

EPISTEMIC VIRTUE, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND BELIEF

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This paper defends the “epistemic virtuousness” at least of tentative religious conviction based on religious experience. The virtues of ‘openness’ and ‘intellectual humility’ are contrasted with the skeptic’s ‘closedness’ and ‘intellectual hubris.’

The framework of this paper is provided by “virtue epistemology”;¹ its subject is religious experience – or, more accurately, the range of suitable belief-related attitudes to which religious experience may give rise. Its conclusions occupy a kind of middle ground – roughly equidistant, I would judge, from the certitudes of the “true believer” and the “disinterested agnosticism” of the nonbeliever. For it endorses an attitude primarily of openness, of wishing to probe, even as we accept (in intellectual humility) our cognitive limitations regarding, the mysteries of religion.

I. Epistemic Virtue.

My initial position is that one is only criticizable (in the sense of blameworthy) for one’s doxastic states (beliefs or failures to believe) insofar as one is guilty of a certain type of epistemic vice, typified by such cases as wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, intellectual laziness, or sheer carelessness in thinking or reasoning. These vices are appropriate bases for personal criticism insofar as they embody two central features required for – or, at the very least, especially suited to -- such criticism. First, they are subject to one’s control – one’s fairly direct, albeit not complete control -- and in this regard are distinguishable from mere capacities like power of recall or visual acuity. A person can be asked or even commanded to keep an open mind, to pay close attention, not to jump to any hasty conclusions – but only to “try your best” regarding the use of such capacities again as good vision or memory. Second, such virtues bear an “internal connection” to the central value in relation to which one is held blameworthy (in failing to exemplify them) -- that is to say, all of these vices involve some shortfall in one’s efforts (regarding truth). Thus, closed-mindedness involves a failure to be “open” – but to what (if not the possibility of truth)? Likewise, “care” would be a specifically epistemic virtue insofar as it involves care in arriving at correct – i.e., true – beliefs.

Other, quite different accounts have conceived epistemic virtues as merely qualities or capacities apt to produce true beliefs (and not to produce false ones).ⁱⁱ This is not the place to raise issues with such theories, except to make this one point. Our own approach – focused on a concept of praise and blame sensitive virtues, and eschewing any particular regard for knowledge and knowledge-yielding justification – has at least this desirable feature. It can raise epistemic -- as opposed to merely practical -- concerns regarding religious experience and belief, without almost immediately bogging down in such stalemated issues as whether religious experiences can be “reliable” sources of knowledge – or whether, more generally, they may provide such “justification” as would be required for knowledge. Along these lines, we are able to mount an original defense of religious belief – without falling into ‘mere pragmatism’ (views merely that we are “better off” – say, happier or more apt to produce happiness for others -- with these convictions).

A second main feature of my working account of epistemic virtue should be mentioned here at the start, as it will emerge later as quite central to my argument. Assignments of epistemic virtue and vice – and epistemic praiseworthiness and blameworthiness -- must be regarded as context sensitive, and especially as sensitive to considerations of moral risk. Thus, take the case of Leopold Bloom of Ulysses fame, strolling about Dublin forming all sorts of beliefs: some spontaneous, some born of a bit of reflection, some quite ridiculous, some quite ordinary. Now, from an intuitive standpoint, I do not think that we want to judge Bloom as “blameworthy” – morally or in any other way – even for his more casually or carelessly formed beliefs. I explain this intuition by citing the obvious: there is no evident reason for Bloom to be more careful, more discerning, or more skeptical in his interior monologue. Even in his more ridiculous beliefs, Bloom is, I would add, not really all that different from the rest of us -- were our (“unedited”) stream of consciousness to be held up to public view.

If, then, Bloom should say to himself, “Why, that’s Paddy McGuire over there” -- only to hastily correct himself when the person comes into much fuller view – ordinarily we would not “blame” or otherwise chastise him for the first belief. But, of course, if Bloom is in the process of pointing out Paddy for a Sinn Fein sniper (who will shoot immediately on Bloom’s hand-signaled identification), everything changes. Even if Bloom feels quite certain, at the original distance, that this is Paddy, we will fault him for his too hasty certainty – all the more if it is attributable to his longstanding personal dislike of McGuire. In

this case, great care – and certainly a control of one’s personal biases -- *is* required, and Bloom has greatly fallen short in both regards.

The point, then, is that, broadly speaking, our estimations of whether some blameworthy shortfall of virtue has taken place will be relative to such act or acts as may be in prospect – and what their foreseeable consequences may be. This will lead to a second advantage of the approach taken here. Although our concern is with the epistemic and not the moral value of religious experience and belief, we are able to explore one very close link between narrowly epistemic and larger moral concerns in this regard. Even if one denies, as I would deny, that the knowledge-status of religious beliefs depends on what acts one may be contemplating based thereupon, it must be plausible, or very much more plausible, to hold that how much care, open-mindedness and other such virtues as may be required in forming (or continuing to hold) a given belief – that this will depend on such essentially practical considerations as the likely moral consequences of one’s being in error.ⁱⁱⁱ

This has a second liberating effect. It allows a fairly liberal standard for virtue and praiseworthiness in the case of religious belief – roughly, as long as no morally risky acts are going to be predicated on such beliefs. It offers, one could even say, a measure of doxastic freedom – but at the expense of risky, religiously based acts. Just as Bloom is not held to a very high standard of virtue until such point as serious negative consequences may ensue if he is wrong, the “model believer” contemplated here – open, humble and possessed of other relevant virtues – has considerable latitude, roughly, until such point as what she contemplates could be morally dangerous.

II. Religious Experience

We turn now to “religious experience,” a dauntingly wide, ill-defined, and variously approached territory. Here I will follow William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience^{iv} in not attempting to define so much as to focus matters. James himself ‘defines’ not religious experience, but religion itself, as

the feelings, acts and individual experiences of individual men so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine (39).

This, however, serves James as a characterization mainly of religious experience, for he takes such experiences to represent the core of what is truly valuable, distinctive, and intellectually interesting in this

subject. For my part, without rejecting this or any other characterization, I shall want to focus things a bit more narrowly. In particular, I want to begin with the following distinction. There may be occasions when the depth of one's religious response is entirely intelligible, given the apparently miraculous nature of what one has just witnessed. In other cases, however, an individual may have an experience in the context of religious worship, where the very depth and intensity of the experience is itself an important part of what leads one – of course the ostensible object of these experiences would be another -- to make an affirmation of its supernatural character.^v

This is not an experience of the miraculous – though one might sometimes want to describe such a thing as a “miraculous experience.” More particularly, I am interested in these two other, likely aspects of such experiences:

First, such features of them as are “numinous” (to use the famous appellation of Rudolph Otto^{vi}) -- as are apt to arouse such strong feelings as awe, wonder, and dread, what Otto picturesquely describes as the experience of the “mysterium tremendum.”

Second, and along the same lines, I am interested in such aspects of these experiences as may give rise to deep feelings of mystery – not of definite answers so much as haunting questions. Such experiences will not strike one as “revelatory” but will, at most, leave one with an impression of having “seen through a glass darkly.” They will occasion, even demand, further reflection – not because they reveal answers, but because of the way in which they do not. If they do not reveal, they suggest; if they do not deliver anything, they promise much.

III. The virtue of ‘openness’ – and a vice of skepticism

“The mystic is, in short, invulnerable, and must be left, whether we relish it or not, in undisturbed enjoyment of his creed . . . But I now proceed to add that mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto.” (Wm. James, Varieties, 415)

What is an epistemically responsible attitude not to mystical experiences but to the kind of more ordinary experiences characterized in the previous section?^{vii} Even here, I want to say that something *like* James' distinction is helpful -- but as applied to the subject herself. When such religious experiences are going on, it is hard to speak of “epistemic virtue” at all, for to expect the subject to adopt a stance, even of the mildest scrutiny – lest she not affirm something that is not true -- would be to interfere greatly with the experience (as a specifically religious one). While they are continuing, her experiences are, as James would say,

“authoritative” for her. This is not to say that, during such episodes, the mind is somehow powerless to exert special efforts of “epistemic scrutiny” for that is certainly not so. Again, the point would rather be that inasmuch as such states are genuinely to be experienced, one ought not to do anything whose effect would be greatly interfering with their natural and normal character.

Nor can the issue be one of our being required to enter into such experiences for “pure” (affectively neutral, merely truth-investigating) motives, as this, too, could but have a very limiting, not to say, injurious, effect on these experiences (again, as specifically religious ones).^{viii} Some experiences need to be entered into – really can only be satisfactorily appreciated as experiences – if they are entered into for motives specific to them, and not ones merely of curiosity or investigative intent. Certainly, in the case of love, one who tried to fall in love, but mainly just to see “what the experience was like” would likely fail – or if he did succeed, would certainly have distorted the experience of love (as long as he maintained this observer’s stance). Thus, in the end, a primary commitment to the observer’s role generates a paradox: we are at best distorting the very thing a commitment to truth would have us accurately represent.

The most important issue, then, must surely concern what attitudes an epistemically virtuous individual would take in reference to such experiences when she is neither in nor about to enter into them – in particular, when she is reflecting (in a calm moment) about them. Should one, for instance, have a positive, encouraging attitude, perhaps doing such things and encouraging such states of mind as might support or reinforce the effects of their previous occurrence (or even add to the likelihood of their occurrence in the future); or should one take a more cautious, even a suspicious or hostile, attitude?

My first suggestion would be this. A measure of openness to such experiences surely would be epistemically virtuous; a corresponding “closed-mindedness” would be a vice. Obviously, openness is (open-mindedness) is itself an epistemic virtue (and closed-mindedness is, in its general tendency a vice). Beyond that, openness in this specific case promises, at the very least, to reveal aspects of ourselves – and of the nature of our own responses in an environment in which deep mysteries, and at least vague, incomplete answers to these mysteries may be experienced. Even if we remain noncommittal as to the ultimate truth of these “answers,” a measure of openness to them – so long as it is not carried to the point of interfering with other, definite good things -- would surely be appropriate. Openness, after all, requires only the promise – and not necessarily the proof – of epistemic rewards.

In this regard, a skeptic who refused to put himself in situations in which he was apt to have such experiences would seem to be just as “closed-minded” as a believer who refused to consider skeptical arguments or anything apt to disturb her faith. Neither would appear to be exactly virtuous, from the standpoint of truth and inquiry. Our skeptic may complain that, unlike the other, he is open to every argument and position – but this would seem very much an unduly “intellectualist” or “anti-experiential” attitude. What would we say, correspondingly, of one who disdained all sexual activity but was steadfastly “open” to arguments, pro and con, about the value of this? (Perhaps there is a moral or prudential case to be made for his stance, but there is not much to be said for it epistemically) We do know that some things have to be experienced, in order to assess their true value.^{ix}

My charge against the skeptic, then, amounts to this: “openness” to the supernatural (or the possibility thereof) involves more than openness to arguments.^x To this, the skeptic may retort that in being open to all such arguments, one is being open to all such evidence that religious experiences may yield. But I can think of two fairly telling replies to this:

First, any argument will at best propositionally encode certain aspects of an experience. If the argument is “pro-religious faith,” it will encode such aspects as would appear to favor that conclusion. But if “one picture is worth a thousand words,” one experience must be many times richer (“informationally” and not just “experientially” -- than its propositional description). Thus, any claim that one is considering via arguments, “all such evidence that such experiences may yield” will be mistaken. In failing to experience the full richness of “the real thing,” one is only taking cognizance of a very impoverished version of this richness.

Second, even such talk of “evidence” begs more fundamental questions concerning the nature of the decision process involved in partaking of relevant experiences. Not every rational decision procedure, we must remind ourselves, is one of argument and the consideration of arguments. In certain quite important areas of life, decision is more a matter of having relevant experiences, reflecting on those experiences (including considering relevant arguments), and then, more passively, just seeing what choice “sits best with one.” A decision process may certainly include the appraisal of relevant arguments – without reducible to mere consideration of arguments.

To expand on this last idea, certainly some choices (e.g., among rival scientific hypotheses) may consist in mere argument appraisals, but others -- say, the choice of a mate --- will not. Some choices -- most notably, this last one -- are such that one must quite literally "live with" the results. Such a choice may happen to coincide with the conclusion of an argument, but there is no guarantee that this happy result will obtain. If the conclusion of an argument is something one cannot seem to live with, of course one possibility is to adjust one's choice to that conclusion. But this cannot be the right solution to any and all such cases -- especially not when one has considered and given some weight to the various arguments, and still finds oneself fundamentally dissatisfied. In the case of choosing a mate, the point is of course clear: even if a seemingly irrefutable argument should select A, if one still finds oneself fundamentally resisting this choice in favor of B, at some point it becomes, I would think, a mere irrational prejudice in favor of "arguments" not to resist.^{xi}

IV. Intellectual humility

My next point would concern such attitudes as wonder and awe -- characteristic of the "numinous" experience alluded to earlier. These are notable for my project partly because they involve experiences likely to prompt belief in the non-argumentative manner just discussed. That is, such experiences might easily lead one to a state of belief -- might easily lead an embrace of the supernatural as something that ultimately "sits well" with one (or "sits better" with one than a lack of such embrace) -- but without necessarily providing an argument to that effect.^{xii}

Yet, there is another way in which "the numinous" is important in this connection. Feelings of awe, wonder, and the like are salutary in helping to induce a certain type of "intellectual humility" (alluded to earlier). Now, humility in matters religious has traditionally, and rightly, been understood mainly as a moral virtue. Partly as a result of this, intellectual humility, unfortunately, has been neglected in the process.^{xiii} Such humility would involve, mainly, I suggest, a profound sense of the limited powers of what one knows -- and can know from one's rather small position relative to the immensity and complexity of the physical universe -- and to what might involve an even greater disparity: between the limitations of one's own spiritual powers and the possible immensity of the spiritual universe.

Thus, such humility is deeply connected to experiences of the "mysterium tremendum" for these may easily impress such disparities on one -- without any paradoxical claim that one "knows" or adequately

comprehends their dimensions. Notice, too, that such humility has a further implication in the present connection. The skeptic is pleased to reflect on our limited powers of knowing, and the relative unlikelihood that the world as it is will happen to coincide with the world as we take it to be. Yet the skeptic's "humility" bears the seeds of a kind of intellectual hubris. For the skeptic takes certain considerations as exempting him from such experiences and, more generally, such "practices" by which persons have sought God. That "there may be more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy" can be, in its opposition to the skeptical philosopher, a legitimate expression of intellectual humility. The opposed attitude – that there are no such things, or even, that I refuse to engage in such experiences as might alter my perspective on this possibility -- may be correspondingly taken as an expression of intellectual arrogance.

V. Belief

Seen in this light, then, a patient, continuing interest in religious experiences, a wish to probe them, an openness to, and an intellectual humility regarding, the distinctive experiences of the "numinous" may reasonably be taken as intellectually virtuous. But now we should focus more narrowly on what is surely the most important of cognitive attitudes: belief (including degrees thereof)? What does epistemic responsibility call for here?

Certainly, one would not want to claim here that such experiences, even if they induce belief in the supernatural during their occurrence, should be reflectively comprehended with full belief in their supernatural aspects. Just because one has had an experience of "Jesus giving one assurance," this does not mean that one should be reflectively convinced that this is exactly what has happened. For that would likely evince a rather hasty, precipitate – and one could even say, an intellectually impatient attitude toward the objects of religious belief. It would defeat, or go completely against the grain of, the kind of exploratory, open attitude we have been extolling – for it would be as though one already "had the answer" or an important part of the answer. Here I might again quote William James, as his attitude is precisely the one I wish to endorse:

I reject this dogmatic ideal not out of perverse delight in intellectual instability. I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather do I fear to lose truth by this

pretension to possess it already wholly. That we can gain more of it by moving in the right direction, I believe as much as any one. . . . (Varieties, 327)

My ‘Jamesian’ ideal learner, then, might be described as a kind of “wise beginner” (just the opposite of the “wise fool” of sophomoric tendencies). She does not and, as learner, will not give full assent to a story, of which he has, in all likelihood, experienced, only a part. Too much evidently remains to be experienced for her to reach any very hard and fast conclusions concerning the exact nature of what she has experienced to date. She is “wise” inasmuch as one is approaching this as a reflective adult, not a mere child. Yet she does preserve something of the kind of “childlike wonder” – characteristic even of such scientific minds as Albert Einstein and Richard Feynman.^{xiv} If our wise beginner moves forward, it is with extreme caution; if she is learning, she is more impressed with how much she has not learned or even begun to understand.

In addition, notice that our wise beginner, insofar as she is epistemically virtuous, will contemplate doing nothing of a morally risky nature – say, “persecuting heretics” or even voting for a “born again” candidate whose political agenda seems morally questionable. For one thing, she is far too insecure in her incipient convictions to undertake acts that would qualify as morally bad – should those convictions prove false. Also, since the acts she contemplates, based on whatever tentative convictions she may possess – since these acts are morally very safe, recall that the appropriate standards of epistemic virtue for the beliefs underlying such acts will be relatively modest, and ones she will easily have met. If she thinks that God has revealed himself in an experience of hers, she may quite safely pray that this will happen again. Obviously, such an act (her prayer) – no matter what the status of its underlying belief – can do little or no harm. Insofar, then, as this “safety first” policy remains in effect, a kind of limited doxastic freedom will obtain. One’s initial openness may well lead to some level of perhaps quite tentative commitment. Even if such initial credence is not actively challenged, or scrutinized, in times of reflection - - it is not clear that such challenge or scrutiny is particularly called for. Certainly the kind of intense critical examination as might cause one to lose all conviction would not be – as long as merely safe acts are contemplated.

But, of course, this is not to say at all that full conviction is called for here – or that full conviction would be “virtuous.” For full conviction involves a double difficulty in this connection:

(i) Even if one contemplates no particular acts, the mere fact of one's being convinced – I think we can say, based in part on the lessons of history – the mere fact of one's being quite certain of a religious belief, this carries serious moral risks. For even if no particular act is contemplated, situations in which one might act to the disadvantage of those not sharing one's beliefs, these could well arise.

(ii) At the same time, given the rather limited experiences available to our “wise beginner,” full conviction is certainly apt to have been purchased by epistemically unvirtuous means – e.g., focusing closed-mindedly only on reasons one has to take one's experiences as “veridical” or as confirming some particular religion, deliberately shunning the company of those who might question one's convictions, and so forth.

It is important to recognize, then, that as one's degree of certainty increases, two separate factors conspire, or are apt to have conspired, to work against the virtue of one's belief state. Just as a higher level of virtue would be required of one, the likelihood is that one is exhibiting actually exhibiting a lower and not a higher level. By the same token, our wise beginner's more hesitant, probing, openness to religious mystery – this would be doubly endorsed: as an expression of relatively high virtue in proportion to moral risk.

VI. Faith

We have thus far taken care not to let our “beginner” take on too much for herself, either in terms of what he believes or does. But, especially on the side of belief, this may leave her, and the present theory, open to the following objection, likely to emanate from the defender of faith and full conviction:

Religious experience can and should give rise to religious belief. But this can only happen via faith. Without faith, there is no genuinely progressive element to lead us deeper, further into the mysteries of religion and religious experience. Without faith, we remain ‘beginners’ (as you say), we can continue to probe the edges; but we are not making intellectual or emotional progress. There is, as one might put it, a “dialectic” between experience and faith: experience helps to induce faith; but without faith itself, experience remains merely tentative and therefore, even as experience, much less profound that it would otherwise be. You, however, seem willing to endorse only the first element of this dialectic; you

allow experience to induce perhaps some small element of faith; but you do not allow a separate act of faith to induce and enrich experience.

How, then, will our “wise beginner” ever advance, ever become more than a mere beginner? Here I begin by throwing the question back to my fideistic critic. How, relative to our discussion of epistemically virtuous and unvirtuous ways of proceeding, does this critic want her (the wise beginner) to proceed?

We must suppose, first off, that this objector is not suggesting that our beginner adopt unvirtuous strategies, e.g., ignoring arguments against her incipient convictions, and so forth. For any such suggestion would have but, as Russell used to say, “the advantages of theft over honest toil.”

Nor can we suppose that the suggestion is that she should, as it were, “become convinced by a sheer act of will.” Obviously, it is hardly clear that this is possible – and even if it were, hardly clear that this would express anything like a virtuous tendency.

Still, there is the possibility that our wise beginner might simply affirm – and be called upon by our objector to affirm -- regularly what she only partly believes. This, in contrast to the preceding, seems quite a reasonable suggestion, as such affirmation, in the first place, would be subject to one’s control, and would not have to be epistemically unvirtuous at all. Affirming, after all, is an act – as much subject to one’s control as any other act. Moreover, such affirmation seemingly could be offered by our beginner in full cognizance of the limitations of her experiences. In general, notice, one may quite easily affirm – in the face of evidentiary difficulties – something of which one might only have become fully convinced by means of wishful thinking or other epistemic vices. I can tell myself “I am going to jump that wall” – temporarily blocking out, but not unvirtuously, the evidence against this. By contrast, the corresponding stable conviction (that I will jump that wall) might need to be purchased by wishful thinking or other epistemic vices.^{xv}

Here, however, a difficulty would seem to arise. Even if we allow that one may virtuously affirm a proposition for such limited, short-term purposes as jumping a fence, may one virtuously do this in order to alter, to deepen, one’s beliefs? My answer is this. Up to a point, it is not unvirtuous to strengthen such convictions by affirmation – not, at least, when one is simply attempting to resist the natural erosion of conviction, following the dying of such experiences as may have excited it. Mere passage of time will, as a

matter of plain fact, tend to diminish convictions born of unusual experiences. But mere passage of time does not, as such, render such convictions any more, or any less, solidly founded. Now, to be sure, it is unvirtuous to suppress the natural consequences of time – when these give rise to questioning reflections; that, however, is not what we are endorsing. The idea is merely that the encroachments of time may, to a degree, be virtuously resisted – and that affirmation can help to play a role in this regard.

Affirmation, then, may surely be viewed as an epistemically virtuous, or certainly not unvirtuous, response to time and its effects. But there is another highly relevant consideration here, which is the contextuality of assessments of epistemic virtue. We have already indicated that, as one's religious convictions might approach complete certainty, two factors – ones of moral risk and of virtue – conspire to make one's epistemic position more perilous. As we have also indicated, however, at the lower ranges of the scale of conviction, one gets a much freer rein from a virtue standpoint – and this would certainly apply to the case at hand (that of affirmation). So long as our wise beginner avoids morally risky acts (based on her incipient convictions), there is no reason why, up to a point, she cannot effect increases in her degree of conviction – within safe virtue parameters. If it is still wrong (unvirtuous) for her to rigorously suppress all doubts and considerations apt to lead her to doubt, it is hardly clear that the relative absence of such doubts and doubting reflections, and the gentle encouragement of belief – that this must be counted unvirtuous, at least at this stage of conviction.

In short, then, some progress, clearly, will be possible for our beginner. To be sure, this progress will be slow – and will predictably become much slower as her degree of conviction increases. (Something like the doxastic equivalent of “diminishing returns” will apply.) But, at the end of the day, may it not be that a lack of rapid progress is simply part of the price of maintaining one's virtue -- in matters of faith and belief (as much as in morals)? Presumably, there is no available, epistemically virtuous “short cut” to full religious conviction.

VII. Against the skeptic -- again

On our other flank, however, the skeptic has been lying in wait. At this point, he may simply wish to maintain that if religious experience cannot yield, or be shown to yield, epistemic justification, and thus knowledge -- it is of no real epistemic value and thus, such “virtues” as it may embody must be merely practical and not epistemic after all.

To this implicit dilemma – either knowledge-yielding or not epistemically relevant at all – I reply as follows. Even a skeptic – no, especially a skeptic – must be sensitive to the point that if the beliefs on which we presently base our actions should prove false or epistemically unjustified, we still need to be able to allow that we have been entitled (epistemically) to act on them -- or some of them, at any rate. In other words, we still need to be able to allow that these beliefs (or some of them) possessed sufficient *epistemic* credentials of some sort for our acts to be “justified” – to have whatever sort of moral credential they would not possess in the absence of this epistemic credential. My solution to this is to treat virtue as, in effect, “practically justifying” acts (based on a given set of beliefs.) The skeptic, quite obviously, owes us an account of his own.

The skeptic may now deploy this new line of argument. “I will allow, what is a mere tautology, that when acting on religious belief will do no harm, there is nothing ethically wrong with acting on such beliefs – but this fails to distinguish them from plainly just silly beliefs (e.g., in the “tooth fairy”) – as long as they, too, are practically harmless.”

The answer, or short answer, to this difficulty would be to contrast the rootedness of religious belief in experience with the lack of that type of rootedness of “silly” or “arbitrary” beliefs (however harmless). The “tooth fairy” will, no doubt, have had her (or his) day, and those with “faith” in this being will perhaps have had associated experiences – but, ultimately, it will be the very limited character of these in the life of children that marks this as “silly” --- and not truly, or very deeply, religious in character.

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Notes

ⁱ For a fuller statement of my views on this matter, see my Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); and “An Internalist Theory of Epistemic Virtue,” in Guy Axtell, ed., Knowledge, Belief, and Character (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

ⁱⁱ I refer here, most prominently, to the views of Alvin Goldman, e.g., in such classic papers as “What is Reliable Belief?” in George Pappas, ed. Justification and Knowledge (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1979) and Ernest Sosa’s virtue-oriented reliabilism, e.g., in his classic, Knowledge in Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991). The source of Goldman’s own virtue epistemology is “Epistemic Folkways and

Scientific Epistemology,” in Liaisons: Philosophy Meets the Social Sciences (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992)

ⁱⁱⁱ In his famous “Ethics of Belief,” essay, William Clifford writes: ‘If a belief is not realized immediately in open deeds, it is stored for guidance of the future. . . . No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us for more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts which may some day explode into action and leave its stamp on our character forever.’ This is reprinted (e.g.) in Louis Pojman, ed. The Theory of Knowledge (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1993), p. 502). However, even if we suppose all of Clifford’s contentions here to be true, this hardly shows that we must, regardless of what acts we are able to foresee, and for such purely general reasons as Clifford proposes, pay special regard to each and every belief that we may happen to form, lest we believe wrongly. Such a policy, besides being impossible to carry out, would in many cases be counter-productive. As Bloom meditates on some triviality, a trolley may run over his foot.

^{iv} Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Barnes and Nobel, 2004), reprint of the 1902 version; page references to the former volume are inserted parenthetically.

^v William Hasker, “The Epistemic Value of Religious Experience,” in Thomas Senor, ed., The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faiths: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1995), makes a helpful distinction between two types of epistemological appeal to “religious experience”: construing it as a perception of religious objects; and construing it as something whose best explanation appeals to these same objects. In a sense, my own view inclines to the latter, but with this important reservation: I am not interested in this as a type of “argument from experience” so much as a description of what I will eventually defend as a “virtuous tendency” (to believe).

^{vi} The Idea of the Holy, John Harvey tr. (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1950).

^{vii} This, by the way, is not to suggest that only experiences describable as broadly ‘mystical’ or ‘numinous’ might qualify as religious. For quite an account of the range of this topic, see, for instance, Ann Taves, Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1999).

^{viii} Here perhaps “truth-seeking” should be distinguished from “investigative.” The latter would be disruptive of religious experience, the former not. Linda Zagzebski has made a relevant distinction, here, between merely wishing to have a certain belief (what would be irresponsible, unvirtuous) and wishing that a certain thing be true (what need not be irresponsible at all). If I call to find out the result of a game on which I have bet my life savings, presumably I seek to know the true result – yet though I am hardly neutral on this outcome. I am not “merely investigating” but that does not make my conduct intellectually irresponsible. See her discussion in “Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth,” in Zagzebski and M. DePaul, eds., Intellectual Virtue (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003).

^{ix} To be sure, a celibate who, relying on the testimony of others, granted a certain “experiential value” to sexual things may not be “closed-minded” at all, for there is nothing wrong, in such matters, with relying on the testimony of others – so long as one is not using the absence of personal experiences to reach a conclusion that seems to depend specifically on that absence.

^x I suppose here, purely for the sake of argument, that such contemporary defenders of arguments from experience – see (e.g.) William Alston, Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1991); Carolyn Franks Davis, The Evidentiary Force of Religious Experience (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1989); Keith Yandell, The Epistemology of Religious Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993); and Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1979) – have not made their case. I hold no brief against these authors, except to insist, for reasons I develop here, that the resources of experiential appeals are not limited to arguments.

^{xi} Of course, some might say that at some point one’s preference becomes a kind of argument for itself. The fact that one is fundamentally dissatisfied with all other conclusions becomes itself an argument favoring a certain choice. That, however, basically concedes the point I wish to make: that one’s preference must sometimes hold sway – at least where it is back by suitable experiences.

^{xii} This is not to say that there could not be such an argument. See in this regard Yandell, The Epistemology of Religious Experience.

^{xiii} Even such a thorough theistic philosopher as Robert C. Roberts offers an account of intellectual humility pitched entirely to rather mundane concerns like one’s absence of excessive desires for professional status,

and so forth. See Roberts and W. Jay Wood, "Humility and Intellectual Goods," in L. Zagzebski and M. DePaul, eds., Intellectual Virtue.

^{xiv} An interesting account of a graduate student's encounter with Feynman still child-like in old age is Leonard Mldinow's Feynman's Rainbow: A Search for Beauty in Physics and in Life (New York: Warner Books, 2003). Another relevant subject, both here and regarding our earlier discussion of "humility" is G.E. Moore, whose child-like delight and interest in the objections of even the most inexperienced students to his most carefully drawn philosophical positions was legendary. Roberts and Wood, op. cit., p. 262, discuss Moore's humility.

^{xv} Here it could be objected that even such common practices are "telling yourself you can do it" involve epistemic vice insofar as they temporarily, at least, focus only on the reasons on one side. But this, I think, loses sight of the larger point, which is that our notion of epistemic virtue must ultimately tie in with our intuitions governing morality and the long terms prospects of having true beliefs about the world. At the point that such first-person encouragement involves a degree of conviction that could lead one to take morally risky acts, then, I think, we must be concerned about its epistemic virtuousness or lack thereof. Likewise, at the point at which such affirmations threaten one's longer terms possession of true beliefs, we must be concerned. But neither of these is, in point of fact, threatened by such affirmations as "I will jump that wall" – especially when a tiger pursues. One might compare, in this connection, L.J. Cohen's distinction between "acceptance" and belief, properly so-called, "Belief and Acceptance," Mind 98 (1989), p. 368. My notion of "affirmation" would be equivalent, I suppose, to a kind of "act of acceptance," in Cohen's terms.