard the experience as a possession-experience from the subject's context or psychological need make it (far) more likely that she would make the same attribution even if it were false. We know that genuine hallucinations and delusions occur. A strong push from context and/or psychological need likely could make a subject regard such hallucinations as spirit-possessions.

Against the objection, I note that experiences or seemings require a stronger counterclaim than merely noting that the experience could easily be mistaken. With Swinburne, I argued that experiences can be taken at face value in the absence of a more plausible alternative causal explanation. A good possibility that there is such an alternative is not sufficient. It can give a subject reason to regard her experience as less forceful and the resulting beliefs as less certain. To defeat the beliefs, however, more is needed. Furthermore, several authors have noted that a lot of beliefs which are commonly regarded as justified crucially depend on context. For example, scientific beliefs are more commonly accepted in some context than others. This suggest that the objection may have too much collateral damage.

The second defeater also suffers from too many problems to undo the justificatory force of possession-experiences. Like mediumship-experiences, not all possession-experiences can be regarded as having an internal origin. Adding a role of context and psychological needs adds little to build an alternative causal explanation.

7.4.3 Rogue Models of Selves

Ivaylo Iotchev and Hein van Schie propose an explanation for possession experiences and associated phenomena that draws on predictive cognitive models and simulation theory. They argue that cognitive models about other people's minds are key to understanding alleged spirit-possession. The idea of predictive models is common in contemporary cognitive neuroscience. The general idea is that subjects build models of the external world and various parts thereof in their minds. The models are built up by repeated interactions with the world and correcting for mismatches between the internal model and externally generated sensory

input (Iotchev and van Schie 2017). The internal model allows subjects an overview of their environment and to make predictions about what a subject will encounter. The model of the world consists of several sub-models. One of these is the model of the self and others are models of other subjects.

Internal models of other subjects are built up by processing sensory input like facial expressions, visual behavior or other information concerning others. The models can be revised if new information requires so. Iotchev and van Schie argue that human brains serve as 'hardware' for different minds. When subjects reason about someone else' intentions or internal life, they simulate the other's mind on the very same 'hardware' that mediates the experience of their own internal mental states. As a result, models of others draw on information about one's own self and this information can be used to fill in gaps concerning others. For example, a subject who perceives someone else who is walking through a blizzard can simulate what it is like to walk through snow herself. She can transpose this information to the model concerning the other and conclude that the other had a similar experience. Human brain can thus temporarily simulate another one's subjectivity to gain more information (Iotchev and van Schie 2017). Such simulation of other minds relies on the same internal dynamics as the experience of our actual mental states.

Iotchev and van Schie add that our experience of our own mental states is usually associated with stronger neural activation and more intense, but has overlaps with experiences of simulated mental states of others. Sometimes, however, the distinction can disappear and experiences of simulated mental states can gain independence. These states are then no longer experienced as simulations but as mental states of an independently existing subject. A model of another then gains its own subjectivity. The model is still built on different premises than the subject's own original mind, causing it to gain a level of objectivity (Iotchev and van Schie 2017). The process could account for people experiencing foreign spirits intruding their minds and taking control of their motor functions.

Iotchev and van Schie's explanation had the potential of supporting a defeater. An objector could draw on their explanation to argue that possession-experiences are not caused be an actual spirit taking hold of the subject but by cognitive modelling going astray. Possession-experiences would be caused by misprocessing a simulated subjectivity as a real subjectivity, granting it objective existence rather than being a cognitive construction.

Unlike other explanations, Iotchev and van Schie's can better account for the differences in personality and behavior between possessing and possessed subjects. Such differences can be brought about by simulations of different situations and character traits. Other problems, however, arise that prevent the defeater from being successful. First, there are no

indications that subjects who experience possession have problems in distinguishing simulated mental states from objective states. Possessed subjects appear to be able to reason about other people's mental states without many problems outside of ritual setting or other situations that involve possession. Attributing their possession-experiences to misprocessing simulated as objective mental states begs the question why such misprocessing only occurs in these setting. Second, possession-experiences appear phenomenologically different than simulated mental states. Simulated mental states usually occur when subjects reason about others or are prompted to direct their attention toward something external. This is not how possession-experiences are commonly reported. Possession appears to come over a subject quite suddenly. Some subjects report the experience as of being grasped or suddenly taken by an outside force. While it is true that possession-experiences are often induced (see above), the induction processes do not resemble cognitive processes leading up to taking the perspective of others, like joint attention or conscious perspective taking. Third, Iotchev and van Schie have a hard time accounting for why possessing entities appear in similar ways to different possessed subjects. If possession-experiences were brought about by simulation processes, we would expect considerable divergence in possession-experience since simulation is dependent on the subject's own inner life. While there is some variety in possession-experiences, subjects in the same community tend to have similar possession-experiences, allegedly because they are possessed by the same spirit. Moreover, people report being possessed by the same entity at great distance from one another.

Iotchev and van Schie's account seems more apt to explain a related though different phenomenon. Possession is usually understood as a subject being taken over by a pre-existing entity. A related phenomenon is known where subjects are taken over by an entity they create themselves. The practice of creating such entities is known as 'tulpamancy'. Tulpamancy is a collection of meditative techniques with the goal of creating and interacting with tulpas. Tulpas are experienced as conscious, autonomous entities that exist in someone's mind (Isler 2017). Tulpas are considered to be entities that were willfully created by the hosting subject. They are sometimes likened to imaginary friends or companions. The practice of tulpamancy chimes better with Iotchev and van Schie's account. Tulpamancers appear to create entities by engaging in techniques that resemble simulation. Various websites describe how one can create a tulpa by deciding on its character traits and imagining a being with those traits as real.[11] There appears to be considerably more overlap between the processes by means of which tulpas are created and simulation of other people's mental states than there is between the latter and possession-experiences.

7.4.4 Dissociation 2

A next defeater points to how humans are easily fooled into attributing movements to alien control. Humans sometimes attribute movements to machines or automata while they were instigated by the humans themselves. In 1810, Haslam reported a case of a man who believed that his thoughts, feelings and movements were being controlled by an air loom (Haslam 1810). Hirjak and Fuchs describe cases where patients suffering from schizophrenia get the sense that their thoughts, movements and feelings are controlled by the internet, x-rays or lasers (Hirjak and Fuchs 2010). Attribution of control to machines is very likely erroneous because machines lack agency and the power to control human movements or action. If movements attributed to external spirits are significantly similar to these cases, they could be regarded as stemming from the same mistakes or the same disposition to make that mistake.

To investigate whether perceived control by external spirits is similar to perceived control by immaterial machines, Deeley et al. look for neurological similarities between both events (Deeley et al. 2014). If illusions of control by a machine would be mediated by similar brain-activation as perceived possession by spirits, the case for a similar misattribution in both cases is strengthened. Deeley et al. tested whether both are similar by comparing fMRI-scans of subjects in three conditions:

- Condition 1: subjects were suggested that an Engineer was remotely controlling right hand movements of a joystick via a machine.
- Condition 2: subjects were suggested that the machine was malfunctioning and purposelessly causing the hand to move remotely.
- Condition 3: subjects were suggested that the Engineer had found a way to conduct experiments by entering the subject and controlling movement from within, with the experimental subject aware of the thoughts and motives of this possessing agent but unable to control the hand movements produced by it.

(Deeley et al. 2014)

Condition 3 resembles alien controlled movements during spirit-possession and condition 2 resembles control by an immaterial machine.[12] Condition 1 resembles 'ordinary' control by a human. Scans of subjects in condition 3 revealed increased activation in the left cerebellum and precentral areas, right mid-cingulum and parietal areas. Activity was also significantly greater in the mid-temporal and hippocampal areas. The study revealed no significant differences between external personal control (condition 1) and internal personal control (condition 3), compared to condition 2. Deeley et al. conclude that these findings overall indicate that a specific network of regions is associated with condition 2, different than those recruited in conditions 1 and 3 (Deeley et al. 2014).

The findings do not support the claim that experiences of movements controlled by an agential foreign entity are caused by the same mechanism that causes the sense of beings controlled by a non-agential machine. The neural activation in both experimental conditions that resemble both situations were too different to make such a claim. A defeater that possession-experiences are caused by a similar misattribution is therefore not supported.

7.4.5 Dissociative Identity Disorder

The current version of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM) lists certain forms of possession-experience as symptoms of dissociative identity disorder (DiD).[13] It states: 'Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession' (DSM-5 2013) as one of the symptoms. DiD (previously called 'multiple personality disorder') is commonly regarded as a pathology where subjects experience a discontinuation or lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions and identity (Mayo Clinic Staff 2017).

We discussed the mechanisms behind dissociation at length and how it could give rise to mediumship-experiences in Chapter 6. If the mechanism can give rise to possession-experiences (which the authors of the DSM V suggest it can), it can serve as a defeater for those. We noted how mediumship-experiences might be explained as misrepresented memories or other internally generated information. More or different kinds of information would be required to explain possession-experiences (e.g. automatic behavior or character traits). If possession-experiences would be caused in this way, they are not caused by actual spirits and we have a defeater.

Anthropologists and ethnographers sometimes object to linking possession to pathologies like dissociation. Rebecca Seligman notes how possession is often experienced as therapeutic rather than pathological in Brazilian Candomblé (Seligman 2005). Other authors share this concern and some add that regarding possession as pathological may result from a western bias.[14] The objection can be mitigated if one simply shies away from the term 'pathological'. An objector can argue that possession-experiences are caused by misrepresenting internally generated information during dissociative states and that the state can be experienced as beneficial, neutral or pathological. The experience could merely be pathological in the sense that information is misrepresented but not pathological in a medical or phenomenological sense.

Similar problems, however, arise as for dissociation as a defeater for mediumship-experiences. There can be little doubt that possession-experiences involve dissociation, understood as a discontinuation of the subject's own thoughts and identity. As such, dissociation is not at odds with the belief that the experience is brought about by a foreign entity.

Problems do arise if possession-experiences are causally attributed to internally generated information. The behavior and character traits of possessing entities are frequently rather different than those of the possessed subject. For example, the example in Section 7.2 notes how Pai behaves very differently when possessed than he would under normal conditions. Such stark differences are not expected if the experience was generated by internal information.

On top of this, possession-experiences are often phenomenologically different from experiences by people suffering from DiD. Patients usually report that two or more identities 'live in' their minds. They may alternate in dominance or appear and disappear. Patients do not tend to lose awareness of their own identities when another one comes to the fore. During possession, entities only briefly take control of a subject. They usually do not continue to 'live in' the mind of the possessed subject. The experience is more fleeting and often confined to ritual settings. Often, the possessed subject does lose awareness of her own identity during possession-experiences. There thus appear to be significant phenomenological differences between experiences typical of DiD and possession-experiences. This suggests that dissociation-mechanisms may explain something different.

Given that dissociation mechanisms appear to have problems in explaining the foreign nature of possessing spirits and appear to explain a different phenomenon, there is strong reason to doubt that they can provide an alternative causal explanation for possession-experiences.

7.4.6 A Cognitive Account of Possession

A next defeater refers to the human cognitive apparatus. General cognitive mechanisms would have a clear causal role in bringing about possession-experiences. Cognitive mechanisms are features of the human mind that are shared species-wide. Examples are abilities for memory or dispositions to detect agents (see Chapter 5). Such cognitive mechanisms are often seen as part and parcel of the human mind, meaning they arise naturally[15] in most normally functioning humans without the need for special (cultural) interventions. Unlike other defeaters discussed in this chapter, the defeater does not draw on explanations from neuroscience or evolutionary biology.[16]

Emma Cohen arguably did more than anyone to highlight the role of cognitive mechanisms in possession-experiences.[17] She argues that possession-experiences involve the operations of at least the following four cognitive mechanisms:

1 Theory of mind
2 Intuitive ontology
3 Anthropomorphism
4 Processing strategic information

The theory of mind is that cognitive mechanism that allows humans to build beliefs about other people's minds. It is used to obtain beliefs about what fellow humans believe themselves and how those will manifest into action. Cohen argues that the mechanism is applied to possessing entities as well. Subjects form beliefs about the natures of possessing entities and their states of mind.

Beliefs and practices concerning possession are also mediated by an intuitive ontology. Humans would have an internal classification system of various classes like 'person', 'plant' or 'animal'. Classifying something in one of those categories allows subjects to make predictions or inferences. For example, plants can be expected to grow under the right conditions. Persons can be expected to talk and move around. Some classified entities violate (some of) these predictions. For example, plants are not expected to move suddenly but Venus flytraps do. Entities that violate a small number of expectations are more memorable than entities that violate none or entities that violate many. Entities without violations are not very memorable. Entities that violate many are too difficult to process. Entities that violate little or 'minimally counter-intuitive concepts' are remembered and transmitted most easily (Boyer 2008).

Cohen argues that possessing entities are minimally counterintuitive. Spirits are usually regarded as persons. They meet most expectations of persons; they can talk, have agency, have desires, etc. they violate the expectation that persons are usually not immaterial and cannot enter other people's minds. The violations make them noteworthy and give them an elevated status (Cohen 2007).

Related to the previous point, Cohen notes that possessing spirits are not regarded as radically different than human persons. While adherents might give voice to ideas that spirits are very different and highly elevated, they tend to behave and engage as if the possessing entity is highly similar to humans and thus anthropomorphic. They talk and act as if the spirit has belief like humans do, has desires like humans do or has memories like humans do. Spirits are thus processed cognitively as humans are (Cohen 2007).

Finally, Cohen notes that possession allows humans access to 'strategic information'. Sometimes the appearance of a spirit is seen as an omen of bad fortune to come. Possessing spirits sometimes offer council to humans and sometimes provide healing. All this shows how possession-experiences can be a powerful tool for reasoning about the causes of everyday fortunes and misfortunes (Cohen 2007).[18]

Cohen notes that referring to cognitive mechanisms only provides an incomplete explanation as many distinctly cultural processes are contributing factors as well (Cohen 2007). In order to serve in a defeater much more needs to be added still. The operations of cognitive mechanisms do not so much point to the root causes of possession-experiences as well as to how the experience is structured.[19] An experience may be

caused by a possessing spirit and by modulated by the possessed subject's cognitive mechanisms at the same time. Because of the operations of the subject's theory of mind, intuitive ontology, anthropomorphic dispositions and processing of strategic information, the experience will have distinct characteristics. The objector may reply that a possession-experience can have a different cause (e.g. internally generated information) that is in turn mediated by cognitive mechanisms. In this case, the experience will bear the marks of those mechanisms as well. In both cases, the marks of cognitive mechanisms reveal nothing about the deeper cause.

Pointing to the operations of cognitive mechanisms thus reveals little about the deeper cause of possession-experiences. Therefore a cognitive explanation that only point to the operations of cognitive mechanisms does not provide an alternative causal explanation.

7.4.7 Glue for Cooperation

A next defeater draws on an evolutionary account of possession-experiences. The explanation has a broader scope and offers an explanation for the occurrence of other shamanic states as well. Although possession-experiences are often ranked under shamanic states, the latter also encompasses trance, ecstasy or soul flights.[20] If successful, however, the explanation can provide an alternative causal explanation for possession-experiences as well.

The explanation draws on cultural evolution rather than biological evolution. Whereas biological evolution is driven by genetic mutations of which some may turn out to be fitness-enhancing, cultural evolution is driven by cultural changes. Cultural changes can have a profound effect on a subject's or a group's fitness. Clear examples are agricultural and technological skills. Subjects with an adaptive cultural trait can therefore be more successful and outcompete others (or other groups). Successful cultural traits are transmitted through cultural institutions or transmission in families.

According to Manvir Singh, shamanism is a fitness-enhancing cultural trait. The key reason why is that shamanism allows humans to regain a sense of control over otherwise unpredictable events (like diseases or disasters). Such unpredictable events are often a major source of concern, more so for our distant ancestors than today. Shamanic practices can afford subjects (mostly spectators of shamanic practices or clientele of shamans) a way to cope with these concerns. Shamans present themselves as being able to control unpredictable events. This perceived ability is enhanced by sensory pageantry and more importantly by their claims of interacting with invisible forces. By using these, the shaman transforms the way he is perceived by his community and can convince them of his efficacity more easily (Singh 2018).

Singh notes that the perceived efficacity of shamanic practices draws on a general proneness for false beliefs or magical thinking. For various reasons, biological evolution would have made humans prone for this way of thinking.[21] Cultural practices like shamanism draw on these dispositions or actively recruit them to convince people of their efficacity. The joint work by the psychological dispositions and the convincing nature of shamanistic practices convinces subjects of the shaman's ability to control events and gives them a sense of control (Singh 2018).

Induction of and acts performed during possession-experiences are one case of shamanistic practices that could provide the needed sense of control. We noted, for example, how Zimbabwean mediums claim a role in ensuring rainfall (Lan 1985).[22] Possession-episodes often involve healing of spectators as well.

If successful, the evolutionary explanation provides a clear defeater. Possession-experiences would be caused by random mutations that produce psychological dispositions for magical thinking. These are selected by natural selection. The dispositions are recruited by cultural practices which are in turn selected by cultural selection. At no point is there a causal role for actual spirits taking control of human subjects.

A number of problems arise that make the explanation unsuitable for a defeater. Not all possession-experiences serve the function of controlling otherwise uncontrollable events. Some possession-episodes occur to individuals in isolation without any distinguishable communal function. Singh could reply that such episodes are extensions or offshoots of cultural shamanistic practices and are a mere add-on or by-product of adaptive shamanistic experiences. A related, deeper problem is that possession-experiences often appear to add more fitness-diminishing costs. Reports of possession by malevolent spirits are not uncommon. Delivering subjects of such spirits (by means of exorcism) usually takes considerable efforts and material costs. Efforts and material that could likely be spend in evolutionary more advantageous ways. Even if we abstract from malicious spirit-possessions, petitioning spirits through possession-rituals takes a lot from a community. Rituals often include expensive offerings. Rituals also require a lot of time in preparation and performing the ritual itself. Given that the efficacity of shamanistic practices is merely psychological on Singh's account, it is unclear if the benefits outweigh the costs.

For reasons concerning scope (i.e. not explaining non-communal, non-functional possession-episodes) and potential internal problems (possession may very well inflict more evolutionary costs than benefits), it is doubtful whether the explanation provides a more plausible causal account of possession-experiences. As a result, the defeater is unsuccessful.

7.5 Conclusion

The conclusion is again similar to that of the previous chapters. The evidence clearly shows that possession-experiences occur in similar forms across cultures. They can therefore provide prima facie justification for a set of beliefs regarding spirits and their natures. I surveyed seven unsuccessful defeaters. Some were similar to defeaters for other spirit-experiences and suffered from similar problems. While other alternative causal explanations may be available, the justification of beliefs drawn from possession-experiences appears to hold its ground.

Notes

1 For a recent discussion, see Guthrie (2022) and Hunt (2020).
2 According to traditional Haitian Vodou belief, humans are composed of a body, soul or life force (gross bon ange) and guardian angel (petit bon ange) (Kiev 1961).
3 The definition is largely based on Crapanzano (2005).
4 Subjects probably lose some control during mediumship-experiences because putatively external voices or thoughts demand their attention and energy. Similarly, patients suffering from schizophrenia note problems in processing information and paying attention. This has an impact in their decision making and overall (sense of) agency (Schizophrenia 2022).
5 Jordan refers to Guō Qīngshuǐ as a 'medium'. The experience described, however, fits better into the category of possession as described above.
6 According to David Luke, only 5% of cultures with possessions or practices similar to them use psychedelics on a regular basis (Luke 2022).
7 The summary is drawn from quotations of Cossard in Goldman (2005).
8 Fales mainly targets mystical experiences of God.
9 See Arciniegas (2015).
10 The sensitivity criterion for knowledge was first defended by Robert Nozick (Nozick 1983). In short, he argued that beliefs that would have been believed if they were false cannot be regarded as knowledge. Others reinterpreted the sensitivity principle as a criterion for justification rather than knowledge (Becker and Black 2012) like the hypothetical objector of this paragraph does.
11 See, for example, https://www.tulpa.info/creating-a-tulpa/.
12 One can doubt that condition 2 resembles the cases of being controlled by an air loom or other machines to a sufficient degree. In the examples, the machine was perceived as having a sense of agency or will. In the experimental condition, the machine is portrayed as wantonly influencing the subject's movements.
13 Attributing possession to dissociation mechanisms is not uncommon in other contexts as well. See below and Ross (2011).
14 For an overview, see Cohen (2007: 81).
15 As some authors note, claiming that cognitive mechanisms are natural does not imply that they are present at birth or at a very young age. The mechanisms may also arise gradually as subjects mature (McCauley 2011).
16 Some authors argue that cognitive mechanisms arose because of evolutionary pressures. For example, we saw in Chapter 5, how Stewart Guthrie argues that hypersensitive agency detection served a clear adaptive goal. Other cognitive mechanisms like theory of mind (see below) also increase human changes of survival and could therefore have been selected for.

17 The focus of her work is on experiences in Brazilian Candomblé. Her account can be generalized to similar possession-experiences.
18 This point ties in with the evolutionary explanation discussed below where providing a sense of control is seen as the key reason why people engage in possession-practices.
19 In a lecture, Robert McCauley stated that cognitive explanations [merely] explain aspects of aspects of cognition. He probably pointed to how cognitive explanations merely explain certain features of beliefs and cognition.
20 Soul flights are experiences where a subjects putatively leaves her body and visits different realms populated by spirits (Vitebsky 2001).
21 The proclivity has been explained as a result of error-management (Frith and Frith 2003) or overextension of mentalizing abilities (Legare and Souza 2012).
22 They do so both by engaging in mediumship-experiences and possession-experiences (Lan 1985).

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8 Justification from Animistic Experiences

8.1 Introduction[1]

Like other spirit-beliefs discussed in this book, animism is a topic rarely discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion.[2] Most discussion on animism takes place in disciplines like anthropology or religious studies and is descriptive in nature. Sometimes anthropologists do argue for the value of animistic practices. For example, Graham Harvey notes that animism implies a greater respect for nature which makes animism more suited to tackle environmental challenges than western materialism (Harvey 2005). Such arguments are moral in nature rather than epistemic.[3]

Below, I provide an assessment of the epistemic status of animistic beliefs based on animistic experiences. I discuss distinctive features of animism in Section 8.2; how tacitly held beliefs can be epistemically evaluated in Section 8.3; provide examples of animistic experiences in Section 8.4; and discuss potential defeaters in Section 8.5. I end with a conclusion (Section 8.6).

8.2 Defining Animism

Animistic beliefs are a unique kind of spirit-beliefs. They differ from other spirit-beliefs insofar that adherents of animism believe that spirits inhabit objects, plants or animals. Animism is common in African indigenous, American indigenous, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Polynesian religions. The scope of animistic beliefs is thus large and arguments in favor or against their rationality potentially have a lot of ramifications.

Because of the differences, the discussion in Chapter 1 does not suffice to get a grasp of what animism means. Contemporary anthropologists who study animism often make a distinction between 'old animism' and 'new animism', with most siding with the new animism camp. Below, I discuss how both define animism.

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8.2.1 Old Animism

'Old animism' defines animism in terms of beliefs. The term 'animism' is usually traced back to Edward Tylor. Tylor regarded animism as a 'doctrine of souls' or 'doctrine of spirits'. According to Tylor, the distinctive feature of animism is the belief that spiritual beings are common (Tylor 1871). Tylor regarded animism as an early, undeveloped form of religiosity. For Tylor, animism was the religion of primitive people devoid of culture and devoid of explicit religious conceptions whatsoever (Park 2007).

Tylor's definition clearly bears the marks of colonial misconceptions of non-western cultures. Nonetheless, Tylor's account offers a good starting point. Although belief in spirits is central to animism, it does not quite capture the distinctiveness of animism. Nineteenth century Spiritism[4] and traditions that sprung from it (e.g. Brazilian Kardecism and to some extent Umbanda) affirm the existence of spirits but they are not commonly called animistic. Furthermore, belief in demons is common in Christianity and a majority of Muslims affirms the existence of Jinn. Both demons and Jinn can be classified as spirits yet Christianity and Islam are never called 'animistic'. What distinguishes animism from spirit-belief in all of these traditions is the belief that spirits inhabit objects, plants and non-human animals.[5] For example, ancient Celts believed that some sacred trees are inhabited by spirits. Adherents of Japanese Shinto believe in the existence of *kami* that govern rivers and streams.[6] Siberian shamans believe that animals have spirits that can be approached by imitating animal sounds (cf. Willerslev 2007). Contrary to other religious traditions, adherents of animism tend not to regard spirits as *disembodied*.[7] In Christianity, Islam or Spiritism, spirits are commonly regarded as existing without a physical body or carrier. Animists, by contrast, tend to believe that spirits inhabit and take control of a physical carrier (i.e. an animal body, plant or object) much like human souls inhabit a human body on dualistic accounts of humans. As Rane Willerslev notes, animists do not always believe that *all objects* or *all animals* have spirits (Willerslev 2007). Some (or even most) objects, plants or animals are regarded as devoid of spirits as most westerners do.

Having a spirit can mean a lot of things. Most adherents of animism likely do not have an elaborate metaphysical account of what it means to have a spirit or soul.[8] The approach of animists is much more pragmatic. Regarding objects or animals as spirited means that objects or animals are approached in a similar or analogous way as humans. In doing so, animists (tacitly) accept that spirited objects or animals have similar capacities like humans.

What are those capacities? These are some of the capacities that are attributed:

1 Ability to communicate.
2 Ability to reflect.
3 Ability for intentional action.

Some biologists and philosophers argue that abilities 1–3 can be attributed to some animal species. Especially species that are more cognitively advanced would be able to communicate with other members of their species, be capable of rudimentary reflection and be able to act intentionally. Such abilities have been attributed to chimpanzees (De Waal and Tyack 2003), dolphins (Tomonaga and Uwano 2010) and corvids (Emery and Clayton 2004). Biologists add that animals have these abilities to a (far) more limited extend than humans do. Reflection by chimpanzees is limited to practical problems like how to gather food or how to organize against threats.[9] The abilities attributed by animists go beyond such rudimentary abilities. Adherents of animism tend to regard spirited objects, plants or animals as having similar or even greater capacities as humans have.

Construing 'being spirited' as having a number of abilities misses out on one central aspect of animism. Having a spirit also means that objects or animals have a spiritual essence. In some cases, that essence is considered divine and immortal. In this sense, being spirited again bears large semantic similarities to being 'ensouled' for humans.

8.2.2 New Animism

The idea that animism consists of a set of beliefs about spirited objects, plants and/or animals has been subject to growing criticism in recent years. Defenders of 'new animism' argue that animism should be construed differently, with an emphasis on animistic practices rather than (primitive, misguided) animistic beliefs.[10]

Nurit Bird-David objects to traditional analyses of animism where animism is regarded as a 'proto-religion' or a 'failed epistemology'. Such analyses would trace back to Edward Tylor's original, western-centered account of animism (see Section 8.2.1) and betray a commitment to positivism and Cartesian dualism.[11] As an alternative to rationalist approaches, Bird-David proposes to regard animism as a 'relational epistemology'. Animism is not a well-articulated worldview or religious system but rather a way of life. Animists live in a way that is very closely related with the natural world. They interact with their natural environment in a way similar to how they interact with fellow humans. For example, Bird-David observed how members of the Nayaka (a group of tribal people living in South India) talk and listen to stones or other objects (Bird-David 1999). The attitudes and practices of animists toward objects and animals can be compared to how the Nayaka act toward their fellow tribesmen. Most people that are not psychologically trained do not have a clear set of beliefs about minds or cognitive capabilities of fellow humans. Instead, they learn how to interact with other humans from a young age and most never ask questions on what these interactions imply or how they are made possible.

Animistic practices stem from a different concept of personhood according to Bird-David. Whereas westerners (tacitly) accept a strict dichotomy between human persons and non-human non-persons, animists tend to consider humans and animals as subcategories of a broader category of persons. Because of their broader concept, animists experience the world in a different way and interact with animals like they interact with humans (Bird-David 1999).

Bird-David notes one aspect of animistic practice among the Nayaka that sets it apart from interactions with fellow humans. On some occasions, animistic practice is evoked in special performances. In ritual[12] settings, members of the Nayaka enter into trance and invoke various animals. Members try to imitate animal behavior as well as they can and others make offerings to them. According to Bird-David, such performances bring to life various animal spirits[13] to the Nayaka. During the performances, interactions between humans and animal spirits are highly personal and intense (Bird-David 1999).

Bird-David puts her new animism in sharp contrast to old animism. She writes: 'We do not first personify other entities and then socialize with them but personify them as, when, and because we socialize with them' (Bird-David 1999: 78). The quote suggests that Bird-David's new animism might not be as new as she claims it is. Old animism need not be construed as a belief-system that comes before any actions that embody animistic beliefs. Bird-David mainly gives an account of how animistic beliefs emerge and how they function within a community. She makes a plausible case that animists gradually develop animistic beliefs through partaking in animistic practices. Very likely, they learn how to engage in these practices by socialization and imitating elders. This account is compatible with much of my reading of old animism above.

Bird-David could, however, be making a stronger claim. She might argue that a lot of animists *never* form clear animistic beliefs. Most might leave it at practices and never end up with a full-blown belief-system that goes along with them. New animism thus construed raises a challenge for our purposes. Later on in this paper, I will evaluate whether animistic beliefs are undermined by recent scientific theories. If animism consists merely of a practice without beliefs, such an assessment becomes difficult. I argue, however, that Bird-David has not shown that animism consists merely of a practice. It appears as if animists have tacit animistic beliefs that guide their practice. Without these beliefs, animistic practices are not intelligible.

A comparison to inter-personal practices is again helpful. I noted above that animistic interaction without clear beliefs can be compared to how most people interact with fellow humans. To be able to interact with others, one need not have clear beliefs about minds or cognitive abilities. Interaction does betray that one accepts that others can be interacted with. When people talk with another, they assume that the other can

hear them and can respond. They also assume that the other is similar in at least some respects. These assumptions distinguish interaction with humans from (playful) interaction with computers or cars. While a lot of people will on occasion talk or shout to their computers or cars, they do not assume that they will talk back or even understand what they were saying. Most people know that there is a clear difference between such pretend interactions and the real thing. Grasping the difference would be impossible without tacit assumptions about similarity between humans and human abilities.

In a similar way, animistic practices are incomprehensible without some underlying assumptions. It is possible that animists do not regard objects and animals as similar to humans and engage objects and animals as such in an ironic fashion. The fact that animistic rituals and practices are central to animists' lives renders this highly unlikely. A tacitly held belief that (some) objects, plants and animals are similar to humans explains animistic behavior better. The similarity probably lies in the three abilities I discussed above.

In the next section, I argue that tacitly held beliefs can be assessed epistemically even if they are never articulated. Tacit animistic beliefs can be based on misguided intuitions or experiences or not be properly supported by evidence and therefore epistemically tainted. In later sections, I look at some of these challenges. If successful, these challenges could show that animistic beliefs are not rationally held whether they are tacitly held or articulated.

8.3 Justification of Tacitly Held Beliefs

Contemporary cognitive science and psychology have largely moved away from the idea that all beliefs are consciously available to the subject who holds them. People sometimes act as if they hold certain beliefs about the world without explicitly avowing them or without being aware of them. Clear examples are people suffering from obsessive compulsion disorder. Patients obsessively perform actions like washing their hands or checking if the door is locked. When prompted to explain why they do so, patients usually admit that their actions do not make sense. Some argue that obsessive actions of this kind trace back to stressful events in the past or past infections.[14] A tacitly held belief (stemming from past experiences) that one ought to be careful to prevent new infections or that one ought to prevent danger can explain the compulsive behavior.

There is also evidence for other behavior that is best explained by tacitly held beliefs. Ohman and Soares argues that an evolved fear module can explain why certain stimuli (e.g. of snakes and spiders) can elicit strong behavioral responses even if subjects do not consciously affirm fear (Ohman 2009; Öhman and Soares 1994). An unarticulated

(evolved) belief that snakes and spiders are dangerous can explain this behavior well.

Unarticulated, tacit beliefs go by various names. Some authors refer to them as 'dispositional beliefs', stressing the idea that subjects are disposed to form beliefs when prompted to do so. Pat Manfredi gives the following example:

> Lauren sat at her desk reading her morning mail. Suddenly, she gasped. Her most important clients were coming for dinner that night. She grabbed the phone and dialed her home number. 'Bob, I'm so glad I caught you before you left. I forgot to put in the roast. Set the oven timer for 4:00 p.m. Thanks. Goodbye'.
>
> (Manfredi 1993: 95)

Other authors regard tacit beliefs as dispositions to believe as well (e.g. Lycan 1986).[15] Tacit animistic beliefs are not dispositional like the states in the example. If adherents of new animism are right, people are not easily triggered to state or affirm animistic beliefs when prompted to do so. Instead, their views on spirits inhabiting objects and being remain dormant and unarticulated. They could even remain dormant if or when subjects are questioned about their views. If this is the case, (some) adherents of animism do not have a disposition to form animistic beliefs.

As an alternative, tacitly held animistic beliefs can be regarded as aliefs. The term was introduced by Tamara Gentler. She considers aliefs to be associative, automatic and a-rational. Aliefs are conceptually and developmentally prior to other states like beliefs. They are typically affect-laden and action-oriented. Aliefs can be activated by features of the subject's internal or external environment. Examples of aliefs are cases where people hesitate to cross a tall bridge while knowing that the bridge is perfectly safe. In this case, people *believe* that the bridge is safe but *alieve* that the bridge is dangerous (Gendler 2008).

Gendler's concept of 'alief' appears to be useful to get a sense for tacitly held animistic beliefs. Like aliefs, they are often affect-laden and action orientated and are easily activated by features in the environment. However, tacitly held animistic beliefs are not a-rational and do not run counter to occurrent, affirmed beliefs. Most adherents of animism do not slip back into behavior in line with animism while consciously affirming the opposite like in the bridge example. Instead, their views on animism are usually in line with their other beliefs and behavior. For example, some authors argue that animism implies more respect for non-human animals and the environment. Adherents of animism indeed appear to display this behavior.

An important question for our purposes is whether tacitly held beliefs can be epistemically assessed. Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs are

about something.[16] Animistic beliefs, whether tacit or not, make the claim that spirits inhabit objects, plants or beings. That content can be true or false.[17] Therefore, tacit beliefs can be regarded as false if their contents are false and true if their contents are true.

Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs can also be assessed as justified or unjustified. Like occurrent beliefs, tacit beliefs can be properly backed up by evidence or not. They can also be formed by means of epistemic virtues like open-mindedness or epistemic vices like wishful thinking. Below, we will focus on whether animistic beliefs are based on veridical experiences or not. Tacitly held animistic beliefs formed in this way need not be assessed in a different way.

8.4 Animistic Experiences

There are various ways how one can assess the epistemic status of animistic beliefs. Contemporary skeptics tend to argue that there is insufficient evidence for animism (as they argue is the case for most religious beliefs).[18] Some argue along similar lines as Edward Tylor that animism represents an earlier stage of human development. In light of recent scientific development, animism would no longer be tenable.[19] Arguments for materialism or physicalism, if successful, would also imply that animism is untenable. The same holds for arguments that conclude that spirits need to be tied to a *human* body.[20] Most of these arguments assume a materialistic ontology that is foreign to animists. Assessing these and similar defeaters for animistic beliefs lies far beyond the scope of this paper. For this reason, I will focus on the experiential roots of animistic beliefs and defeaters thereof.

There is considerable anthropological evidence for animistic experiences or seemings. Charles Whitehead argues that people in animistic societies have religious experiences all the time (Whitehead, unpublished). Sometimes the experiences occur under trance. More often, animists have animistic experience in their interactions with nature. Bird-David reports of inspirited stones that were seen to have moved or 'opened their mouths' (Bird-David 1999: 74–75). Safonova and Santha note that Siberian Evenki hunters see prey as competitive partners with whom they compete (Safonova and Santha 2012).

Experiences of animism can take on two forms. Sometimes subjects describe seeing or sensing plants, animals or objects as having agency. Such experiences are more direct and more in line with 'old animism'. More often, subjects behave or act toward plants, animals or objects as if they have agency. In the latter case, the experience is less direct and more in line with 'new animism'. The latter kind raises different epistemic questions and will therefore be discussed separately.

8.4.1 'Old' Animistic Experiences

Reports of subjects experiencing plants, animals or objects as having agency are rather rare in ethnographic reports. Robert Crombie describes the following experience:

> I had gone to the Garden in the early afternoon. (…) As I reached the end of it and crossed the path, I was more conscious than usual of the livingness of the trees and bushes ahead of me, and of a closeness to and identification with the earth and the whole vegetable kingdom. I went across the grass in the direction of my favourite redwood trees. After greeting the trees as I usually do, I went on by a grass path through the trees and bushes, conscious of an ever-increasing intensity of feeling causing my whole body to tingle and giving the experience I have described before as 'more real than real' (…) When I reached the path I was making for, I crossed it and went to a seat a little way beyond it on the grass, where I sat and looked at the nearby trees. How vitally alive they were, though some of them had lost nearly all their leaves. I immediately became aware that not only were they alive but they were communicating with me; the trees themselves, that is, not the tree spirits or the nature beings still working with them. I was not only overwhelmed by the love they were sending out, but realised that they were giving me thanks for the work I was being used for in passing on knowledge to people about the consciousness and sensitivity of the vegetable kingdom and the reality of the elemental helpers. The trees claimed me as one of themselves. This feeling of total oneness with all nature was wonderful. The unexpected appreciation was deeply moving. I now felt that my life had been worthwhile.
>
> (Crombie 2018: 78–79)

Crombie describes seeing and sensing trees behaving as agents. They were communicating and giving their thanks. He claims the trees are endowed with consciousness and sensitivity.[21]

Most reports of direct animistic experiences are less elaborate. Bird-David reports of a Nayaka woman who had stones 'come to her'. Inspirited stones were seen to have moved or 'opened their mouths' (Bird-David 1999: 74–75). June McDaniel reports how a Bengal woman was seen talking to trees and inanimate objects (McDaniel 1989).

Direct experiences of agency in plants, animals or objects are more common in subjects under the influence of psychedelics. See for example:

> The Beauty has been unveiled. There was shimmering of light all over the trees, the grass, the leaves, the skies, everywhere. Trees seemed ancient, timeless, curvy, gracious, mysterious. Tree bark that seemed dry and old just a minute ago, now seemed alive, like skin, every single

> thing around me was living and breathing some kind of energy that seemed to emanate from everywhere and everything, a hidden aura of magic. Patterns in the trees intensified - I could clearly see faces, eyes, hundreds of eyes, anywhere I looked. They were all smiling. The whole ancient forest was smiling at me. My fingers were trembling from awe.
> (Dazza 2010)

Like Swinburne did, experiences induced by psychedelics could be discarded as unreliable. Swinburne argues that one could conclude inductively that new experiences under the influence of psychedelics are unreliable by noting most experiences so induced proved to be false (Swinburne 2004: 311).[22]

Swinburne's argument falls prey to the generality problem. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman note a problem for any claim that a belief is unjustified because it was produced by an unreliable[23] mechanism or faculty. They note that the way in which a belief-forming mechanism is specified lead to widely diverging conclusions about its reliability. Take visual perception. If a belief concerning a maple tree is initiated by observing the leaf shape, the mechanism will be judged as reliable. If the belief was initiated by an observation behind a solid object, the verdict will be less favorable (Feldman 1998).

A similar generality reply can be leveled against Swinburne's claim. Experiences induced by psychedelics may be unreliable if all psychedelic experiences are taken aboard.[24] However, limiting our view to psychedelic experiences in quiet situations under proper guidance may raise a very different verdict. A worry is that the reliability of psychedelic experiences in such settings is hard to calibrate. Often subjects reports highly unusual experiences during psychedelic trips, like feelings of oneness with nature or seeing supernatural beings. Since the veracity of these experiences is hard to establish through other means than experiences, we seem to lack an objective measure of reliability.

In line with the previous chapters, we could treat psychedelic animistic experiences (and possibly psychedelic experiences in general) as innocent until proven guilty. In the absence of defeaters, such experiences may be regarded as justified. Defeaters could be evidence that what was experienced does not exist or that the experience was not caused by its alleged object. I return to defeaters of the last kind in a later section. Defeaters of the first kind fall outside the scope of this chapter.

8.4.2 'New' Animistic Experiences

Direct experiences like the ones discussed above are rather rare in ethnographic descriptions of animistic cultures. Descriptions of experiences or events wherein subjects engage with nature as if it had agency are more common.

Take, for example, the behavior of Siberian hunters. Safonova and Santha note that Siberian Evenki hunters see prey as competitive partners with whom they compete (Safonova and Santha 2012). Rane Willerslev made the following observation in Siberia:

> Watching Old Spiridon rocking his body back and forth, I was puzzled whether the figure I saw before me was man or elk. The elk-hide coat worn with its hair outward, the headgear with its characteristic protrud-ing ears, and the skis covered with an elk's smooth leg skins, so as to sound like the animal when moving in snow, made him an elk; yet the lower part of his face below the hat, with its human eyes, nose, and mouth, along with the loaded rifle in his hands, made him a man. Thus, it was not that Spiridon had stopped being human. Rather, he had a liminal quality: he was not an elk, and yet he was also not not an elk. He was occupying a strange place in between human and nonhuman identities.
>
> A female elk appeared from among the willow bushes with her off-spring. (…) But as Spiridon moved closer, she was captured by his mimetic performance, suspended her disbelief, and started walking straight toward him with the calf trotting behind her. At that point he lifted his gun and shot them both dead. Later he explained the incident: 'I saw two persons dancing toward me. The mother was a beautiful young woman and while singing, she said: "Honored friend. Come and I'll take you by the arm and lead you to our home". At that point I killed them both. Had I gone with her, I myself would have died. She would have killed me'.
>
> (Willerslev 2007: 1)

In the example, Spiridon approaches the elk by behaving as an elk. Spiridon's behavior displays respect for the animal in line with respect given to (other) agents. In this case, the indirect experience gives rise to a direct experience of the spirits inhabiting the elks. In the first part, a direct experience appears to be absent. While the Siberian hunters usually do not see the elks behaving differently than non-animists do, they do appear to get a sense that they are endowed with agency. The hunter in the last example does not appear to actively attribute agency to the elk or to make a conscious decision to approach the elk in a special way. The whole episode appears to unfold naturally, signaling that the hunter notes 'something' in the elk that makes him behave this way. This 'something' is likely agency or a similar unarticulated property of the elk.

Reports of indirect animistic experiences of animated objects are around as well:

> A white trader, digging in his potato patch, unearthed a large stone similar to the one just referred to. He sent for John Duck, an Indian

> who was the leader of the wabano, a contemporary ceremony that is held in a structure something like that used for the Midewiwin. The trader called his attention to the stone, saying that it must belong to his pavilion. John Duck did not seem pleased at this. He bent down and spoke to the boulder in a low voice, inquiring whether it had ever been in his pavilion. According to John, the stone replied in the negative.
>
> (Matthews 2016: 56)

Animistic engagements with nature also occur in ritual settings. Animistic communities, like the Udmurt communities in Bashkortostan conduct annual rituals where they thank nature for the fruits of the harvest. They also present offerings to ensure a next successful harvest (Toulouze and Niglas 2014).

An objection against the epistemic import of new animistic experiences is that agency is not 'given' in the experience. One could make the case that adherents of animism are socialized into regarding (some) objects, plants and animals as agential. Because of their upbringing, they approach things as agential and thereby attribute agency. They do not form animistic beliefs based on the experience themselves. One could also make the reverse case the westerners are socialized into regarding objects, plants and animals as non-agential and approach them in a different way as a result. In both cases, subjects might not note anything concerning agency or lack thereof when encountering an animal (or object or plant), but merely act toward them in a way in line with their upbringing. If this were the case, agency is not given in the experience but stems solely from cultural transmission.

The force of the objection is, however, doubtful in the light of common sense and cognitive science. It is apparent that young children often treat object, plants and animals in similar ways as they treat humans. Children talk to animals and engage with them in other ways similarly as they would humans. Adults also tend to occasionally talk to pets or shout at their cars and computers. All of these occur in the west where animistic traditions are hardly present. This strongly suggests that humans often note aspects or characteristics in things and animals that appear as if these have agency. Some cognitive scientists argue that seeing certain objects, plants and especially animals as agential is more natural than the reverse. Jean Piaget already argued that children from age two see natural phenomena as conscious and alive. Children would naturally regard those things capable of self-propelled movement as being like humans. Moving away from this natural stance requires considerable education and conceptions of agential animals would often pop back up when humans let their epistemic guard down (Kelemen and Rosset 2009).

Some defenders regard this 'natural animism' as the result of misattributions of our cognitive system (see below). Whatever it may be, they do suggest that humans naturally tend to see at least some objects, plants or

animals as endowed with agency.[25] It is therefore not unlikely that such experiences lie at the root of animistic beliefs.

8.5 Defeaters

In this section, I discuss defeaters for animistic experiences. like before, the defeaters consist of alternative causal explanations, i.e. claims arguing that animistic experiences are not caused by ensouled objects, plants or animals. Such defeaters can undermine both 'old' and 'new' animistic experiences.

8.5.1 Dreams

Proposed defeaters for animism are as old as the term itself. Edward Tylor not only regarded animism as a backwards set of beliefs, he also attempted to explain how these beliefs are formed. He argues that animism evolved from reflection on death, dreams and apparitions. For example, dreams of dead kin or friends would be regarded as evidence that their spirits were still out there. This would give rise to a 'doctrine of spirits' and the idea that objects, plants and animals are spirited (Tylor 1871). If animistic beliefs indeed stem from interpretations of dreams and dreams are bad guides to reality, this would count against their rationality.[26]

Willerslev argues that Tylor's claim that reflections on dreams give rise to beliefs on spirits has some traction (Willerslev 2007). Nonetheless, Tylor's explanation is not often defended by contemporary psychologists or cognitive scientists.

Against Tylor's explanation or a recent update, one can note that not all animistic experiences occur in dreams. When experiences during dreams or during trance occur, they are usually had by shamans. Many animistic traditions have designated specialists, often called 'shamans', regarding the spiritual world. Shamans indeed report experiences during trance or dreams where they encounter (nature)spirits. The examples of animistic experiences above were, however, not reported by shamans and did not occur under trance or during dreams. Therefore, the experiences fall beyond the scope of Tylor's explanation.

Attributing animistic experiences to dreams can therefore, at best, present an alternative causal explanation for a limited number of animistic experiences. Given that many experiences fall beyond its scope, many instances of animistic beliefs remain undefeated.

8.5.2 Natural Animism

Stewart Guthrie draws on the idea of natural animistic thinking (see above). He defends an evolutionary-cognitive explanation for how people naturally form animistic beliefs. In contrast to Tylor, Guthrie refers

to cognitive biases or tendencies that give rise to animistic beliefs. His theory has been criticized and reformulated by several others (Barrett 2004; Van Leeuwen and Van Elk 2018). In this section, I focus on Guthrie's original theory.

Guthrie distinguishes 'animism' from 'anthropomorphism'. Animism is 'attributing characteristics of living things (e.g. sentience and spontaneous motion) to inanimate things and events'. Anthropomorphism is 'attributing characteristics of humanity (e.g. language and symbolism) to non-human things and events, including other animals' (Guthrie 2001). Guthrie adds that humans often do both at the same time (Guthrie 1993). While attributing sentience and spontaneous motion is one minor aspect of animism, it does not explain why people attribute abilities 1–3 to objects and animals. I will therefore focus on Guthrie's account of anthropomorphism.

According to Guthrie, animistic beliefs can be explained by looking at perception and cognition. He notes that we often see non-living things as alive (Guthrie 1993). A famous example is the Heider Simmel experiment. Subjects were shown a short animation of two triangles and a dot that moved in and out of a secluded area. Afterwards, subjects recollected what they say in terms of stories. Some said that the triangles were 'in love' or were 'chasing one another' (Heider and Simmel 1944). Such properties are only meaningfully used for living things and subjects know full well that the triangles and dot are not alive.

The inclination to see things as alive is no accident but a useful strategy according to Guthrie. Living things often pose a threat. Especially for our prehistoric ancestors, encounters with predators and other humans were a prime cause of death. For this reason, it makes evolutionary sense to be on guard for living things. Seeing too many living things is at worst a waste of time and energy. Seeing one living thing too little could easily mean instant death (Guthrie 1993).

Our propensity to easily conclude that things are alive could explain animism. According to Guthrie, animistic beliefs stem from 'false positives' (Guthrie 2002). People erroneously conclude that objects or plants display agency and conclude that they are spirited. Humans can overcome their evolved tendency by reflecting or increased knowledge.

One could object that Guthrie assumes the falsity of animism. He appears to assume that humans are making mistakes when they see objects or plants as alive but not when they do the same to humans. Guthrie does not provide arguments to think that this is the case. While Guthrie might have similar assumptions, they do not undermine his claim that humans easily mistakenly see things as living. As Guthrie notes, humans often attribute agency to computers or cars. These objects are regarded as inanimate by animists as well. Guthrie's case that human attribution of agency is error-prone is therefore not clearly dependent on his assumptions.

There are other reasons to think that Guthrie's account does not show that animistic beliefs result from misattributions. My discussion above shows that Guthrie primarily explains why humans easily attribute *agency*. I argued above that animistic beliefs encompass more than agency, namely the belief that (some) objects, plants and animals have mental capacities as well. Guthrie does not explain the attribution of mental capacities.

Justin Barrett expanded Guthrie's theory to account for why humans also attribute mental capacities. He argues that when humans detected agency (erroneous or not), a second cognitive mechanism is activated. Human start to reason about what the detected agent might do or think by using their theory of mind (ToM). The ToM is usually applied to form beliefs about other human's mental states. When humans get the idea that something else is agential, they could also apply it elsewhere (Barrett 2004).

There is another reason to doubt that Guthrie's account harms animistic beliefs. Guthrie argues that humans easily get the sense that objects or plants have agency. This sense amounts to little more than a hunch or feeling that something is alive. Guthrie acknowledges that these hunches are usually discarded. The examples of animistic experiences I discussed above do not resemble such hunches. The experiences are rather long lasting encounters. It is unlikely that hunches that are easily discarded provide the foundation for such experiences.

Animistic experiences do not fit well into Guthrie's account for yet another reason. Because of our hypersensitivity for living things, attribution of agency would occur very frequently. The slightest sign would suffice to get a hunch that some object is alive. Animists, however, are not all that quick to see something as animate. Bird-David notes that the Mayaka certainly do not see all objects, plants or animals as inspirited (Bird-David 1999). Usually a limited class of objects, plants or animals is regarded as inspirited. If animistic beliefs stem from our proneness to detect living things, we would expect animists to consider a lot more as inspirited.

Guthrie's explanation is thus not sufficiently apt to show how most animistic experiences have an alternative cause. As a result, the theory does not support a defeater.

8.5.3 Misattributing Agency

Guthrie frames his theory explicitly as an explanation for animism. The explanations discussed next were not framed as such but do explain certain features of animistic experiences. The explanations point to how humans attribute agency or mentality in erroneous ways. As such, they might explain how animistic experiences can occur.

I argued above that animists attribute three abilities to objects and animals. The first two abilities are part of mentality, the third of agency.

A defeater could look at how humans usually attribute agency or mentality and point to how they often do so in erroneous ways. I look at the attribution of agency in this section and that of mentality in the next. I will not look at attributions of a spiritual essence to objects, plants or objects. Scientific accounts of how such an attribution occurs are (nearly) non-existent. To my knowledge, this form has not been subject to experimental investigation as well. For these reasons, I focus on agency and mentality.

There is ample literature on how humans attribute agency to others. There are also examples of where the attribution goes wrong. The defender of a defeater could point to the latter and argue that the way in which animistic beliefs are formed resembles them. The animistic experience is then not caused by an ensouled object, plant or animal but by mistaking some other sensory input. Below, I give a brief summary of recent empirical data on misattribution of agency. I discuss four situations where humans easily misattribute agency:

1 Similarity
2 Ambiguity
3 False prior beliefs
4 Triggers

A first situation (1) where humans easily misattribute agency to others is when others perform similar actions as they do. Nomura et al. conducted an experiment where people were asked to manipulate a mouse to control a cursor. At the same time, someone else was performing a similar bodily action but did not in fact control the cursor. Subjects were prone to state that the other was controlling the cursor as well. They were thus prone to erroneously attribute agency to others. The authors suggest that misattributions of agency of this kind could also occur when people are performing a similar dance (Nomura et al. 2019).[27]

Attribution of agency to objects or animals only minimally resembles the experimental setup. Animals may sometimes behave like humans do and thereby prompt humans to misattribute agency. However, usually animals behave rather differently. For example, some anthropologists note that animistic beliefs are more salient during hunts (e.g. Willerslev 2007). During hunts, animal preys behave very different than human hunters. Therefore it is unlikely that an attribution of agency results from performing similar actions in these cases. Differences in behavior are even greater with plants or objects since these do not display much behavior at al. This all makes it unlikely that attribution of agency to objects or animals results from mistake (1).

Another situation (2) where humans easily misattribute agency to others are situations with an ambiguous correspondence between action

and outcome. Possibly, humans are more prone to attribute agency to others when the outcome is unexpected given the action. Similarly, animists could attribute agency to objects or animals because some observed behavior or phenomenon is ambiguous. Bednark and Franz, however, conclude that ambiguity leads to *less* attribution of agency in others rather than more (Bednark and Franz 2014).

Human agency attribution might also easily be led astray (3) when humans have false prior beliefs about agency (Desantis et al. 2012). It might very well seem that objects and animals have agency to animists because they hold animistic beliefs. Seemings might in turn reinforce animistic beliefs and thereby create a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The main problem with an argument that relies on (3) is that it presupposes the falsity of animistic beliefs. Prior animistic beliefs only lead to misguided attributions of agency in objects and animals if these prior beliefs are false. If animistic beliefs are correct, they lead to correct attributions instead. An argument that concludes to the non-rationality of animistic beliefs and relies on (3) would thus by question begging.

A next class of situations (4) fostering misattribution of agency is situations where humans are triggered to do so. Some evidence suggests that humans are easily lead astray when they are primed to think that others will perform intentional actions (Moore et al. 2009; Sato 2009). Animists might be willingly led to 'see' agency in objects and plants by frequently reminding them that these are spirited. Again, an argument against animistic beliefs that relies on (4) would assume the falsity of animism and would therefore be question begging. Furthermore, Bird-David suggestion that animistic beliefs often remain unarticulated (see above) makes it unlikely that animists are willingly primed to 'see' agency in objects and animals.

The evidence discussed so far does not make it likely that animists attribute agency to objects or animals in situations that lead them astray. Therefore, we have no reason to think that animistic beliefs have a different cause than spirited objects, plants or animals and are defeated. Animists might also make mistakes when they attribute abilities 1–2. In the next section, I will look at evidence for that claim.

8.5.4 Mis-attributing Mentality

We discussed (mis)attribution of agency in the previous section. Having agency implies the ability to perform intentional actions and therefore covers ability (3). In this section, I look at the attribution of abilities (1–2). Both abilities (communication and reflection) are frequently discussed under the header 'mentality'. We say that humans have mentality because (among other things) they can communicate and reflect. Assessments of whether primates, dolphins or other animals have a mental life often also looks at both abilities. Below, I discuss reasons to

think that attribution of mentality sometimes goes wrong. Like before, I discuss whether the evidence gives us reasons to think that attribution of mentality to animals, plants or objects goes wrong as well.

Most contemporary cognitive scientists and psychologists accept that the attribution of mentality is mediated by the ToM. The term designates the faculty (or faculties) that allows humans to attribute and understand mental phenomena like beliefs, desires and intentions. According to most theorists, the ToM is triggered by outward behavior and postulates minds, beliefs and other mental phenomena to explain this behavior. For example, when humans see someone smiling, the behavior is explained by postulating that the person is happy. The explanations can be revised in accordance with new evidence. Evidence that the person in the example is faking a smile will prompt a revision.

Like most cognitive mechanisms, the ToM sometimes goes astray and sometimes misattributes mentality when none is present. Below, I discuss three situations:

1 Meaningful experiences
2 Perceived as 'warm'
3 Perceived as competent

Jesse Bering argues that the ToM is highly important for human lives and human survival. As a result, humans apply their ToM to more phenomena than outward (human) behavior. He argues that humans also apply ToM to find explanations for meaningful events. Examples of meaningful events are experiences of awe or life changing events like having a child. Because meaning is intuitively connected to intention, meaningful events are explained in terms of mental capacities. Since ordinary humans lack the powers to bring about a lot of meaningful events, humans (by virtue of their ToM's) explain these by postulating an ultimate, divine mind (Bering 2002).

Bering's theory offers an explanation for how humans form beliefs about God rather than animistic beliefs. He does suggest a situation (1) where ToM easily goes astray. People would easily misattribute mentality when they perceive situations as meaningful. His theory can be extended to account for animism.[28] Perhaps people have profoundly meaningful encounters with animals or some objects. If these encounters are accompanied by awe or have a meaningful impact on human lives, humans might be prone to attribute mentality. Even if this were the case, it would not show that animistic experiences in these situations result from misattributions. Bering assumes that the intuitive connection between meaningfulness and intentionality is often unwarranted. Perhaps meaningfulness is a good indicator of mentality and attributing mentality accordingly is perfectly warranted.

People often misattribute mental capacities to groups or organizations. While this has no immediate bearing on animistic beliefs, these attributions may be mediated by perceiving groups or organizations as warm and/or competent. Humans do not attribute mentality to all groups. Fiske et al. conclude from neuroimaging studies that humans easily attribute mental capacities when groups are perceived as warm (2) (Fiske 2009). Attribution of mentality to 'warm organizations' like charitable groups comes more easily than attribution to 'cold organizations' like government bureaucracies or large multinational companies. This raises the possibility that humans easily misattribute mentality when they perceive a thing or a being as warm.

A third mediating factor (3) that supports attribution of mentality to groups is competence. Competent organizations are more easily seen as having mental capacities then incompetent ones (Fiske 2009). For example, in one study, subjects attributed more mentality to Cathay Pacific Airlines than to the NGO World Vision (Au and Ng 2021).

Do (2) and (3) raise problems for animists? Some objects or animals are probably seen as warm and/or competent. Siberian animistic hunters likely note the competence of animals in escaping or hiding. Animists probably also experience forms of affection for animals or objects. However, concluding that all attributions of mentality based on perceived warmth or competence are misguided goes too far. Warmth or competence might lead humans astray in attributing mentality to organizations but it often a good indicator of mentality in humans. Noting that young children develop competence in some area or develop empathy is a good indicator that they have increased mental capacities. Reduced competence or empathy in patients suffering from dementia is also a good indicator of reduced mentality.

Proneness to misattribute mentality in situation 1–3 therefore does not show that animistic beliefs likely result from misattributions and therefore have different causes. As was the case for attribution of agency, there might be other situations that lead humans astray. The empirical evidence I discussed so far, however, does not show that animistic experiences are caused by something else than animated objects, plants or animals.

8.6 Conclusion

I argued that like other spirit-beliefs, animistic beliefs can be supported by animistic experiences. If one grants that experiences can be regarded as good evidence for beliefs, there is no reason to exempt animistic experiences. As a result, animists who form beliefs based on animistic experiences are prima facie justified.

I also argued that while experiences might be undermined in various ways, the scientific evidence discussed gives us no reason to think that

animistic experiences have an alternative cause. As a result, animistic beliefs formed by animistic experiences stand undefeated.

My conclusion implies that animists can continue to regard their beliefs as justified in the light of surveyed scientific evidence. Other (rebutting) defeaters may be available. For example, a sound argument that objects, plants and animals are purely physical would rebut any belief that either are animated or ensouled.[29] Assessing such arguments lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

8.7 Coda: A Moral Argument for Animism

Some anthropologists note that animists tend to have greater respect for their environment (e.g. Harvey 2005). The link between animism and greater respect for the environment is fairly obvious. Regarding (some) animals, plants and objects as spirited puts constraints on instrumentalizing nature. If nature is just mindless matter, the only constraints on using nature are the need for resources in the future or aesthetic reasons for preserving nature. While these might get us some way toward protecting nature, these constraints have proved not to be forceful enough or to be easily overridden by other needs. If nature is to some extent spirited, nature is easily regarded as having intrinsic value. Seeing intrinsic value implies greater respect and seeing nature as an end in itself. An animistic view of nature could therefore help meet ecological challenges like widespread pollution or anthropogenic global warming since both likely stem from instrumentalizing nature.

Traditionally moral reasons are kept strictly separated from epistemic reasons. Recently some argued that the separation is too strict. An increasing number of epistemologists argue for 'moral encroachment'. The thesis is aptly defined by Sarah Moss as 'The epistemic status of an opinion can depend on its moral features' (Moss 2018: 177). Examples of when moral implications of a belief are relevant are beliefs on racial profiling or structural oppression (Moss 2018).[30]

Defenders of moral encroachment usually do not provide strict criteria for when moral implications are relevant for the epistemic status of beliefs or opinions. The examples they provide signal that moral encroachment becomes more important if the stakes are high. Rejecting racial profiling or structural oppression arguably has profound real life implications. Because of the importance of accepting or rejecting these views, moral implications have considerable weight. Given the importance of contemporary ecological challenges, animistic beliefs appear to fit this criterion remarkably well. Global warming is often considered to be one of the major challenges for humanity in the 21st century. Pollution of the oceans threatens ecological systems and species. Therefore, the stakes rule in favor of accepting animistic beliefs on moral grounds as well.

Arguing that moral implications lend additional support for animistic beliefs raises questions. It is not clear how much epistemic support is gained or whether moral reasons will suffice to be justified in holding animist beliefs. It is also not clear whether the moral support for animism is merely temporary and instrumental for the sake of solving ecological crises. These questions lie beyond the scope of this paper. The potentially profound moral implication of accepting animism does constitute an additional reason alongside the stricter epistemic reasons I discussed above. Together they can constitute a cumulative case for animism.

Notes

1 Some of the content of this chapter was previously published in 'An Epistemic Defense of Animism' (Van Eyghen forthcoming). Reprinted with permission.
2 A notable exception is Tiddy Smith's recent defense of the existence of nature spirits (Smith 2020).
3 I discuss a moral-epistemic argument in Section 8.7.
4 This form of Spiritism gained popularity near the end of the nineteenth century. Adherents held séances in which they invoked spirits or tried to communicate to spirits through material means (e.g. Ouija boards). Notable figures in the spiritist movement were Allan Kardec, Frans Mesmer and the Leah sisters.
5 Cf. Hornborg (2006) and Stanford and Jong (2019).
6 The kami that govern rivers and stream are called 'Kawanokami' or 'Kahaku' (Nakayama 2005).
7 A considerable number of animists do hold that a spirit can be disentangled from its body. Nonetheless they are usually embodied.
8 For a recent account of what it means to have a soul, see Swinburne (2019).
9 Aristotle had a similar view. He argues that animals have a soul that allows them to engage in a number of activities (most notably self-directed motion). Contrary to humans they do not have a rational soul and thus miss out on most distinctively human capacities.
10 New animism has been defended by a number of authors (see Hallowell 2010; Harvey 2014). Viveiros de Castro defends a similar position he calls 'perspectivist cosmology' (De Castro 1998). In this section, I focus on Nurit Bird-David's defense.
11 Bird-David even suggests that Tylor was inspired by modernist spiritualism (see above) and their beliefs on spirits. He notes that Tylor took his notion of animism from 17th century alchemist Stahl.
12 Bird-David objects to calling the performances 'rituals', but calls them 'practices' instead (Bird-David 1999).
13 Bird-David uses the Nayaka term 'Devaru' to designate spirits.
14 See American Psychiatric Association. Task Force on DSM-IV (1994).
15 Lycan also suggests defining tacit beliefs as beliefs without representation (Lycan 1986). This definition presupposes a representationalist view on belief (cf. Schwitzgebel 2006). Delving into the discussion between representationalists and other accounts of belief stretches beyond the scope of this paper. For this reason, I will not pursue Lycan's suggestion any further.
16 The aboutness of beliefs is often called 'intentionality'.

17 The content could also be assessed as accurate, meaning closer to the truth or inaccurate, meaning further removed from the truth.
18 See, for example, Shermer (2002).
19 For a recent similar argument, see Rosenberg (2020).
20 For a critique, see Peels (2013).
21 It is not clear from the quote whether Crombie concluded to consciousness and sensitivity from an experience or by some other means. In any case, his experience provided support for these beliefs.
22 Swinburne makes his claim about experiences induced by LSD. The claim can be generalized to other psychedelic substances like mescaline or psilocybin since these have similar effects.
23 Unreliability is generally defined as producing considerably more true than false beliefs.
24 Although some have argued against this. See for example, Letheby (2016).
25 One should add a caveat in line with new animism that idea concerning agency may remain unarticulated or undeveloped.
26 The defender could of course deny the second part and insist that dreams are good guides to reality.
27 Jeffrey Bednark and Elisabeth Franz provide additional evidence for a proneness toward these misattributions of agency (Bednark and Franz 2014).
28 Alexander Rosenberg makes a similar point when he accuses the Theory of Mind of promiscuously anthropomorphizing nearly everything. Like Bering, Rosenberg does not really argue for why the ToM is making mistakes when it anthropomorphizes objects or animals (Rosenberg 2020).
29 A broader argument for overall physicalism, i.e. the thesis that all reality is physical, would not suffice. On physicalism, humans are purely physical as well and nonetheless display a significant level of agency. Therefore, physicalism allows for the possibility of physical agency and does not preclude that objects, animals or plants share in it. A sound argument for physicalism would rebut the belief that (some) objects, plants or animals are ensouled or have a spiritual core.
30 See Gardiner (2018) for a criticism of moral encroachment.

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Conclusion

My aim in this book was to investigate the question whether belief in spirits is justified. The answer is affirmative. I discussed two metaphysical arguments in favor of the existence of spirits. I concluded that the existence of spirits is rendered more plausible if God exists. The conclusion is thus conditional on the existence of God. This may seem like a meager victory since the existence of God is not undisputed. However, since most who do not accept the existence of God do not even consider the existence of spirits, the conclusion may have significant reach. Its conclusion can also help push back against mere theism, the thesis that God is the only supernatural agent who exists.

I found the second metaphysical argument more wanting because of stark differences between unusual events. Unusual events might be plausibly explained by spirit-activity, but such a claim requires careful study of the event under consideration and arguments why the event is best explained by spirit-activity. In common-sensical versions of the argument, such deliberation is usually absent. The discussion in Chapter 3 can serve to ward of common counterattacks against attributing unusual events to spirit-activity, like claims that explanations in terms of spirit-activity are always less parsimonious or have less explanatory power than naturalistic alternatives.

The discussion in Chapters 4–7 concluded that various forms of spirit-experiences can provide justification for various spirit-beliefs. They can lend justification to the belief that spirits exist or beliefs on the nature and abilities of spirits. The discussion did not aim to show that culturally specific spirit-beliefs are justified. To show that specific Vodou- or Shinto-beliefs are justified, a closer look at specific experiences at the roots of those beliefs is required. The discussion does strongly suggest that even such culturally specific spirit-beliefs are not in danger of being defeated by the most commonly proposed alternative naturalistic explanations.

The discussion in Chapters 4–7 did not point out epistemically relevant differences between perception-like-, mediumship, animistic- of possession-experiences. All experiences can provide prima facie justification for

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spirit-beliefs and all were shown to withstand defeat by the most common naturalistic alternative explanations.

Toward a New Spiritology?

When pushed by Christians that his 'the God Delusion' did not do justice to theological reflection on God, Richard Dawkins allegedly replied that he also doesn't need to be an expert in 'fairyology' to know that beliefs on fairies are nonsense.[1]

The aim of the book was merely to assess the epistemic status of spirit-beliefs. The assessment did conclude that beliefs concerning the nature of spirits can be justified (mainly by spirit-experiences). In itself, the conclusion says little about what that nature consists of, apart from not being God, (usually) being non-physical and (usually) being invisible.

Theistic arguments or epistemic arguments in support of theistic beliefs are sometimes seen as preliminaries for theology. Establishing the existence of God is sometimes regarded as a preliminary or necessary condition before one can reason about God's nature and attributes. In a similar way, the arguments defended in this book could prepare the way to reason about the natures of various spirits. Like theology, such a 'spiritology' will be culturally specific. Many traditions, like Haitian Vodou and Chinese traditional religion have elaborated descriptions of the natures of various spirits. However, their natures have not been the subject of elaborate philosophical discussion as the nature of God in (analytic) theology.

Beyond Infantile Fairytales

The claim made by Dawkins on the obvious absurdity of belief in fairies is often (tacitly) applied to spirits as well. Many western people appear to employ a similar reasoning about spirits like atheistic thinkers like Dawkins do for God. Atheists like Dawkins are often accused of holding up an infantile, mythological picture of God. On this view, God is some kind of superhuman who lives in heaven and directs creation much like a wizard.[2] In a similar way, many people appear to hold a view of spirits that closer resembles mythological or fairytale depictions than what spirit-believers actually believe. When looking for examples of various spirit-experiences, I could also not help but note a certain level of disdain for indigenous spirit-beliefs. This is more prominent in older ethnographies.

The arguments defended in this book might help people take the existence of and belief in spirits more seriously. I hope to have shown that various spirit-beliefs do not resemble mythological depictions and are often formed in similar ways as other religious or perceptual beliefs.

Notes

1 The claim is, among others, made by Randall Rauser who tweeted on 27 January 2022: 'When Dawkins wrote "The God Delusion" he was criticized for his gross ignorance of theology and phil. of religion. He replied that he also doesn't need to be an expert in "fairyology" to know that fairies are nonsense. An incredibly inane reply. His fans thought it was a brilliant' (https://twitter.com/RandalRauser/status/1486530863793774599). Richard Dawkins himself tweeted on 17 November 2014: 'I may be an epic failure at "Theology" but I have a PhD in Fairyology with Distinction in Tooth Fairy Studies' (https://twitter.com/richarddawkins/status/534380002884591616).
2 For thorough dissections of Dawkins and other atheists depictions of God, see McGrath (2004) and Hart (2013).

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