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## **A Plea for the Theist in the Street: The Significance of Liberalism in the Epistemology of Religious Experience**

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### **Abstract:**

It can be easy to assume that since the ‘theist in the street’ is unaware of any of the traditional arguments for theism he or she is not in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists. I argue that that is false if we accept with William Alston (1991) that ‘manifestation beliefs’ can enjoy rational support on the basis of suitable religious experiences. I make my case by defending the viability of a ‘Moorean’-style proof for theism—a proof for the existence of God that parallels in structure G.E. Moore’s famous proof for the existence of the external world. I argue that this shows that even if the theist in the street has nothing to offer for helping to convince the religious sceptic, this needn’t entail that she cannot offer independent rational support in defense of her theistic belief.

### I. Introduction

It is easy to suppose that the ‘theist in the street’ is unable to offer independent rational support in defense of their theistic belief; and so cannot, on that account, be in possession of *rationally grounded* knowledge that God exists.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is different for the theist who is in possession of some dialectically effective argument—like one of the traditional theistic arguments—for thinking that God exists. But the theist in street is stipulated to be unfamiliar with any such argument. Of course the assumption here is that without good arguments the theist in the street has nothing to appeal to for offering independent rational support for believing that God exists. Here is Duncan Pritchard, for example, giving expression to this sentiment:

“For notice that it is hard to see what specifically rational support is available to the [theist in the street] to justify the foundational status of [their] belief. In particular, the kind of rational support that would immediately leap to mind—e.g., personal religious experience, testimony from peers in one’s religious community, the evidence of scripture, and so on—would not be apt to the task since *it already presupposes that one’s belief in God’s existence is rationally held.*” (2012, p. 145; emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Of course reformed epistemologists will suggest that this is nothing to worry about. For even if theistic belief is not ordinarily rationally grounded in the operative sense, it may still enjoy epistemic support sufficient for knowledge on the basis of its being produced/sustained by suitable proper functioning cognitive faculties (cf. Plantinga 2000), for example, if not (also) on the basis of good evidence (cf. Dougherty and Tweedt 2015, Tucker 2011). We are encouraged to relax: folk in the street can still know that God exists even if they are unable to offer independent rational support for believing what they do. I

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<sup>1</sup> Note that we need not deny that there are other *weaker* notions of what ‘rationally grounded’ knowledge

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard continues: “For example, it would be odd to appeal to the evidence of scripture in order to rationally defend one’s belief in God, since it is only because one believes in God that one thinks that scripture has the evidential bearing with regard to religious belief in the first place. One is thus already taking it as given that one’s belief in the existence of God enjoys appropriate rational support.” Compare also this quote from Nicholas Wolterstorff, wherein he describes ‘reformed epistemology’: “Using ‘rational’ as a catch-all word for the various truth-relevant doxastic merits one could say this: *religious beliefs can be rational without being rationally grounded.*” (2010, p. 29). Again, the implication here is that one line of motivation for reformed epistemology is that theistic belief is not ordinarily rationally grounded in any robust sense (see also Dougherty and Tweedt 2015). In this paper I aim to say otherwise.

don't mean to quarrel with any of this. But even still I think this grossly underestimates the theist in the street's epistemic position vis-à-vis theistic belief.

In this paper I would like to motivate a position in religious epistemology that I have not seen motivated before. I will argue that even the theist in the street is in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists—that it is a *mistake* to think that one cannot do this unless one can offer some effective argument, like one of the traditional theistic arguments, for thinking that God exists. I will try to convince the reader of this with reference to what I will call the 'Moorean' proof for the existence of God: what I will argue represents a perfectly cogent (if dialectically ineffective) proof for theism proceeding from premises that are rationally supported on the basis of *religious experiences*. An important upshot is that both philosophers of God *and perceivers* of God can be seen to enjoy knowledge that God exists that is rationally grounded in the operative sense.

Here is the plan. In §1-2 I build on ideas from William Alston (1991) in order to introduce the 'Moorean' proof for theism—a proof for the existence of God that parallels in structure G.E. Moore's famous proof for the existence of the external world. In §3 I clarify what I mean when I say that this proof can confer *independent* rational support upon theistic belief—or equivalently—can represent a *cogent* proof. Then in §4-5 I defend this claim against attack. Specifically, I look to the literature that has developed around the familiar conservatism vs. liberalism debate in epistemology to construct two objections to my proposal that I suspect most readily spring to mind. We will find that neither of these objections is clearly successful. Finally in §6-8 I anticipate and respond to what may be some of the readers further concerns regarding my positive proposal. Here I relate the 'Moorean' proof for God to the more familiar argument from religious experience, consider whether we should think that there are cogent proofs for God rooted in rational support for claims found in Scripture, and then finally offer some brief remarks in connection with reformed epistemology. Here I also say something about the significance my conclusion. I then summarize and conclude.

## *II. Alston and Religious Perception*

Begin by considering Bill. Let's say that Bill fits the description of our theist in the street who, recall, while religiously devout is entirely unfamiliar with any of the traditional arguments for God's existence. Now imagine that Bill has just been denied an absolutely crucial job opportunity despite being given every reason to think that it would be offered to him. It would not be unusual, under these circumstances, for someone like Bill to enjoy a conscious mental condition that—if asked—he might describe as an experience as of God's helping him to take courage and to trust Him for his provision into the future.

Famously William Alston (1991) argued that there is no good reason *not* to think that in cases like this Bill might enjoy rational support (or 'justification' in Alston's terms) for believing something like 'God is encouraging me' on the basis of this religious experience—or else no good reason that would not likewise count against the thought that *visual* experiences can provide rational support for ordinary visual perceptual beliefs. Alston thought that religious experiences often serve to mediate religious (or 'mystical') *perceptions* of God, and can even serve to rationally support (and even warrant) *beliefs* about God's manifesting himself to an individual in a given way.

The religious beliefs at issue here Alston calls 'manifestation' beliefs (or M-beliefs for short). These Alston writes "are a particular species of perceptual beliefs; they are beliefs, based on mystical perception, to the effect that God has some perceivable property or is engaging in some perceivable activity" (1991, p. 77). Plausibly paradigmatic M-beliefs concern God's activity vis-à-vis a particular subject at a time: for example beliefs about God's admonishing one for some wrongdoing; strengthening one through some adversity; or demonstrating His love toward one in some tangible way.

In his book *Perceiving God* Alston argues that these M-beliefs are at the heart of a perfectly viable 'doxastic practice' in which religious experiences are properly taken at face value to indicate what they purport to indicate to a given subject. On Alston's picture these M-beliefs enjoy a distinctively *religious* perceptual rational support (or justification) when sustained in light of suitable religious experiences—even affording one perceptual *knowledge* of M-beliefs when conditions are right (i.e. in conditions where God exists and has orchestrated things such that human beings are in sufficiently reliable contact with Him via 'mystical' or religious perceptual experience, and etc.). Alston is at great pains to show in his

book that these doxastic practises are on all fours with more run-of-the-mill *visual* perceptual doxastic practices.

For our purposes we needn't become embroiled in the finer details of Alston's proposal. What I have represented here is sufficient for what we need: viz., a perfectly coherent account of how, in worlds where God exists and is concerned to manifest Himself to His creation in perceivable ways, one could come to know that God is doing thus and so on the basis of a suitable religious experience. Here I will be taking for granted Alston's account of religious-based perceptual warrants in order to argue that *if it is true* that one can enjoy rational support for M-beliefs on the basis of suitable religious experiences *then* this puts one in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists.

Before moving ahead it is probably worth noting at this juncture that while our proposal depends quite crucially upon the groundwork that Alston (1991) supplies, here we go well beyond anything that Alston envisions himself arguing for. For as we have just seen Alston is primarily interested to substantiate and defend the claim that a certain class of religious beliefs—*M-beliefs*—are susceptible of a distinctively religious perceptual rational support. By contrast he has comparatively very little to say regarding *theistic belief*—or belief in the *existence* of God. He certainly does not claim—as I maintain here—that there may be a cogent proof for theism from premises that rely on one's having rational support (or justification) for M-beliefs.<sup>3</sup> It is one thing if on the basis of suitable religious experiences one can have rational support for thinking that God is *manifesting Himself* to one in a given way. It is another thing entirely if this puts one in position to offer independent rational support for believing that *God exists*. Here—of course—we are primarily interested to motivate the latter claim.

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<sup>3</sup> Although some of his remarks suggest that he may have been sympathetic to our proposal. Very early on in his book he writes “Am I suggesting that the belief in the *existence* of God is susceptible of a perceptual justification? Well, yes and no. [...] there is the point nicely made by Alvin Plantinga (1983, p. 81) that even if ‘God exists’ is not the propositional content of typical theistic perceptual beliefs, those propositional contents self-evidently entail it. ‘God is good’ or ‘God gave me courage to meet that situation’ self-evidently entail ‘God exists’, just as ‘That tree is bare’ or ‘That tree is tall’ self-evidently entail ‘That tree exists’. Hence if the former beliefs can be perceptually justified, they can serve in turn, by one short and unproblematic step, to justify the belief in God's existence” (1991, p. 3-4). It isn't clear that Alston realized that if he is right about this, then there is available a kind of ‘Moorean’-style proof for theism that can confer independent rational support upon theistic belief just as well as any of the classical theistic arguments. Neither is it clear that Alston realized that there may be good objections to this idea, which we will consider here in great detail.

### III. The ‘Moorean’ Proof for the Existence of God

We are now in position to state more clearly the idea at the heart of my positive proposal. I submit that if one knows that—for example—God is encouraging one on the basis of enjoying a religious experience to this effect then we can make sense of one’s being in position to offer independent rational support for one’s theistic belief. We can make sense of what this means with reference to what I will call the ‘Moorean’ proof for the existence of God, which I display here alongside G.E. Moore’s original proof for the existence of the external world for comparison.

#### *The ‘Moorean’ Proof for the Existence of God*

- 1) God is encouraging me just now.
- 2) God is encouraging me just now only if God exists.
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- 3) Therefore, God exists.

#### *Moore’s Proof for the Existence of the External World*

- 1) Here are my hands.
- 2) Here are my hands only if an external world exists.
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- 3) Therefore, the external world exists.

Now to be clear the ‘Moorean’ proof for the existence of God is not a proof that Moore himself advocated for. I give it this name only because I think that it is analogous in crucial respects to Moore’s famous proof for the existence of the external world. Here is what I mean.

Recall that in his paper ‘Proof of an External World’ (1939) Moore was keen to point out that his original proof satisfied what he said were three important conditions of any “sound proof” (his words). First its conclusion is *different* from the premises insofar as it may have been true even if the premises were false. Second the conclusion clearly deductively follows from the truth of the premises. And third Moore claimed that the premises were all known to be true: the second premise *a priori* and the first by means of visual perceptual experience.

This should strike us as interesting straight off since there is no obvious reason why the theist could not also claim that the ‘Moorean’ proof for the existence of God meets these same three conditions. For its conclusion too is different from the premises in the relevant way, and also follows from them with no less deductive certainty. Moreover why cannot the theist also maintain that each of its premises can be known to be true? Premise (2) of course is obviously knowable *a priori*—just like premise (2) of Moore’s original proof. But notice that

premise (1) is just one of Alston's M-beliefs, and so—the theistic can maintain—knowable on the basis of its enjoying religious perceptual rational support.

I highlight these similarities between the two proofs only to provide some initial motivation for our Moorean proof for theism—for giving it serious consideration. If Moore was correct to think that his original proof of the external world had something going for it, then perhaps there is something interesting in this 'Moorean' proof of the existence of God, as well. There is more work to be done, however. For my specific claim is that the 'Moorean' proof for theism can be perfectly *cogent*. But it is now widely agreed that a proof can satisfy each of Moore's original three conditions without yet being *cogent* in the way I intend—that is, without yet conferring upon its conclusion any rational support that doesn't already presuppose that one has rational support for believing the conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

For example this is precisely what Crispin Wright (2002) (2003) (2004) (2007) (2014) has contended is the case with Moore's original proof. Wright has long held to the 'conservative' view that having visual-perceptual rational support for an empirical belief *presupposes* having rational support for believing (among other things) that there exists an external world. It follows from that however that having rational support for believing that one has hands, for example, *cannot* constitute having independent rational support for believing that there exists an external world (despite the fact that the latter claim clearly logically follows from the former). Wright's initial thought was that this best explains the widespread impression that Moore's original proof is somehow a *defective* proof for its conclusion. The idea is that it's defective because it isn't cogent in the operative sense.<sup>5</sup> Shortly we will consider whether a similar objection transfers over to problematize the 'Moorean' proof for God.

The argumentative strategy, then, will be as follows. I'll aim to show that there is no clear obstacle to viewing the 'Moorean' proof for God as a perfectly cogent proof—capable of conferring via the relevant entailment independent rational support for believing that God exists. I'll do this by constructing and undermining what I think are two primary objections

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<sup>4</sup> Such cases are otherwise known as cases of 'transmission failure'. For overview and discussion see Moretti and Piazza (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Nico Silins (2005): "The main case for conservatism [i.e. Wright's view] can usefully be stated as an inference to the best explanation. The fact to be explained, for now just assuming there is such a fact, is that Moore's inference is not a way for him to acquire a well founded belief [in the proof's conclusion]." Below I consider and reject the thought that the 'Moorean' proof for God is susceptible to a version of the same worry.

to this proposal. The most natural tack here is to appropriate key objections to the cogency of Moore's original proof that have come out of the conservatism vs. liberalism debate. And that is precisely what I'll do. Space constraints limit how far I can pursue the connections between the conservatism vs. liberalism debate and the 'Moorean' proof for God. My more modest aim is to do enough to get the 'Moorean' proof for God on the table for discussion.

But first, what exactly does having *independent* rational support for theism consist in? What would it be to enjoy such rational support by virtue of enjoying the relevant rational support for an M-belief? So far we have assumed an intuitive notion. But before proceeding we should get clearer on what this means. I'll do this by contrasting what Jim Pryor (2004) calls "type-4" and "type-5" epistemic dependence.

#### *IV. What is Meant by 'Independent' Rational Support?*

It will be helpful in what follows to consider the following rendition of our 'Moorean' proof for God, which is designed to help make explicit the *religious-perceptual* rational support that it purports to independently confer upon theism through the relevant entailment:

##### *The 'Moorean' Proof for God (I-II-III)*

GOD (I) Religious experience as of God's encouraging me.

GOD (II) God is encouraging me (M-belief).

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GOD (III) Therefore, God exists

(Since God is now encouraging me only if God exists)<sup>6</sup>

Note that when I imagine the theist referencing an M-belief (GOD (II)) in attempt to display her rational support for believing that God exists, I take it that she is citing something for which she enjoys *immediate* rational support on the basis of the religious experience itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I am applying the same (I-II-III) structure that Crispin Wright has made famous in connection with discussion of Moore's original proof for the existence of the external world (for a recent presentation see Wright 2014). Note that here GOD (I) serves to bring out the fact that one's rational support for believing premise (I) of the 'Moorean' proof for God rests on one's having a suitable religious experience. That shouldn't be confused with thinking that GOD (I) it itself a premise in the 'Moorean' proof for God. It isn't.



That is to say that a religious experience can rationally support a suitable M-belief *directly*—not by means of providing one with rational support for believing anything else.<sup>7</sup> This of course entails, for example, that one needn't *believe* that one is having a religious experience that *p* in order to enjoy rational support for believing that *p* on the basis of this experience.<sup>8</sup>

Now Jim Pryor (2004) highlights at least five ways that the premises of an argument might be said to *depend upon* (or else be independent of) the argument's conclusion. We need only consider two of Pryor's five ways here: what he calls "type-4" and "type-5" epistemic dependence. Following Pryor we can say that type-5 dependence is instantiated in a proof when its conclusion is such that *having rational support for thinking it true* is among the conditions that underwrite one's having the relevant rational support for (at least one of) the premises (ibid., p. 359). If the Moorean proof for theism exhibits type-5 epistemic dependence then having rational support for GOD (II) on the basis of GOD (I) would *presuppose* having rational support for GOD (III) in this way. That would then preclude the sequence from generating through the relevant entailment rational support for believing that God exists that does not *already* require one's having rational support for believing that God exists. This is plausibly the kind of epistemic dependence that Duncan Pritchard (see quote above) has in mind when he *denies* that having rational support for propositions on the basis of religious experiences, religious scriptures, etc., can be a way of having non-dependent (i.e. independent) rational support for believing that God exists.

To be clear, then, I mean to defend what is being denied here. I mean to be defending the claim that the 'Moorean' proof for theism can confer upon ordinary theistic belief independent rational support of the type that is precluded by Pryor's type-5 epistemic dependence.

Now this is not to be confused with 'independent rational support' of the type that is precluded by what Pryor calls type-4 epistemic dependence. Again following Pryor, we can say that type-4 epistemic dependence is instantiated in a proof when its conclusion is such

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Pryor (2000, p. 532): "Say that you are "immediately justified" in believing *p* [...] iff you're justified in believing *p*, and this justification doesn't rest on any evidence or justification you have for believing other propositions."

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting clarification on this matter. Not also that I take for granted that religious perceptual experiences—like visual perceptual experiences—get us on to things (in part) by *representing* those things to be a certain way. Religious perceptual experiences can then be seen to justify M-beliefs in virtue of their propositional contents: their representing *that* things are a given way (at a given time). It is an interesting question what the truth-conditions of religious experiences can be, and how they come to have those truth-conditions. But this is outside the scope of the current project.

that *acquiring rational support for thinking it false* would undermine the relevant rational support you purport to have for (at least one of) the premises (*ibid.*, p. 359). The ‘Moorean’ proof for God exhibits type-4 epistemic dependence if acquiring rational support for thinking that God does not exist tends to undermine the rational support one might (otherwise) have for adopting an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience. I leave it an open question whether this is the case. But notice that *even if* the ‘Moorean’ proof for God exhibits type-4 dependence, that doesn’t by itself entail that it exhibits type-5 epistemic dependence, rendering it incapable of generating the kind of independent rational support for theism that is of central interest.<sup>9</sup>

I trust this serves to bring out more clearly the sense in which I mean to defend the claim that the ‘Moorean’ proof for God can be a *cogent* proof—conferring independent rational support upon its conclusion.

#### V. *The Objection from the Apparent Defectiveness of the ‘Moorean’ Proof for God*

The first objection to our positive proposal that I will consider begins with this thought: But isn’t the ‘Moorean’ proof for God, like Moore’s original proof, clearly *defective* in some sense? Isn’t it—in some way—not a very good proof for the existence of God? Above we noted that this can seem like good reason for thinking that Moore’s original proof cannot possibly confer independent rational support for believing that an external world exists (providing initial motivation behind ‘conservatism’ in the epistemology of perception). But then isn’t

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<sup>9</sup> What is the bearing of *the problem of evil* on this? Does the problem of evil at all undermine the theist in the street’s rational support for accepting an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience? Not in my view. First, the problem of evil poses a problem for our view only if the ‘Moorean’ proof for God exhibits type-4 epistemic dependence: that is to say, only if acquiring rational support for believing that God *does not exist* tends to undermine one’s rational support for adopting an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience. But, as I say, it is not at all clear that the rational support one enjoys for premise (1) of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God *depends upon* the claim that God exists in this way. Perhaps it *does* depend in this way on the following claim: that putative religious experiences are the result of purely natural causes in the brain. Perhaps having rational support for believing *that* undermines one’s rational support for accepting an M-belief on the basis of a religious experience. But that is irrelevant, since arguments from the problem of evil do not (directly) support *that* claim anyway. Second, but *even if* the ‘Moorean’ proof for God exhibits type-4 dependence, the typical theist in the street is committed to various other (religious) assumptions against the background of which the presence of evil does nothing to disconfirm that God exists, but rather *confirms* that God exists along with certain auxiliary assumptions (i.e. God exists *and* created humankind free to chose evil). And so I don’t see that the problem of evil makes any special trouble for our positive proposal. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

this also ultimately good reason for thinking that the ‘Moorean’ proof for God cannot confer independent rational support for believing that God exists?

We can frame the relevant objection here in terms of an *explanatory challenge*: If the ‘Moorean’ proof for God really is cogent—really can confer independent rational support upon theistic belief—then what else explains its seeming to go wrong as a good proof for the existence of God? The challenge is to provide some explanation here that is consistent with our positive proposal. I think that this challenge can be met. The trick is not to confuse cogent proofs (in our sense) with *dialectically effective arguments*. What is the difference?

It may help initially to consider the distinction Ernest Sosa (2009, p. 7) draws between *persuasive proofs* and *display proofs*. Sosa writes that a mere display proof “is a valid argument that displays premises on which one can rationally base belief in the conclusion, without vicious circularity.” By contrast a persuasive proof, Sosa writes, is a “valid argument that can be used to rationally persuade one to believe its conclusion, if one has put the conclusion in doubt.” Adopting Sosa’s terminology for the moment, I want to say that we should be thinking of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God as a species of *display proof* for theism. But what is crucial is that this needn’t entail that it has the dialectical quality of being a good *persuasive proof*—that it might be effective, for example, if presented to the religious sceptic as an *argument* for the existence of God. In fact I think that the ‘Moorean’ proof for God is dialectically ineffective in just this way. This should be reasonably straightforward.

I would think that, in general, a proof for a given conclusion is (potentially) dialectically effective against one’s opponent only if she is not prevented from *borrowing* the rational support (implicitly) being offered in support of the relevant premises. For example, a proof can be dialectically ineffective in this regard if it *begs the question* against one’s opponent in the way highlighted by Martin Davies (following Jackson 1987):

**Begging the Question: Jackson’s Account (Basic Condition)**

For one of the premises, P, which is supported (according to the speaker) by the consideration or other evidence, C, a hearer who antecedently doubted the conclusion would be directly rationally required to adopt assumptions [...] against the background of which C would not support P (Davies 2009, p. 348).

It has been argued that Moore's original proof of the external world is dialectically ineffective on account of 'begging the question' against the external world sceptic in just this way. As Davies (2009, p. 346) highlights (agreeing with 'liberals' like Pryor 2004), if the external world sceptic is convinced that there is no external world—that, for example, she is being tricked by an evil demon to believe that ordinary objects like hands exist—then it will do her no good to be offered a proof to the contrary whose premises depend for their rational support upon the relevant 'hand-like' visual experiences. That is because her external world scepticism makes her committed to certain assumptions against the background of which visual experiences as of hands should indicate *not* that one has hands, but rather that one is the handless (epistemic) victim of an evil demon. Borrowing a locution from Jim Pryor (2004), we can say that for this reason the external world sceptic is "rationally obstructed" from borrowing the rational support Moore implicitly offers when he cites premise (1) of his original proof: 'Look—here is one hand; and here is another'.

This is how 'liberals' in the epistemology of visual perception defend the cogency of Moore's original proof against the relevant version of what I am calling here the *explanatory challenge*. The proof looks defective *not* because it cannot confer for the nonsceptic independent rational support for thinking that there is an external world, but because it's *dialectically ineffective* in the relevant way (cf. Pryor 2004). I submit that the same can be said for the 'Moorean' proof for God. But we need to be careful. For while it is dialectically ineffective, it isn't clearly dialectically ineffective for *the same reason* that Moore's original proof seems to be.

In order to see this, notice that there is a clear sense in which Moore's rational support for believing that he has hands is *good for borrowing* in a way that the theist's rational support for believing that God is encouraging him/her is not. What do I mean? Well notice that by drawing his opponent's attention to his hands in the relevant way—"look: here are hands"—Moore can induce in his opponent the very kind of visual experience on the basis of which he (Moore) enjoys rational support for believing that he has hands. By contrast, notice that the theist in the street's rational support for believing that God is encouraging him/her is *not* likewise good for borrowing in this way. For unlike visual experiences, one cannot induce *religious experiences* in one's opponent simply by 'pointing' to the world. Religious experiences are just not like that. Why that is the case is an interesting question that we cannot pursue here. But this is worth pointing out since it means that while both Moore's

original proof and the ‘Moorean’ proof for God are dialectically ineffective against the relevant opponents, they are ineffective for subtly different reasons. For unlike Moore’s rational support for believing that he has hands, in no situation can the theist offer for borrowing his/her rational support for believing that God is do thus and so.<sup>10</sup>

Objection: But certainly we can imagine that the theist is so greatly admired by her opponent that, when she cites the content of some M-belief, her opponent is rationally persuaded to believe its content, and thereafter infer that God exists. But doesn’t that suggest that the ‘Moorean’ proof for God *can* be dialectically effective, after all, so that the explanatory challenge again rears its head?

The point is well taken. In response, however, we needn’t have to say that there is no *version* of the ‘Moorean’ proof for theism that is a (potentially) dialectically effective proof. For notice that, in the case at issue, the rational support that the theist (implicitly) offers her opponent for borrowing is plausibly her *having testified to the fact* that God has manifested Himself to her in such and such a way—*not* the rational support that *she has* for accepting premise (1) (i.e. the relevant religious experience). It is helpful then if we keep these two versions of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God distinct: versions of the proof whose premises enjoy rational support for someone on the basis of *testimony*, and versions of the proof whose premises enjoy rational support for someone directly on the basis of a religious experience. Whether versions of the proof of the former sort are *cogent* in our sense is an interesting topic for further investigation. But here our focus is on versions of the proof of the latter sort. It is enough to overcome the explanatory challenge if we can show how these versions of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God are dialectically ineffective proofs.<sup>11</sup>

It seems to me then that the relevant explanatory challenge with which we started has now been overcome. Even if the ‘Moorean’ proof for theism can confer independent rational support upon theistic belief for subjects of religious experiences, that needn’t entail that we

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<sup>10</sup> Objection: But doesn’t this entail that only *subjects of the relevant religious experiences* can be ‘convinced’ of ‘Moorean’-style proofs for God? Doesn’t that seriously water down the epistemic efficacy of our Moore-inspired theistic proof? In response, this *does* seriously water down these proofs in terms of their *argumentative* power. But it doesn’t follow from that that these proofs are not epistemically powerful in the sense of being able to confer—for *subjects of religious experiences*—independent rational support for believing that God exists. Recall that my very humble claim is that by citing the content of an M-belief the theist can be citing something by virtue of which she enjoys independent rational support for believing that God exists. Defending the cogency of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God is my chosen way of showing how that might be possible. I am *not* defending the ‘Moorean’ proof for God in its capacity to stand up alongside more traditional theistic arguments. Thanks very much to an anonymous referee for helping me to sort through many of the issues discussed in this section.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

cannot otherwise explain why it can appear defective. Plausibly proofs can be evaluated against different criteria. And just because a proof is good for providing for subjects of religious experiences independent rational support for theistic belief, that needn't entail that it is good for rationally convincing someone over to one's side.<sup>12</sup>

## VI. *The Objection from Cognitive Locality*

### VI.A *Motivating the Objection*

In her book *Extended Rationality* Annalisa Coliva (2014) presents an objection against the idea that having rational support for ordinary *visual-perceptual* beliefs could constitute having independent rational support for believing that there exists an external world. There she refers to this as “the problem of surpassing our *cognitive locality*” (ibid., p. 61, my emphasis). In this section I motivate a parallel objection against our positive proposal. Again we will see that this objection threatens to undue our proposal according to which appealing to the kind of rational support one enjoys for M-beliefs can be a way of appealing to independent rational support for believing that God exists—rational support that does not presuppose having rational support for theism. In what follows I will motivate this objection before supplying a response.

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<sup>12</sup> Objection: It can be tempting to think that one could not *come to believe* that God exists by reasoning one's way through the premises of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God. For given that the proposition <God is encouraging me> so clearly entails that <God exists>, it can seem that one cannot so much as *understand* what one believes when one believes the former proposition unless one also believes the latter proposition as well. This is good to think about. I'll offer two quick remarks. First it isn't obvious to me that one cannot believe that God is encouraging one unless one believes that God exists. Certainly I think that one must be *disposed* to believe that God exists. But being disposed to believe *p* doesn't entail that one (even dispositionally) believes *p*. But perhaps the worry here is more specific. Perhaps it is that one cannot *satisfy one's curiosity* whether God exists by reasoning through the relevant premises of the proof. That is to say: perhaps one cannot—while *entertaining* the proposition <God exists>—both believe that God is encouraging one, and understand what one believes, without *also* believing that God exists. I am happy to concede this. But then notice, second, that nothing I'm arguing for commits me otherwise. My main contention is that citing the content of an M-belief can be a way of referencing independent rational support for believing that God exists. That requires only the *epistemological thesis* that one can enjoy rational support for an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience *without first* needing rational support for believing that God exists. It does not require the *psychological thesis* that one should be able to *come to believe* that God exists—perhaps for the first time—by carefully reasoning one's way through the relevant premises. Compare this quote from Pryor (2000, p. 533): “You may require certain background beliefs [...] merely to be able to entertain some belief B. That doesn't by itself show that your justification for believing B rests on your justification for those background beliefs.” Thanks very much to a referee for pressing me to say more about this.

I begin by tracing a familiar line of thought for adopting a form of *fallibilism* about the rational support available for religious perceptual knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Start off by considering this. Consider that for any ‘good’ case in which one actually perceives that God is doing thus and so we can define a corresponding ‘bad’ case. The bad case is introspectively indistinguishable from the good case—except in this case it only *seems* to one as though God is doing thus and so because one is suffering from a delusional religious experience. The bad case is *bad*, of course, because one is unwittingly misled by one’s experience to adopt an M-belief that is false. What does it mean for the good case to be *introspectively indistinguishable* from the bad case in this way? I take it that it means that even when one is in the good case, and so is actually successfully perceiving that God is doing thus and so, one cannot *tell by introspection alone* that this is what is going on. That is to say that one cannot—merely by introspecting upon what it is like to have one’s religious experience—*know* that one’s religious experience is the result of a real encounter with God as opposed to being produced in some purely naturalistic fashion. This is not meant to be controversial.<sup>14</sup>

Now it can be tempting to think that it follows from this rather uncontroversial fact that one has the *same level* of rational support in the bad case as one has in the good case for accepting the relevant M-belief. After all, from the subject’s point of view in the bad case, things seem exactly as they do in the good case. That is to say that it seems to one ‘from the inside’ just like one perceives that God is doing thus and so. Many will find it hard to deny, then, that in the bad case one has *every reason* one has in the good case for adopting the relevant M-belief. Of course it follows that since in the bad case the relevant M-belief is *false*, then even in the good case—where one successfully perceives that God is doing thus and

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<sup>13</sup> As I say below, I think that one’s rational support *R* for believing that *p* is *fallible* if having such rational support is consistent with *p*’s being false. And so for example if one’s rational support for adopting a given M-belief that *p* consists entirely in its experientially *seeming to one* that *p*, then one’s rational support is *fallible* in the operative sense. That is because it could experientially seem to one that *p*, even if one’s M-belief that *p* is false. ‘Fallibilism’ has been used to denote a number of distinct these. See Neta (2011) for a helpful catalogue.

<sup>14</sup> Note that the relevant claim here is not *merely* that one cannot *infallibly* know by introspection alone that one is in the good case rather than the bad case. Rather the claim is the more moderate one that, even in the good case, one cannot know *at all* via introspection alone—not even fallibly—that one is in the good case rather than the bad case. Notice that this is not yet to say that, in the good case, one cannot know that one is in the good case rather than the bad case. Many will think that one *can* know this via inference from things one knows via perception. As I say it isn’t meant to be controversial that in the good case one cannot—simply by introspecting the phenomenal character of one’s religious experience—tell that one is in the good case rather than the bad case. See Pritchard (2012, p. 38-45) for relevant discussion. Thanks to a referee for requesting this clarification.

so—one cannot enjoy better than *fallible* rational support for accepting it. Fallible rational support for  $p$  is rational support that one has even if  $p$  is false. And so, for example, many will take this line of thought to indicate that that the kind of rational support that one has in the good case for accepting an M-belief consists in its *seeming to one* that one perceives that God is doing thus and so: where this supplies rational support that one can have in *both* the good case and the bad case. Thus we arrive at a seemingly plausible *fallibilism* about the rational support available for religious perceptual belief.

Thus far we have not arrived at any particular problem for our positive proposal. But now consider the following ‘arbitrariness’ problem for the fallibilist view just arrived at. It can now seem difficult to explain how—on the basis of it’s merely *seeming to one* that God is doing thus and so—one ever has rational support for believing that God is *in fact* doing thus and so, when so easily, from the subject’s point of view, one might just as well be in the bad case (i.e. might be suffering a delusional religious experience in the naturalist’s world). To speak as Coliva (*ibid.*, p. 25) would in the present context: even if the theist were in the good case—and so was lucky enough to have mostly veridical religious experiences—she should still need some “subjectively available reason” for thinking that these experiences are at least more likely caused by real encounters with God than by purely natural causes in the brain and/or central nervous system.<sup>15</sup> Otherwise it can seem arbitrary for one to take oneself to have rational support to believe the one hypothesis over the other.

A very natural way of overcoming this problem for the fallibilist is to insist that the theist *already* has antecedent rational support for accepting things like ‘God exists’, ‘God acts in ways that can be perceived by human beings’ and etc. For in that case it would no longer seem mysterious how one could have rational support for accepting that God is *in fact* doing thus and so by virtue of having such (fallible) rational support as one has when it ‘mystically’ *seems to one* that God is doing thus and so. For assume for the sake of argument that one enjoys such antecedent rational support for accepting theism (among other things).<sup>16</sup> Then it

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<sup>15</sup> Here is Coliva commenting on the version of the problem as it applies to rational support for visual-perceptual beliefs: “If one’s experiences could be just the same no matter how they are produced, why should they justify beliefs about material objects rather than their sceptical counterparts? It seems entirely arbitrary to take them to favor the former rather than the latter. [...] *We are (...) looking for conditions whose satisfaction would allow us to take a mind-dependent kind of evidence to bear on beliefs whose content is eminently mind-independent*” (2014, p. 61, my emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> We need not bother here about *what it would take* for the theist in the street to enjoy such collateral rational support (although perhaps we may appeal to some notion of ‘rational trust’ (cf. Wright 2004, 2014)). For our



clearly seems no longer arbitrary, from the theist's point of view, to take its seeming that God is doing thus and so to favor believing that God is *in fact* doing thus and so, over believing instead that God does not exist and that one's religious experiences are the product of purely natural causes in one's brain.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, however, notice that these considerations do nothing to favor our positive proposal. For if having rational support for an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience entails as a *precondition* that one has rational support for accepting theism, then clearly appealing to the former rational support cannot be a way of offering *independent* rational support for theistic belief—where, recall, this is rational support that does not presuppose having rational support for believing that God exists. Here is the argument against our positive proposal stated slightly more formally. I present it as consisting of two sub-arguments.

### *The Argument from Cognitive Locality*

#### Sub-argument One

- 1) The good case in which one perceives that God is doing thus and so is *introspectively indistinguishable* from a corresponding bad case in which it only seems to one that one is perceiving that God is doing thus and so because one is suffering a delusional religious experience. [Premise]
- 2) If the good case is introspectively indistinguishable from the bad case in this way, then in the bad case one has the *same level* of rational support that one has in the good case for accepting a given M-belief. [Premise]

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purposes we need only note that on the current objection one must first enjoy *some such* collateral rational support before enjoying the relevant kind of rational support for a given M-belief. Of course if the present objection is successful and we *cannot* make our how one can enjoy this collateral rational support, then the idea that M-beliefs enjoy rational support at all becomes jeopardized.

<sup>17</sup> Compare: the reason why—before looking—one's evidence gives more reason to believe that the dice has landed on something 1-5 rather than on 6 is because one has collateral rational support for believing that a fair die, when tossed, will *more likely* land on something 1-5 rather than on 6. Plausibly this is why one has more reason to believe the former rather than the latter hypothesis, even though one's rational support is *nonfactive* and therefore consistent with either hypothesis.

- 3) Therefore, in the bad case one has the same level of rational support as one has in the good case for accepting a given M-belief. [Intermediate Conclusion A, from (1) and (2) MP].
- 4) If in the bad case one enjoys the same level of rational support as one has in the good case for accepting a given M-belief, then one cannot enjoy better than fallible rational support in the good case (obviously: for one cannot enjoy better than fallible rational support in the bad case). [Premise]
- 5) Therefore, one enjoys at best fallible rational support for M-beliefs on the basis of suitable religious experiences. [Intermediate Conclusion B, from (3) and (4) MP].

#### Sub-argument Two

- 6) One enjoys at best fallible rational support for M-beliefs on the basis of suitable religious experiences only if one has antecedent rational support for believing that God exists. [Premise]
- 7) Therefore: One enjoys rational support for M-beliefs on the basis of suitable religious experiences only if one has antecedent rational support for believing that God exists. [Final Conclusion, from (5) and (6) MP]
- 8) Therefore, having rational support for an M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience presupposes having rational support for believing that God exists. [Restatement of Final Conclusion].

Perhaps it is some argument along these lines that undergirds the impression among epistemologists like Duncan Pritchard (see quote above) that one cannot offer independent rational support for theism by appealing to the kind of rational support conferred upon M-beliefs on the basis of religious experiences. However, as the reader may suspect, I think it is open to the theistic epistemologist to reject at least one of the argument's premises. Below I'll present my preferred strategy. I'll motivate a rejection of premise (2) by way of appealing to what has been called *religious epistemological disjunctivism*.

## VI.B Religious Epistemological Disjunctivism

If the argument from cognitive locality is vulnerable anywhere then I think it must be at either (or both) premises (2) and (4). However to keep the discussion manageable, and to offer what I think is novel solution to the problem, I'll target only premise (2). Specifically I'll argue that we can motivate a rejection of premise (2) by appealing to religious epistemological disjunctivism (cf. Shaw 2016). With premise (2) thus kicked away, that will then be the second putative obstacle to our proposal turned aside.

Notice that premise (2) makes a claim about the level of rational support a religious experience can confer upon a given M-belief. In effect, it exploits the following *assumption*: that since the good case is introspectively indistinguishable from the bad case, therefore, even when in the good case—even when one successfully perceives that God is doing thus and so—one has the same level of rational support for believing this as one would have anyway if one were in the bad case and suffering a delusory religious experience. In other words, the idea here is that even in the good case one's rational support is the 'highest common factor' of the rational support made available in *both* the good and the bad case.<sup>18</sup> But then since in the bad case one doesn't enjoy better than fallible rational support for an M-belief, it follows that one cannot enjoy better than fallible rational support in the good case, either. And then sub-argument two proceeds.

But in reality the assumption being made here in premise (2) is controversial: viz., that it follows from the fact that the two cases are introspectively indistinguishable that one's rational support in the good case should consist of what is the 'highest common factor' between the good and bad cases. For example, *epistemological disjunctivism* about visual-perceptual rational support explicitly denies this, and I see no good reason why we cannot take up the disjunctivist position with respect to the rational support furnished by religious perceptual experiences as well.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The 'highest common factor' is one of John McDowell's favorite locutions used to characterize the sort of idea motivating premise (2), which premise we are presently seeking to undermine under his inspiration. See McDowell (1982) (1994) (1995) (2011).

<sup>19</sup> For an accessible defense of epistemological disjunctivism consult Pritchard (2012) (2016), whose presentation of the view is inspired by John McDowell (1982) (1994) (1995) (2011). For application of the view to the case of religious perceptual knowledge see Shaw (2016).

For example Kegan Shaw (2016) motivates a *religious epistemological disjunctivism* that entails that the good and bad cases are *not* on a par with respect to the level of rational support available for suitable M-beliefs. More specifically he presents a case of thinking that when one knows some M-belief on the basis of a suitable religious experience one can enjoy infallible rational support for believing what one does—*infallible* insofar as this is rational support that one has only if the relevant M-belief is *true*.<sup>20</sup> Says Shaw: “the big idea is that in paragon cases of religious perceptual knowledge that *p* one knows that *p* by virtue of enjoying rational support furnished by one’s *pneuming that p*, where this mental state is both factive and accessible on reflection” (2016, p. 265, my emphasis). Shaw intends “*pneuming that p*” to stand as a kind of religious-perceptual analogue to “seeing that *p*”, or to whatever *epistemic seeing* amounts to in the religious-perceptual case. Note that obviously one *cannot* enjoy any such infallible rational support for an M-belief in the bad case—since in that case it is stipulated that the relevant M-belief is *false*. Even still the key idea is that we should not think that just because the good case is introspectively indistinguishable from the bad case that therefore one cannot have better than fallible rational support in the good case.<sup>21</sup> Why not think instead that in the bad case one (blamelessly) takes oneself to have rational support one does not in fact have?

On the view that results, then, a case in which one enjoys a religious experience as of *p* is *either* a case in which one enjoys infallible rational support for *p*, or a case that is merely introspectively indistinguishable from a case of that kind. That is what makes the view a kind of epistemological *disjunctivism* about the rational support available for religious-perceptual based knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Note that this doesn’t entail that the capacity *itself* is infallible. As McDowell (2011) contends, there’s room for a conception of capacities according to which fallible capacities can put one in position to enjoy infallible rational support for perceptual beliefs.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it can seem that one cannot *really* have access to factive rational support in the good case unless the good case really *isn’t* introspectively indistinguishable from the bad case after all—contrary to hypothesis? This Pritchard calls the ‘distinguishability problem’ for epistemological disjunctivism. For relevant discussion see Pritchard (2012 *b*, pt 2.). The interested reader will discover that the response Pritchard makes available to that problem can easily be pressed into service in defense of religious epistemological disjunctivism against the parallel objection.

<sup>22</sup> Religious epistemological disjunctivism says only that religious perceptual knowledge *can* enjoy infallible rational support, in virtue of one’s being in such a factive mental state as *pneuming that p*. It does not say that one *must* be in some such factive state in order to acquire religious perceptual knowledge. Nor does it say that in general only factive states serve to rationally support beliefs, as may be entailed on one interpretation of Williamson’s evidence = knowledge thesis (cf. Williamson 2000). Thanks to a referee for requesting this clarification.

Clearly we haven't the space to explore or motivate religious epistemological disjunctivism in any great detail (but again see Shaw 2016). But for my own part I think that it's a view worth taking seriously, not least because it promises to pay dividends in religious epistemology of the sort that I presently trying to highlight. For if the view is available then we can use it for motivating a rejection of premise (2) of the argument from cognitive locality, freeing our positive proposal from what might otherwise look like a fairly serious difficulty. For if religious epistemological disjunctivism is true then it is *not* true that if the good and bad cases are introspectively indistinguishable then one enjoys the same level of rational support in the bad case as one enjoys in the good case. That is *false* if—as religious epistemological disjunctivism says—one can enjoy in the good case as good as *infallible* rational support for M-beliefs on the basis of suitable religious experiences.

Note that in this way religious epistemological disjunctivism can seem even more attractive than Shaw (2016) initially lets on. Since in that paper he makes no mention of the fact that it may be a key to unlocking a view in religious epistemology according to which even the theist in the street can enjoy knowledge that God exists that is rationally grounded in a robust fashion—such that he or she is in position to offer independent rational support in defense of their theistic belief.

By now I hope to have said enough to at least suggest that there is no clear reason for thinking that the 'Moorean' proof for the existence of God cannot represent a perfectly cogent proof for theism; so that if there really are perceptions of God of the kind that Alston highlights, then these put even the theist in the street in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists. At the very least I hope to have put the position on the table for serious consideration. Potentially there is much at stake. For if what I have been arguing for is correct then, contrary to popular opinion, knowledge that God exists that is rationally grounded in the relevant sense is actually *ubiquitous*—not the property only of academically-minded theists who are in position to produce a good *argument* for the existence of God.

Before closing I would like to briefly address three further issues that the reader may wish to get clearer about. I'll say something about why appealing to the premises of the 'Moorean' proof for theism in defense of one's theistic belief is *different* from offering a version of the more familiar 'argument from religious experience'. I'll say something about whether I think this opens the door to there being cogent proofs for theism beginning from

premises rooted in Scripture. And finally I'll offer some remarks relating our discussion to reformed epistemology.

### VII. *The 'Argument from Religious Experience'*

Needless to say throughout we have been highly dependent upon the notion of a religious experience. Perhaps it is tempting to think that by appealing to the rational support one enjoys for M-beliefs in defense of one's theistic belief one is offering only a variant of the better-known 'argument from religious experience'. But that is wrong. To see why consider this relatively recent representation of the argument from religious experience advanced by Richard Swinburne (2004):

#### *Swinburne's Argument from Religious Experience*

- 1) People not uncommonly have experiences that purport to be experiences of God's doing thus and so.
- 2) It is rational to believe what an experience apparently reports unless there is special reason not to (Swinburne's *Principle of Credulity*).
- 3) There is no special reason to be dismissive of religious experiences in this respect.  
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- 4) Therefore, it is rational to believe that God exists.

Notice that the 'Moorean' proof for the existence of God differs from this argument in at least three respects.

First from the premises of the 'Moorean' proof for the existence of God it follows that *God exists*, not that *it is rational to believe* that God exists. Clearly these are very different conclusions. The first is a metaphysical claim, while the second an epistemic one. My contention has been that religious experiences put one in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists—*not* for believing that it is rational to believe that God exists.

Second—even if we framed the argument from religious experience so that it delivered the relevant metaphysical claim—notice that the *concept* 'religious experience' figures

nowhere in the premises of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God. That is a relevant difference and a significant one at that. For plausibly the average theist in the street does not have the concept of religious experience as this notion figures in the above argument—i.e. as the mental condition that is *neutral* between religious perceptions and merely delusional religious experiences. But while this may preclude one from being able to appeal to the argument from religious experience in defense of their theistic belief, it isn’t clear that it precludes one from being able to appeal to the premises of the ‘Moorean’ proof for theism for offering independent rational support for accepting theistic belief.

Finally clearly the argument from religious experience is designed to be a dialectically effective argument for its conclusion. To the extent that each of the premises enjoys rational support, plausibly this rational support is “good for borrowing” in the way that one’s rational support for accepting premise (1) of the ‘Moorean’ proof for God is not (see above discussion). The reader is invited to check this for themselves.

### *VIII. Concerning ‘Proofs’ from Scripture*

In light of the forgoing consider now this proof for the existence of God presented again in terms of Wright’s (I-II-III) structure:

#### *Scripture (I-II-III)*

SCRIPT (1) The Scriptures report that God met with Moses on Mount Sinai.

SCRIPT (II) So, God met with Moses on Mount Sinai.

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SCRIPT (III) Therefore, God exists

(Since God met with Moses on Sinai only if God exists)

Notice that this proof seems to satisfy all of G.E. Moore’s three original criteria for any “sound proof”. Its conclusion both deductively follows from the premises and is different from them in the relevant way. Moreover it seems open to the theist to claim that each of the premises can be known. The next question is whether we should also think that it is *cogent*—whether or not having rational support for SCRIPT (II) on the basis of SCRIPT (I) presupposes having

rational support for SCRIPT (III). The reader may be concerned that the ‘Moorean’ proof for God is cogent only if such proofs from Scripture are as well—and yet it is implausible to think that proofs from Scripture can be cogent. This requires more comment that I can offer here—but I will offer two remarks.

First proofs from Scripture may be vulnerable at a point where the ‘Moorean’ proof for God is not. Recall the objection to our proposal from cognitive locality just discussed. Pressed into service here the objection is that SCRIPT (I) provides fallible rational support for SCRIPT (II) only if one has antecedent rational support for theism (i.e. SCRIPT (III)). For otherwise it can seem arbitrary to take oneself to have rational support for SCRIPT (II) on the basis of SCRIPT (I) when so easily—for all else one has rational support to believe—it may be that there is no God and the Old Testament Scriptures at best present a highly embellished historical account. Above we rendered innocuous the parallel objection in application to religious-perceptual rational support by appealing to an independently motivated epistemological disjunctivism about religious perceptual knowledge. Notice however that it is hardly clear whether we can avail ourselves of the same strategy here. That would require adopting an epistemological disjunctivism about distinctively *religious-testimonial based knowledge*—a view that seems hardly plausible on its face.<sup>23</sup> And so there may be scope for thinking that even if the ‘Moorean’ proof for theism can generate independent rational support for its conclusion, proofs from Scripture cannot.

Secondly even if proofs from Scripture *are* cogent in some sense that needn’t entail that there are not yet other important differences between such proofs and proofs that follow the pattern of the ‘Moorean’ proof for the existence of God. For instance notice that while the ‘Moorean’ proof for God purports to confer *perceptual-based* rational support upon theism, the proof from Scripture purports to confer *testimonial-based* rational support instead. Potentially that is an important difference. The difference is between having rational support for theism that is *primarily attributable* to the subject’s epistemic agency, and having rational support for theism that is not. For notice that in order to acquire rational support for a given M-belief one need only lean on one’s own *epistemic powers*—powers to perceive God’s manifesting Himself in certain ways. By contrast notice that in order to acquire the relevant rational support for a claim rooted in Scripture one must crucially be relying on the epistemic

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<sup>23</sup> Although that is not to say that there isn’t precedent for an epistemological disjunctivism about testimonially-based knowledge. See McDowell (1994).



powers of another—potentially countless others—whomever ultimately is creditable for obtaining, recording, and preserving the information contained in Scripture. In this way one who has rational support for theism by virtue of having rational support for claims rooted in Scripture can seem *less creditable* than one who has rational support for theism by virtue of having rational support sourced from religious experiences. The latter individual—we can say—is *fully epistemically creditable* for having the relevant (independent) rational support for theism.

Perhaps this is sufficient for privileging the ‘Moorean’ proof for God over proofs from Scripture, even if *both*—at the end of the day—constitute cogent proofs for their conclusions. If it seems natural to complain that proofs from Scripture are *too easy*—not evincing enough of an epistemic accomplishment on the part of the subject—then we may be able to accommodate that short of having to deny that these proofs can be cogent in some sense. While there is plenty more here to think about I really must move on to make my final comment.

### *IX. Concerning Reformed Epistemology*

Perhaps it is tempting to think that our positive proposal is somehow in tension with what is known as ‘reformed epistemology’.<sup>24</sup> For doesn’t reformed epistemology set itself against the picture that has now come into view: a picture according to which even the theist in the street is in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists? I maintain that nothing that I have proposed here is in any tension with reformed epistemology.

As I think most understand reformed epistemology, it describes an approach to thinking about familiar epistemic statuses—like for example rationality, justification, or warrant—in application to theistic belief. In particular a reformed epistemologist will say that a subject can enjoy some positive epistemic standing with respect to theistic belief *independently* of possessing any good argument for thinking that God exists.

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<sup>24</sup> For an accessible introduction to reformed epistemology see the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the topic by Bolos and Scott. For a recent discussion of reformed epistemology in relation to other approach in religious epistemology, see Dougherty and Tweedt (2015). For an overview of recent work in this area see Moon (2016).

But the first thing to notice is that here I have made no claims at all about rationality, justification, or warrant with respect to theistic belief. I have simply wanted to suggest that the theist in the street is in position to offer independent rational support for believing that God exists. I have made no claims about whether being in such a position is either necessary and/or sufficient or neither for enjoying any familiar epistemic status with respect to theistic belief. In this way I have refrained from making any claims about what reformed epistemology makes claims about.

The second thing to notice is that, in any case, reformed epistemology is supposed to oppose the importance of having *convincing arguments* when it comes to sustaining theistic belief. *Not* the importance of what we have here carefully distinguished as being in position to offer independent rational support for theistic belief. I am happy to agree with the reformed epistemologist if she thinks that ordinary theistic belief is *not* typically rationally supported on the basis of an argument that could be used to help bring the religious sceptic around.

Now this doesn't mean that our result should hold no interest for reformed epistemologists. For if my proposal is correct then at the very least this affords ordinary theistic belief some epistemic insurance against ongoing developments in religious epistemology, and in epistemology more generally. Perhaps in future we will be offered good reasons for thinking that theistic belief cannot enjoy some important doxastic merit unless one can offer independent rational support for believing that God exists. Religious nonsceptics need have nothing to fear from such prospects if my positive claim is sustainable. And it's not as though these prospects are very distant.

To take just one example, suppose John McDowell (1995) is correct that knowledge is a "standing in the space of reasons": or as he says—following Sellars (1963)—the space of "justifying and being able to justify what one says" (2011, p. 9).<sup>25</sup> It would follow that knowledge that God exists, too, is a standing in this space of reasons—the space of being able to justify what one says. But that would mean that it's impossible to know that God exists short of being able to justify this claim by offering adequate rational support for thinking it true. If one can do *that* only if one can offer some rational support that *doesn't already*

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<sup>25</sup> McDowell is often found quoting in approval the following statement from Wilfred Sellars (1963): "In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."

*presuppose* that one has rational support for believing that God exists—as seems plausible<sup>26</sup>—then it follows that one cannot know that God exists unless one can offer independent rational support for believing so. Part of the significance of what I have argued for, then, consists in this. That even on an epistemology as ‘internalist’ as McDowell’s we can make out how the theist in the street can know that God exists.

Moreover, notice that even if McDowell is wrong that *knowledge* consists in being able to justify what one says, it is not unlikely that being in position to responsibly *claim* such knowledge consists in being able to justify what one says in this way. For at least when it comes to *claiming* knowledge of things, there is undeniably some pressure to think that one shouldn’t claim to know things that one cannot begin to offer adequate rational support for thinking are true.<sup>27</sup> This is something that I suspect initially strikes many as commonsense. But then notice that if my conclusions are wrong, then even if the theist *knows* that God exists it may yet be unclear how she can responsibly *claim* to know that God exists in the context of a challenge. But if on the other hand I am right, and the theist *can* offer independent rational support for theism by referencing M-beliefs, then even if there are no direct implications for ordinary theistic *knowledge*, we can at least vindicate the theist in the street’s being in position to (responsibly) *claim* what she knows to be true. Much more could be said here. But considering the full weight of this will have to wait for another occasion.<sup>28</sup>

### X. Conclusion

At the beginning I said that I was going to endeavour to unlock a position in religious epistemology that I have not seen defended before. The position is one according to which even the theist in the street can enjoy *rationally grounded* knowledge that God exists—where this requires one to be able to offer independent rational support for their theistic belief. The position might have seemed out of reach partly because it has been thought that unless one is

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<sup>26</sup> This seems entirely plausible. For surely, if one offers (what is meant to be) rational support  $R_1$  for believing that God exists, except having this rational support *presupposes* (or depends upon) having antecedent rational support  $R_2$  for believing that God exists, then, for all either party knows, *no* rational support has yet been offered for believing that God exists (until, of course,  $R_2$  has been offered, where  $R_2$  is suitably independent rational support).

<sup>27</sup> Notice: which is *not* (necessarily) to say that one should not *believe* things that one cannot begin to offer rational support for thinking are true. Knowledge itself may still not be a ‘standing in the space of reasons’ in this way.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for inspiring much of the discussion in this section.

in possession of a dialectically effective argument then one cannot be in a position to offer independent rational support for God's existence. Here I have tried to dislodge that idea by conducting a more careful study of the relationship between having rational support for 'manifestation' beliefs and having rational support for theism. The result—I suggested—may be a picture according to which you need only be a *perceiver* of God in order to be in position to offer independent rational support for theism—*philosophers* of God do not have the monopoly here (even if they still have the monopoly on effective arguments).

At the very least I hope to have piqued the readers interest in the position that I have tried to show may be available. I think it is a position that is little occupied in religious epistemology today, if at all. Today those working in this area suggest that even if ordinary theistic belief isn't rationally supported on the basis of an effective argument, it may still be epistemically supported by virtue of being produced by suitable proper functioning cognitive faculties, or even on the basis of good evidence. None yet have ventured the thought that even if one cannot offer a good argument for thinking that God exists, one may still be in position to offer in one's defense independent rational support for believing so. That in any case represents my plea for the theist in the street. Perhaps we should call it 'Liberalism' in the epistemology of theistic belief. In any case I think that it is a position deserving further attention.

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