

# Theism and Atheism

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## *Opposing Arguments in Philosophy*

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**Theism and Atheism: Opposing Arguments  
in Philosophy**

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## TOPIC 5

# *Religious Experience: Atheism*

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*The aim of this chapter is to clarify what is meant by “religious experience,” discuss the ways in which such experiences can be explained, and assess what kind of evidential support they offer to either theism or atheism. Atheism uses a variety of arguments concluding that religious experiences cannot justify the idea that a God is involved.*

## ATHEISM ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Experiences about God seem objective enough to those convinced that God is present. There is nothing about atheism requiring it to dismiss or distort reports of such experiences. This chapter describes atheism’s position on religious experience, and defends the conclusion that features to religious experiences that seem unnatural do not justify the view that something supernatural is involved.

Atheism would have little to say about religious experiences if theism never took them for encounters with God. Where theism does so, the atheist position is that there is nothing supernatural about religious experience. Atheism denies that anything from human experience is sufficient for reasonably affirming the supernatural or God. There is no reason for atheism to deny experience, however—it is experience, not gods, that humanity cannot live without. How inspirations from religious experience motivate people to change their lives and change the world is evident to atheism, as it is to religion. If religious experience were entirely private, religion would not foster it, and theology would not appeal to religious experience if nothing could be conveyed about it. In truth, religious adherents can find ways to disclose what their religiosity is like. Atheism raises its skeptical objections when claims are made that God is experienced. This chapter’s justifications for that skepticism apply to any theistic views, whether the label of “God” is used or not.

This chapter discusses religious experience as religions view it. Then atheist and theist perspectives on religious experience are compared, focusing on implications for God’s reality as theism projects it. The difficulties attendant to the study of religious experience are considerable (Bush 2012), but atheism can discuss the topic if theology can. Nothing approaching scientism or reductive naturalism is presumed, although relevant scientific research has a small role. Religious experience cannot be dismissed, and atheism can appreciate why it is taken seriously. To endure over time, a religion must lend its interpretations to ensure that special experiences have religious significance for human followers. An actual deity’s involvement is not necessary.

## OPENNESS TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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The gods are all unknown to atheism, so it can entertain all claims about divine encounters equally, regardless of who has them. This atheist neutrality is not a disadvantage. Religions prejudice which

## KEY CONCEPTS

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*Abductive Arguments*

*Apophatic*

*Attributes of God*

*Deductive Arguments*

*Direct Experiential Theism (DET)/*

*Indirect Experiential Theism (INET)*

*Doxastic Practice*

*Experiential Mysticism (EM)*

*Inductive Arguments*

*Universal Consent Argument for God*

religious experiences are authentic and which are not. It would be odd for atheism to display such partiality. Atheism never presumes that only particular experiences about one or another deity are plausible enough to warrant its skepticism. The complaint that atheism cannot be impartial toward religious experience must be misdirected. It is characteristic of *religions*, not atheism, to lend special credence to one or another mode of religiosity.

Atheism does not deny that religious experience has long been prevalent and persuasive. Academic accounts of religion's origin and proliferation often include religious experience to explain how *Homo sapiens* developed its religious proclivities (Geertz 2013; Newberg 2017; Sidky 2017). Religions favor their own origin narratives, so supernatural sagas are preferred over natural accounts. Atheists have their own myth that science overcomes religion only with atheism's aid. However, fields such as cognitive science and cultural anthropology ably uphold their methodologies and theories about religion (Pyy-siäinen 2013; L. Martin and Wiebe 2017). The sciences rightly

set aside both atheism and theism while undertaking their independent investigations. Whether scientific approaches can help demystify or debunk religious claims about deities is a separate matter for philosophical and theological debate. Theology offers its antagonism or arbitration, either attacking science's competence to study religion, or integrating religious views with science. Atheism has little to do with either option. Science can defend itself against conservative theology without atheist cheerleading. As for speculative theology, finding ways to modify dogma to cohere with knowledge is commendable, but creative theologies head in different directions.

No clear and consistent position on religious experience comes from theology. Theologians disagree as vehemently with each other over religious experience as they do with whatever atheism says about it. Those controversies often sound sharper within a religion than between different religions. Whenever a theologian gripes that "atheism just won't get religious experience right," we can hear the frustration of yet another minority view, unable to speak for a denomination much less an entire religion. There is no religious consensus that atheism has been blindly ignoring. A theologian presumptively explaining to the world's religions how their religious experiences are essentially those of that theologian's own faith is exhibiting close-mindedness, not teaching atheism a lesson (e.g., Stace 1960, chap. 2; Davis 1989, 186–192). Atheism can instead take an open-eyed perspective over all modes of religious experience in whatever manner religions encourage them.

Openness to religious experience is not acquiescence. These experiences are not just a step or two away from justifying theism. The reality of an experience of God is never equivalent—logically, epistemically, or ontologically—to an experience of the reality of God. Because they are not equivalent, successfully encountering God is not guaranteed by anyone's experience about God. Four main reasons for that nonequivalence are pertinent.

First, devout conviction is one thing, while reasonable belief is another. One's certainty does not guarantee correctness. The proposition that "person P holds belief B about God as securely as any belief could be, and there is no God" does not state a contradiction or an unreasonable judgment. The way that an individual will not come to doubt an experience, a belief from an experience, or a belief about deity, can tell us something about human tenacity but nothing about godly accessibility. Put another way, the test of reasonableness cannot be whether a person will admit being unreasonable. Beliefs are usually acceptable until shown to be unreasonable, in principle. Yet this charitable treatment of belief does not mean that someone's conviction stays reasonable so long as the believer stubbornly rejects all reasonable doubts. And there are reasonable doubts to be directed at claims of encountering God. Religion understands that as well as atheism (Schellenberg 2007, chap. 8). Each religion can be pointedly skeptical, as skeptical as atheism, toward encounters with

deities of other faiths, although a religion exempts its encounters from doubt. Atheism thinks that it is even more reasonable to allow no exceptions.

Second, seeking a place where doubt cannot reach religious experience is a retreat into subjectivity. A place beyond the reach of reason and religion would be a private space, where one is an unimpeachable authority over one's experiences. One could say, "I hold my belief about my God as firmly as any belief could be, and my God is real." Belief grounded in experience is compelling, and faithfully expressing that belief sounds sensible to oneself since it is practically a tautology. While stating one's conviction in a deity, one would not admit its unreality. However, verbal tautologies cannot establish the independent reality of anything, so that leaves just a belief about subjective experience. That subjectivity is not compelling to either atheism or religion, but for different reasons. The subjectivity of religious experience does not compel an admission from atheism that an objectively real God is involved. As for religion, such subjectivity is inadequate, since theism seeks an objectively real God, not just human experiences. Subjectivity has its own kind of authority, but it cannot support theism.

Third, perceiving a deity could not be similar to perceiving the world, and religions have always said so. Still, associating religious experience with perception might lend the appearance of reasonableness. Richard Swinburne says, "it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that  $x$  is present, then probably  $x$  is present: what one seems to perceive is probably so" (1979, 254; consult Everitt 2004, chap. 8). How many deities have appeared to credulous people around the world? Theism defends the reality of God, not all of humanity's innumerable gods. Swinburne would object that taking almost all phenomena to be real is not what he means by reliable perception. As everyone knows, perception is often untrustworthy without consulting common sense, and the object of perception should be familiar to anyone with sound senses (M. Martin 1990, 174–177). Swinburne's sensible objection derails his application of his principle to theism. Where God's presence is concerned, surely special considerations pertain, so Swinburne's principle cannot assist theism.

Fourth, the means of perceiving a god could turn out to be not so reliable. Perceiving objects around us is easy for us. God would be regarded as just another worldly matter if perceiving God was not difficult for much of humanity. A perception of ordinary matters cannot be godly; an experience of godly matters cannot be ordinary. Theologians never tire of scolding atheists for taking God to be just another object. Yet Swinburne trusts the perception of objects and of God, and he threatens general skepticism about the world unless his principle holds for both. Skepticism about the external world does not follow from doubting alleged encounters with the supernatural world. Everyone shares observations of evident objects around us, using bodily senses that work in understood ways. If a perception of God bypasses bodily senses, how would extrasensory perception (an ability with a poor reputation) permit a godly encounter? Theism suggests that divine powers are at work, which begs the question. As for religions, they can only say that unpredictable gods reveal themselves to whomever they please.

(For criticism of William Alston's defense of the claim that a group can know that God has contacted them, see Topic 4 "Doxastic Foundations: Atheism.")

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES ARE COMMUNALLY OBJECTIVE

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In the absence of theological consensus on religious experience, atheism concurs with science and religion: religions are sustained where their practices enrich the experiences of committed participants (Boyer 2001, chap. 7; Bellah 2011, chap. 1; King 2017, chap. 1). Religions craft distinctive practices referring to extraordinary beings, objects, and situations (Atran 2004, chap. 10), but such matters are too heterogeneous to help define religion further. In any case, religions mainly focus on their adherents. If religiosity is not central to engaged experiences of devout practitioners, there is nowhere else for it to be.

The term "religious experience" came into use in the nineteenth century, but theologians do not quibble over whether Augustine or Martin Luther had religious experiences (Gavrilyuk and

Coakley 2011), even if Zen meditation or indigenous hallucinogens complicate their classifications. For anthropology, prehistoric humans were having religious experiences by many means, just as they had aesthetic experiences with their art though “aesthetics” is a modern term. Theology gets preoccupied with sorting out who has genuine religiosity, but those prejudgments distort empirical methodology and detract from the search for religion’s origins (Shook 2017). A generous conception of religious experience is more useful for the history of religion and the inquiries of science.

A religious experience is, at a generic minimum, an unusual experience of a person who ascribes religious significance to it. Any number of atypical experiences can be candidates for that religious interest. No list could be exhaustive. Nor would agreement converge on which experiences are essentially religious in import. It is possible for two people to have the same sort of uncommon experience but for only one of them to experience it religiously. It is a mistake to think otherwise. Supposing that some experience E, so long as one person takes E as religious, necessitates that all other people having E must have E in that same religious way, is a presumption that defies common sense and contradicts the way that religions operate (consult Taves 2011, chap. 1).

Commonsensibly, a person can grasp how an experience is quite unusual without simultaneously taking it to be religious in some sense or another, simply by attending to that experience’s peculiar manifestations. The appearance of that experience is not, by itself, sufficient to guarantee its significance as religious for each and every person who has it. Different people can have the same sort of odd experience without agreeing on what its religious import must be, or even agreeing that it has any religious significance. People can reflect back on an unusual experience to arrive at a realization of its religious significance, a significance not occurring to them originally. People can also assign one sort of religious significance to an odd experience at first, and then later change their minds to assign a different religious meaning, or perhaps conclude that it actually lacks any religious sense at all. These commonplace events would be impossible if an experience had to be religious in the same way for anyone and everyone who has it, no matter their situation or preparation.

Religions agree with common sense here. Each religion offers guidance about selected kinds of unusual experiences so they are understood with a specified religious significance. Suppose that everyone who has a certain unusual experience (call it S) already automatically grasps it as religious—prior to any religious instruction or indoctrination—in one specific way (call it R). (Obviously, if one religion could dominate the rest to impose its singular religious interpretation on everyone, this could be accomplished.) On this strange supposition, religions trying to instruct those people in the religious import of S would be ineffective. People would either already agree with that religion on R, so no instruction about S would be needed, or people would disagree, and religious instruction could not change how people intuitively take S to be R. Either way, religions would be unable to guide people toward preferred understandings of religious experiences. Yet this is not the world of devout adherents and potential converts that religions expect to operate in. No religion would accept a definition of religious experience that renders its religious guidance futile, including theistic religions. A monotheistic religion about a unique God revealing himself to humanity may expect that special *sui generis* religious experiences are unequivocally and irresistibly compelling to anyone. Yet that religion will also reserve the right to confirm or deny reports of encounters with its deity, checking for doctrinal consistency and offering its preferred interpretations. Religious conformity is a higher priority than experiential purity.

An unusual experience of a person, who regards it as having religious significance in some sense or another, is a religious experience. A propensity to religiously appreciate an unusual experience differs widely across humanity, and people may or may not be aware of their preparedness for assigning a particular religious significance. Socialization supplies much implicit religious preparation. A person native to Italy, Guatemala, or Alabama is more likely to report a religious encounter with Jesus or Mother Mary than with a Hindu deity. The reverse is more likely for a person who grew up in New Delhi or Kolkata. It is said that faith is needed to see. However, conviction is not always required. Prior socialization where religion has influence, perhaps paired with religious guidance after the experience, will suffice. Unusual experiences can happen to anyone, but *religious* experiences implicate a group. A religion can recognize that someone has had a religious experience without checking for church membership first, but churchly criteria are applied to that experience nonetheless.

Strictly speaking, no one has ever had a religious experience entirely on his own, even if one is alone when it occurs. No denial of individual creativity is intended. Novel interpretations of religious experiences are offered by people modifying their ideas of religiosity. No difficulties need to erupt over who had the “first” religious experience, either. Anthropology, psychology, and cognitive science can agree that humans (and probably some hominids before *Homo sapiens*, such as *Homo erectus*) have always been susceptible to an extremely wide variety of unusual experiences. Some of them were eventually selected for relevance to religious ideas, as those ideas congealed and crystallized into the cultural forerunners of what later became classed as religions. Religious experience is not the only source of inspiration for religious ideas, so no paradox arises from supposing that religion shaped religious experience. No argument over “What was the first religious experience like?” or “What was the first religious belief?” has to be resolved.

Individual religious experience could never have been the exclusive basis for religiosity. All sorts of important events in Paleolithic existence, from the joys and dangers of childbirth to the exhilarations and disasters of the hunt, and all of life’s stages and dramas right to the grave end, were material for creative interpretation and idealization. The early religious life was lived out there, in the wilds and shelters of nature, not within the inner theater of the mind. The peculiar significance of trances and dreams arose from the way that cherished real-world things, from elders and big game to mountaintops and full moons, could be encountered again by way of an inner journey through memory and imagination. The subjectively internal side to religious experience always followed the objectively external side, never the reverse. Even the blindest, most formless emptiness ascribed to some mystical states can acquire religious import because those states lack familiar worldly features.

Religious experience is basically objective in significance as well as in provenance. Only from that basis could religious people help others interpret their new experiences as religious. Entirely subjective experiences of two people can only be incomparable and noncommunicable. Religiosity’s orientation of objectivity is evident in the way that veteran practitioners of a religious tradition can assess whether another person had an authentic religious experience or not. Even with mysticism, no one is treated as a genuine mystic by staying mute.

The objective standards of a tradition’s practitioners supply the tests for conformity. As the novice joins the tradition, practices and ideas are provided to shape the resulting religious experience. A Christian can say, “Yes, that was your sense of guilty depravity, this is a welcome sign that grace may come.” A Hindu can say, “Yes, that was the dropping away of all external sense, this is an absorption into pure consciousness.” And so on. Religious communities provide that sense of meaningful objectivity to their religious experiences. No gods are made real by this social process. That communal objectivity inheres in the way that no individual religious person is responsible for assigning or sustaining the religious meaning and significance of experiences promoted by a religious community. Describing a religious person’s experiences within a religious community as simply subjective is untrue to what those experiences are like and how those experiences are possible.

## RESTRICTIONS ON CRITIQUES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Some observations about criticizing religious experience follow from the previous section’s points about objectivity. First, an attempt to dismiss all religious experience by simply classifying it as entirely subjective takes a mistaken view of religious experience. Second, an effort to discredit all religious experience on the grounds that any religious experience is just a subjective manifestation of a brain’s functioning, or a brain’s malfunctioning, will not succeed. Third, an argument trying to invalidate all religious experience on the grounds that (a) religious people do not assign similar religious significance to unusual experiences, or (b) people around the world do not assign the same religious significance to the same experiences, is a mistaken tactic for the reasons explained at the beginning of the previous section. Fourth, a tactic to dismiss all religious experience because religions prefer different kinds of religious experiences only misunderstands the bases to religious experiences. That diversity is not equivalent to irrelevance, since communal objectivity at most

should be expected, not universal convergence. Uniformity and convergence are appropriate criteria for evaluating whether a real God is present in religious experiences, or for judging the truth of propositions based on religious experiences (such as revelatory messages), but diversity should be expected in the experiential field of religious significance.

Atheism should accept these four observations on illegitimate criticisms of religious experience. So should any religious viewpoint—no religion can invalidate the religious experiences of another religion with those four tactics. One religion can deny the legitimacy of another religion's experiences for failing to conform to its own preferences, because legitimacy in this context just means "belonging to our religion." But no religion has grounds to assert that other religions fail to foster religious experiences. Communal objectivity is inherently hospitable to religious pluralism. If atheist critiques are based on isolating religious individuals or demanding experiential consensus, religions rightly complain. Fortunately, nothing about atheism requires it to make those mistakes, and theism should avoid them as well. The models for experiencing God offered by Swinburne and Alston, discussed above, are failures not because atheism presumed subjectivity or demanded unanimity, but instead because those models fail theism by collapsing into subjectivities and disunities.

The second observation made above, that brain science cannot confirm or deny beliefs from religious experience, requires expansion. Atheism cannot deny that religious experiences occur, but it would expect any experiential episodes to correlate with ongoing neurological processes. (Atheism does not entail reductive naturalism, but atheism endorses psychophysical parallelism to forbid "souls" from supernaturally violating the conservation of energy.) The way that unusual brain states occur when people report unusual experiences satisfies that scientific expectation. The atheist argument, "Religious experiences are just brain states so they are only subjective," is fallacious because of the ambiguity of "subjective." Does "subjective" mean "internal" or "mental"? Pointing to a localization for experience within the brain cannot rule out an objective God's involvement, since all experiences are paired with brain events. If atheism expects brain science to *prove* that religious experiences have *only* subjective content and significance, atheism misinterprets science and misunderstands the nature of religious experiences.

Theism must not misinterpret neuroscience either. The theist argument, "Religious experiences are at least brain states so they are objective," is also fallaciously ambiguous, in this case about "objective." Theism cannot render a real God's involvement plausible by pointing out that religious experiences are more than just mentally subjective. If theism expects brain science to agree that the simpler explanation for unnatural-seeming experiences is the presence of a deity, theism will be disappointed by neurological hypotheses that need no God. That disappointing result is delivered in the section below on the abductive position for direct experiential theism.

Neuroscience is revealing how cognitive processes lend religious experiences their intriguing features. Even near-death visions, feelings of a presence, and out-of-body experiences are yielding to neurological explanations (Blanke and Dieguez 2009; Sharpless and Doghramji 2015; Blackmore 2017). However, spontaneous religious experiences are not invalidated just because similar experiences can be induced through artificial stimulations, of a pharmaceutical or electrical sort, for example. (For skepticism about inducing religious experiences, see Andersen et al. 2014.) A determination that a religious experience of God is a brain malfunction or an experimental artifact has to presuppose, and does not prove, that no deity is involved. To argue, "No God is present while the subject reports experiencing God, so that experience is just odd brain activity," starts with a nonscientific premise and begs the question against theism (Murray 2009). To instead say, "While the subject reports experiencing God, a certain pattern of brain activity was occurring," is scientific but neutral about the subject's belief that God is encountered. Again, theism is neither supported nor refuted by the occurrence of neurological processes in the brain.

In summary, religious experiences are more than just an individual's neurology or mentality due to their communal significance, but that is not evidence for God, or against God. Since it is the unusual features of the religious experience that appear to indicate God's presence for theists, atheism must directly deal with those features, and later sections explore that engagement.

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES ORIENTED TOWARD GOD

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If atheism predefines what counts as “religious experience” with much specificity beyond this chapter’s generalities, it is fairly accused of ignorance or partiality by defenders of one religion or another. Fortunately, atheism can simply let theism speak for itself. What are theism’s objectives for religious experience? Among the many roles that it can play in a religious life, theism looks to religious experiences for opportunities to get acquainted with God. Atheism only has to dispute the theistic view that they access God.

When theism says that believers have experiences about God, atheism has no right to interpret them as really being about something else. Religions enjoy a privileged perspective, because they control both sides of religious experience. Within a religious community, what religious experiences are supposed to be like has been coordinated with what they are supposed to be about. Religions get into disagreements among each other over religious experiences on those grounds. A religion can claim that another religion’s followers have strange experiences lacking religious significance, or that their experiences are not oriented toward the right objective (they worship the wrong god, for example).

We have observed how religious experience is basically objective in significance and in provenance, and now we see that it is also objective in orientation. What makes a religious experience meaningful is independent from any individual (that is its objective significance); what provides content to a religious experience is not originally subjective to the experiencers (its objective provenance); and what a religious experience guides the experiencer toward is beyond just the communal context (its objective orientation). A religion generally expects religious experiences, among their manifold purposes, to direct the attention of followers toward something more than the religion and its practices. Specifically, theistic religions expect some religious experiences to be oriented toward a deity.

The threefold objectivity of significance, provenance, and orientation characterizes important religious experiences for religions, and atheism should concur. Arguments of a theological nature could produce actual or hypothetical exceptions to this general viewpoint. For example, a theological stance could say that some equally important religious experiences are significant only to the individuals having them, with content entirely aroused within the psyche’s privacy, and oriented just toward the mundane field of human activity. Atheism takes no position on possible exceptions, although it notes that emphasizing subjectivism looks like a theological retreat from advancing skepticism. In any case, atheism has to deal with triple-objective religious experiences so long as theism claims that they reveal the supernatural.

Atheism denies that religious experiences are actual encounters with a god or anything with godlike attributes, including apophatic attributes. An “attribute” is anything attributed to God, positively or negatively, and conceptually or nonconceptually. Nothing more by “attribute” is implied here, such as meanings from the term’s usage in the history of metaphysics (see Oppy 2014). If theology affirms that what it means by “God” or “the ultimate” or “the supreme” (etc.) is not an object, or an entity, or a being (etc.), such views do not evade atheism’s scrutiny, since atheism denies *anything* theism offers to distinguish itself from atheism. Theological views rendering “God” indistinguishable from nothingness do not distinguish theism from atheism, even if some mode of devout religiosity is still sustained. Atheism welcomes the good company of extreme negative theologies, radical atheologies, and the like (Shook 2018, chap. 3).

A theistic religion endorsing religious experiences about the supernatural typically ensures that the significance, provenance, and orientation factors all refer to it. For example, a theistic religion centered on a singularly supreme deity will provide (i) a consensus on features of religious experience appropriate for appreciating that deity; (ii) an account about contents of religious experience crediting that deity’s involvement; and (iii) an orientation of attention through religious experience toward the accessibility of that deity. By contrast, a retreat from full objectivity instead leaves a consensus on religious features to congeniality or chance, lets ideas about God arise from individual imagination, and allows adherents to focus on their private religiosity. Atheism need not reject that pseudotheism, as it effectively reduces deity and divinity down to human dimensions. Where

seekers are embracing warm emotions or shining values with enthusiasm, thinking about God on their familiar terms, and reveling in spirituality for its own sake, it is even easier for atheism to see how “God” is made for human appreciation. Let God be Love, Hope, Mercy, or Righteousness (or Justice, Truth, or Beauty, and so on). That identification sounds altogether natural from the nonreligious standpoint. The capacity of religion to imaginatively project human hopes and worthy ideals out into a supernatural realm is one of atheism’s explanations for god-belief.

Let us return to theisms that challenge atheism with objective accounts of religious experiences about God. They presume that “God” is meaningful enough to religious adherents. To give two illustrations, God is “our Father who art in heaven,” or God “is the source and ground of being and the wellspring of all consciousness, but also therefore the final cause of all creation, the end toward which all beings are moved, the power of infinite being that summons all things into existence from nothingness and into union with itself; and God manifests himself as such in the ecstasies of rational nature toward the absolute.” The first quotation comes from Jesus (Matthew 6:9) and the second is from David Bentley Hart (2013, 286). Concrete or abstract ideas of God can all be meaningful. Theism, not atheism, assigns attributes to God, so no atheist list of godly attributes could be drawn up. Anything attributed to God, no matter how abstract or apophatic, is an attribute of God where theism makes that attribution. Taking God to be the inexpressibly infinite ground of all being is hence no less an attribute in this basic sense than taking God to be male, or all-powerful. Atheism holds that no theological account of religious experience (however formulated) reasonably supports the involvement of a supernatural deity (however indicated).

Theology promotes two primary modes of theism based on religious experience oriented toward God: (a) it is God within that experience, and (b) something due to God is experienced. The first mode is supposed to access God directly, in one or more of God’s own essential attributes. Alternatively, if a religious experience is a sign of God or a display of God’s might, or a manifestation of God’s love or righteousness, those are classed with the second mode. Two theistic positions on experiencing God have to be considered separately by atheism:

Direct experiential theism (DET): A specifiable feature F of a religious experience (RE) is the presence of God.

Indirect experiential theism (INET): A specifiable feature F of a religious experience (RE) arises due to God.

This chapter does not explore how religions also gesture at what they suspect could be godly:

Experiential mysticism (EM): Nonspecifiable aspects of an indefinable experience indicate an encounter with unknowable mystery.

EM is not a third theistic view of RE—this mysticism does not claim to be about God but only mystery. Some theologians controversially presume that mysticism is inherently oriented toward God. When a theist claims that a mystical experience has feature(s) revealing God, then DET or INET is pursued.

No major challenge to atheism arises from EM. Atheism contradicts theism, not mystical experience or pure mysticism. Atheism grants the reality of mystery. Labeling utter mystery as “God” does not make theism reasonable (Shook 2018, 139–141). If the mysterious is entirely unknowable and/or ineffable, one cannot surmise that it is God, or even supernatural. The number of people able to agree to a list of mystical qualities is irrelevant, although theological interest in such lists is a lingering ghost of the universal consent argument for God (Zagzebski 2011). Any list at most points to a shared psychological sensitivity, not a list of confirmed godly attributes (Jones 2016). If “supreme reality” is supposed to be so indescribable, why would mysticism be upheld as a way to get acquainted with a deity? If the mystery is cognizable or distinctive enough to suspect God’s presence, then theism is pursuing DET or INET. Mysteries showing up in human experience present no problem for atheism. Scientism may find mystical experiences indigestible, but atheism does not in itself entail either scientism or reductive naturalism.

DET and INET require closer atheological examination. To cover broad argumentative ground, we shall analyze deductive, inductive, and abductive arguments for DET in the next section. The following section analyzes inductive and abductive arguments for INET. All REs in question are assumed to possess that triple-objective character, unless otherwise indicated.

## DIRECT EXPERIENTIAL THEISM

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For DET, there is a pairing of some RE features with some divine attributes in REs, indicating an identity in reality: feature F is simultaneously an attribute A of God. For example, if one's RE is relevantly "blissful" then God is bliss. God need not only be bliss, or blissful to the same extent, or essentially bliss, but God itself has to include bliss. As another example, if the relevant experiential feature is "timelessness" then God is timeless. To appreciate God so directly, no veil of consciousness or a representational medium can intervene: it is not just human experience that is experienced, but something of God is directly present. Subsequent reflection or communication about that encounter will resort to mediating signs and symbols, but DET never confuses memories, concepts, or thoughts about God with God's real presence. Theists focused on psychological intermediaries turn to INET instead.

Atheism should not argue that DET's kinds of alleged REs are just subjective, or conceptually confused, or that experiencers are incompetent witnesses. Nor should atheism argue that religion does not accurately recount what such REs are "really" like. These DET experiences are, phenomenally, precisely what a DET-type theism thinks they are—the privileged authority in this realm of RE is theism, not atheism. However, whether DET experiences can demonstrate that a theistic God is actually present is another matter. DET must not get overconfident on its home ground by saying, "God has attribute A, one's RE has F, and  $A = F$ , so one is present with God." Begging the question is unreasonable. Three kinds of arguments are available to DET, taking the form of deductive, inductive, and abductive inferences.

The first argument has this deductive form: "One's RE has F; F is an attribute A that God would have; so one's RE has A of God." This effectively concludes that one is present with God, without begging the question. It does assume that, if God is real, at least one of God's attributes must be present in some REs (the authentic REs). However, this argument does not limit Fs to only attributes of a God (other things could display those Fs too), and there is no preset limit to the number of gods displaying religiously significant Fs. Assuming that only one God is the aim of this theistic argument, atheism must ask, how could any theism know that some A is truly among the attributes of God? If theism says, "We define God as having A," that appeal to a verbal tautology cannot establish the reality of anything. Each theistic religion conceives of God in its own way, but no religion is entitled to define God for all humanity, as that presumption far exceeds the triple objectivity inherent to each religious community's interest in particular REs.

If there were successful arguments for God from grounds other than REs—such as ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments—theology would possess a list of legitimate godly attributes and then coordinate the objectivity of REs with that kind of deity. However, no arguments for God, individually or cumulatively, can make God reasonably plausible (Shook 2018). Besides, the point of DET is to demonstrate God through REs, without assuming that other ways to know God have succeeded.

## DIRECT EXPERIENTIAL THEISM'S INDUCTIVE POSITION

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We next turn to DET's inductive argument, in which DET does not try to predefine God's attributes but instead looks to the common features of REs had by many people. The basic form is, "Many REs have special Fs; those Fs would not be prevalent unless they are God's attributes; so some As of God are experienced." Atheism, along with religions, must first ask how theism could correctly identify the most common Fs across humanity. Theology understands how a search for

shared features of God's presence is a perilous quest. Theologians have an easier time identifying fairly common psychological qualities to REs, such as a loss of self-boundaries or a feeling of contentment, but DET needs attributes of God, not just human mental states. Discerning two or three near-universal qualities of mystical episodes cannot show that God is real.

The DET inductive argument proposes that a few features to REs could be attributes of God, if those features appear to enough people. Theologians depict this procedure as empirically trustworthy, but theists would be right to question the results. Among Christians having REs, if 30 percent have experienced one attribute of God found on a list of ten proposed attributes, must God have that essential attribute? We would rightly wonder if theism today would willingly agree with the results from such polling among Christians two hundred years ago, or five hundred years ago. All the same, theology suggests that several godly attributes can be discerned in this manner. Among those contemporary Christians having REs, suppose that ten attributes from a large list are recognized by at least 10 percent of those Christians—can it be reasonably concluded that the real God has all ten attributes?

Perhaps theism should consult other religions, too. If there were four vaguely worded attributes for God, each one recognized by at least 20 percent of people around the world having REs, is that God's reality reasonably confirmed? This method would lose credence among theologians when some of those attributes strayed from traditional views of the Judeo-Christian deity. Of course, if Christian theologians controlled the wording and meaning of a short list of key attributes garnering some global recognition, a recognizable God could come into view, but this procedure is no longer an unbiased inductive method. Ultimately, theists do not take DET's inductive argument seriously where quite different religions are concerned.

Atheism adds that RE aggregative cases must logically collapse from the heavy evidential burden placed on REs. Because theology has no list of godly attributes confirmed from other arguments for God, all candidates for godly attributes come from RE itself. But only authentic REs can count: to first attain that triple objectivity to REs, theology has to be selective about which features are relevant to godly attributes. Naturally, theology tries to select only those features that have a fair chance of matching genuine godly attributes. Typically, theologians select features/attributes that already seem sensible to their denominational audiences, or they speculate about which godly attributes seem plausible from their own theological reasonings. Inspirational theology and speculative theology are insufficient at this stage of the discussion, however. DET cannot appeal to RE for yielding the right features, while simultaneously asking those features to serve as confirming evidence for God's presence. Arbitrarily picking what counts as evidence E for X, and then claiming that X is confirmed by that E, is a fraudulent procedure and presents an insurmountable aggregate problem. There is no way out of this dead end, unless theology is prepared to confirm innumerable different gods (extreme polytheism) or theology locates gods entirely within human experiences (extreme subjectivism).

DET's interest in special RE features as godly attributes shifts theology in the direction of polytheism or subjectivism without much push from atheism. Popular theology has led the way, telling laypeople "God is inside you" or "find God within yourself." This counsel is not saying God's reality is entirely within humanity. But DET must be asked this question: Is God only what is appreciable through authentic RE, or does God inherently possess additional attributes never in REs? This question is not about accidental or incidental attributes—if knowledge that God is present in special REs is DET's objective, only important or essential attributes of God could count. Pointedly asking the question again, if DET thinks that God is more than everything present in human REs, how could DET know this, without appealing to other arguments for God? DET is forced toward an admission that it cannot prove that appreciable gods have any reality outside of human experience (so they no longer could be real gods).

DET could argue that some experienced attributes necessarily involve others, which need not also be present in REs. If two godly attributes are supposedly related but only one is ever experienced, DET would explain why the other one is never experienced. (Divine hiddenness arguments are not relevant here, since DET asserts that God is not so hidden.) DET could claim that the presence of a set of godly attributes necessarily implies a metaphysical unity behind them, which is

God's reality. Otherwise, a set of contingently related attributes leaves God in a fragmentary condition. However, DET asserts that God's important or essential attributes are really present within REs, not just God's secondary traits evident in relation to REs (that alternative is INET). If those essential attributes within REs lack a wholeness or a hang-togetherness, then DET cannot arbitrarily insert the needed unification. An aggregate does not automatically indicate a whole, without more metaphysical justifications than DET can provide.

Theology cannot evade these difficulties by adding claims about special RE features that somehow self-identify as genuine godly attributes. Expecting features of RE to display their self-evident and self-verifying status (consult Yandell 1994, chap. 8) is theology's wishful thinking that it bears no extra burden of justifying why some RE features are authentically evidential. Even if some sort of epistemological intuitionism or foundationalism has merit in other areas of knowledge, that hope is fruitless here. For DET, all REs in question are already utterly convincing to experiencers—people uncertain about God's presence do not present candidates for relevant REs in the first place. People perfectly certain about God's presence, by whatever feature(s) so deeply impressing them, have already appreciated those features as self-evident and self-verifying, even if they lack philosophical terminology to label them so. And all these people cannot all be entirely correct, unless humanity has encountered innumerable gods (the polytheism problem), or REs are hosting gods entirely within experience (the subjectivism problem). Theism must reject both destinations. Therefore, a DET theologian must also claim, "Many people have what they think are direct REs with seemingly self-verifying features, but most of them are mistaken about what their REs are like." This is simply another unjustified claim. Atheism—along with rival theologies and all religions—are right to require more justification, even if epistemic window dressing impresses the unwary.

## DIRECT EXPERIENTIAL THEISM'S ABDUCTIVE POSITION

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Finally, DET offers an abductive argument: "One's RE has feature F; F is otherworldly; if F = God's A then F is otherworldly, so God has A." Candidates for otherworldly features are at least as numerous as religious notions about gods, since "otherworldly" is left ambiguous by arguments of this kind. That ambiguity lends plausibility to this argument among theists, who insert their implicit understandings. DET theists accordingly point to all manner of features of REs, making them sound unlike anything of this world. (Keep in mind that the *absence* of something can be a feature of RE too.) The second and third premises should be challenged.

The second premise's plausibility requires theism's accurate identification of truly otherworldly features. How could any F be known to be otherworldly? A feature's reputation for otherworldliness is not enough, nor is its popularity with mysticism. Knowing that F is otherworldly requires a pre-established delimitation for what is worldly. DET would have to first know everything about the world, including humanity. Theology lacks such knowledge, so it imitates a philosophical inventory of the world, or borrows one from science. The first strategy is not enough to establish theism, since defining X as not worldly does not show that X is real. The second strategy picks out Fs in experience missing from science's inventories, and proposes that those Fs cannot be explained by this world, so they must be otherworldly. This strategy is contradictory. It assumes (wrongly) that science already completely understands the world, while presuming (hastily) that science will never fully understand human experience. Theology is just defining certain Fs in terms contrary to naturalistic terms to make them sound forever immune from worldly explanation. Atheism can admit that some Fs in REs currently appear to be somewhat inexplicable to today's science. Although some things seem "unworldly" for being unlike natural matters, theism cannot arbitrarily deem any of them to be otherworldly as essentially supernatural. Theism should not presume to know what all future science will comprehend and what it will not.

Something that seems unworldly to some people is not automatically otherworldly. Like all experiences, REs involve the nervous system, a matter that theists have emphasized (McNamara 2009). If theism were to deny that special Fs depend on the nervous system, or to presume that

awareness/experience is unnatural, that begs the question in favor of supernaturalism. Even if consciousness has not yet been naturalized enough to suit theists, as Charles Taliaferro (2009) complains, REs have not been liberated from brains. Unusual Fs in REs are probably due to modes of brain functioning different from those for mundane awareness. That difference does not mean that those Fs are not happening, or that experiencers are wrongly describing what those Fs are like. But it does mean that “F is truly otherworldly” cannot automatically follow from “F is evidently unworldly.” For example, a suspension of cognitive operations organizing inner and outer sensory information will generate an experience of unlimitedness, wholeness, and/or unification. Brain malfunctions or disorders need not be implicated; practitioners of meditation can enter such states. For more examples, consider how a rush of endorphins can arouse intense bliss or other powerful emotions, or the way that psychoactive substances can generate hallucinations and alterations to one’s sense of self.

Theism cannot rule out all natural explanations for REs in advance. No RE by itself allows one to know how neurology is or is not responsible (that is true for all of one’s experiences), and theism cannot forbid all future scientific explanations for REs. No matter the particular feature F, the experiencer cannot thereby know that something otherworldly is really present, and theism cannot pretend to know anything more about this F without begging the question. Again, it is not necessary for atheism to show that all REs are already scientifically explained. It is a fallacy to claim that theism is well-justified just because science currently lacks explanations for some features of REs.

Even if special features were truly otherworldly, rather than just unworldly in appearance, the third premise of the abductive argument is questionable, that “if F = God’s A then F is otherworldly.” Is the presence of God the only explanation, or the best explanation, for otherworldly encounters? Theism often proceeds as if discerning otherworldly matters is tantamount to confirming God. Exposing scientific naturalism as inadequate, even if that demonstration is possible, is not enough to conclude that God is real. Nonreductive naturalisms embrace consciousness, the self, and everything about experience (Shook 2011).

Setting aside capacious naturalisms, the aggregate problem still looms for DET. Detecting an intriguing array of otherworldly occurrences is not the same as discerning a unified or singular reality responsible for all of them. That logical gap opens wider for contrary or contradictory attributes. A possible God might appear as both personal and impersonal to humans, for example, but simpler explanations can omit God (contra Gellman 1997, 117–119). Abduction surely cannot license a swift inference to a singular being possessing or displaying contradictory attributes. Theology may try to circumvent the aggregate problem by resorting to apophatic features. However, negative attributes lack any obvious way to ensure that they bind together. How would “neither finite nor infinite,” “not-being,” and “beyond suffering” (readers may substitute any set of their own devising) manage to indicate by themselves how they (do not) characterize the same ultimate reality?

## INDIRECT EXPERIENTIAL THEISM

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Indirect experiential theism (INET) in general asserts that one or more specifiable features F of a religious experience (RE) arise due to God, while God’s reality does not inherently possess those Fs. The Fs with significance for INET are taken to be indications, markers, signs (and so on) tightly linking God with human experience. INET is a needed complement to DET. Taking REs to be much like ordinary perception, reliably delivering veridical beliefs in a realistic manner, leaves DET vulnerable to many objections. Besides, many types of REs, no less convincing in import, are unlike those emphasized by DET.

Although INET starts from experiences indirectly about God, their impressive features are quite immediate in those experiences themselves. The immediacy of meaning is not the same as the directness of presence. As immediate, they do not seem to be mediated, and no inferential process need be in conscious awareness. And there is no premise-conclusion reasoning of the sort familiar to theologians and philosophers. For the religious person convinced by his or her experience, such

as hearing God, what is heard is something immediately experienced as God's voice, not as a voice that may or may not be God's. A DET argument can also start from this experiential situation, if God's voice is taken for an essential attribute of God. However, what God sounds like to human ears strikes most theologians as less essential, and more relational to humans. Other relational situations supply further INET examples, such as being conscious of God's presence, sensing godly activity, or appreciating godliness in an object. Theological arguments that rely on explicit inferences concluding that divine mercy or a heavenly destination (etc.) can explain REs are not this chapter's focus. Arguments for God from revelation, for example, are refuted elsewhere (Shook 2018, 154–158).

INET takes inductive or abductive forms. INET's appeal to induction will not lead to reasonable success. Any theism claiming that special REs reveal its deity must be asked how it knows that those experiential episodes count as intermediary evidence. Should atheism take each religion's word for it, when most of the rest of the religious world will not? Furthermore, within a theistic religion, adherents dispute RE episodes among each other. There appears to be no guarantee that REs from the religious community are all about the same deity. A typical follower does not regard other adherents as reliable witnesses, unless they are internally preapproved by religious authorities or their accounts cohere with creedal standards.

Even among the most devout, some suspicion is understandable. The Old Testament reads, "And the children of Israel again did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served the Baalim, and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Sidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook Jehovah, and served him not" (Judges 10:6, American Standard Version). In the New Testament, Jesus warned his disciples about human fallibility: "Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or, Here; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:23–24, American Standard Version). Jesus was just one of many religious figures to warn against false prophets or unreal gods. If any duly convinced and consecrated devotee could be fooled by REs, according to the religion itself, atheism can only add its agreement. No one is infallible about REs. That is why religions impose creedal standards on all adherents to ensure conformity. An "infallible" pope justifies a doctrine with scripture, not his fresh REs of Jesus. A Christian offering deviant REs is starting a heretical sect or a different religion, not improving Christianity's knowledge of God.

Even if there were direct witnesses having REs involving Jesus, no one else's REs are infallible, as Jesus pointed out. That is why a religion promulgates an approved view of its god(s) and each religion's theological efforts prop up that view as the worthy standard for all other REs. But there are no good RE arguments for theism here. Christianity's belief that witnesses had direct REs of Jesus as a deity—not just observations of a man—is a claim that no DET argument can reasonably support, as earlier sections explained. As for other Christians, REs about Jesus (a voice, a vision, a message, etc.) are deemed authentic only if they are consistent with Christian standards. However, this is not a procedure permitting independent judgment about whether REs are evidence of anything. Religions already understand this—they do not appreciate adherents, or infidels, passing their own judgments on evidential REs. Theologies already understand this, too—they do not want their religions to be criticized by standards alien to internal communal standards. All theistic religions reliant on REs insulate themselves from critical scrutiny from any neutral standpoint on REs. Atheism is positioned at that neutral standpoint, along with unbiased historical, cultural, anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies of religion and religiosity.

Theism is unwilling to acknowledge atheism's neutrality on REs. However, theists place their religious thumb on the abductive scale so that their own deity gets weighed as the best explanation for features of REs, far better than "false" gods. Each religion's theology asserts that, unless its own creedal standard is granted legitimacy for evaluating REs as good evidence, external scrutiny is prejudiced against that religion. However, that sort of theological assertion defends a standard fitting a deity already taken for real, so theism again begs the question.

INET can avoid begging the question only by running into a dilemma: either all gods are supported by ample evidence from REs (extreme polytheism), or no real gods receive any evidential support from REs (atheism's neutral view). On the assumption that the point of INET is not to encourage extreme polytheism but only theism, INET collapses. INET tries to forestall that fate by insisting that there must be better and worse evidence for a deity among features of REs. But INET cannot justify any selection without either presuming an acquaintance with a specific deity (to pick relevant features) or appealing to a religion's traditions about authentic REs (to lend credibility to special features). Neither begging the question nor arbitrary preference leaves INET in a reasonable condition.

## SKEPTICISM ABOUT GODS

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Atheism does not dispute the compelling features of REs, or the devout ways that people describe what they are like. Religions guide those matters in the course of sustaining committed practitioners. Theistic religions claim that a deity is involved. Atheism skeptically denies that anything supernatural is really encountered in REs. The arguments of this chapter show why real experiences of God are never equivalent to experiences of a real God. Theism subverts itself by claiming that certainty and tenacity, at individual or group levels, is sufficient for justified belief, since those views either collapse into mere subjectivity or inflate into extreme polytheism. Theistic religions need REs to be objective only in significance, provenance, and orientation, so they can demarcate their own god(s) from unreal gods of other religions. Atheism's skepticism toward gods is no different in quality, just in quantity.

Although certain features of REs can strike people as quite unnatural, it is not possible to deduce a supernatural presence. Perhaps there are unnatural-seeming features common to many REs around the world. However, nothing demonstrably supernatural is evident in them, and no god accrues from selecting one or another set of them. Those choices are invariably parochial and pluralistic, just as religions must have them, and just as atheism would expect them to be.

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