Open Theology 2020; 6: 54–65 DE GRUYTER

Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

Walter Scott Stepanenko*

The Fruits of the Unseen: A Jamesian Challenge to Explanatory Reductionism in Accounts of Religious Experience

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0007
Received October 16, 2019; accepted January 21, 2020

Abstract: In *Religious Experience*, Wayne Proudfoot argued that a *tout court* rejection of reductionism in accounts of religious experience was not viable. According to Proudfoot, it's possible to distinguish between an illegitimate practice of descriptive reductionism and the legitimate practice of explanatory reductionism. The failure to distinguish between these two forms of reductionism resulted in a protective strategy, or an attempt to protect religious experience from the reach of scientific explanation. Among the theorists whom he accused of deploying this illegitimate strategy Proudfoot included William James and his work in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this article, I argue that while James does occasionally deploy a protective strategy in *Varieties*, this is not the only nor most important method of treating religious experience James developed. Implicit in his rejection of medical materialism, James not only deploys the protective strategy Proudfoot criticizes, but the pragmatic method with which he treats all claims. I argue that James's pragmatic method leads to what James called noetic pluralism, or the view that there is no privileged knowledge practice, but a plurality of knowledge practices, and that this method puts pressure on the explanatory reductionist, who is implicitly committed to noetic monism.

Keywords: William James, Philosophy of Religion, Religious Experience, Explanation, Pluralism

1 Introduction

In the opening lecture to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "Religion and Neurology," William James confronts what he calls "medical materialism," or the view that religious experience can be reduced to the causal relations of physiological processes.[1] Examples of medical materialism in practice include claims like "Alfred believes in immortality...because his temperament is so emotional;" "Fanny's extraordinary conscientiousness is merely a matter of over-instigated nerves;" and "William's melancholy about the universe is due to bad digestion."[2] The result, James says, is that

> Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary

1 James, *Varieties*, 20.
2 Ibid., 18.

***Corresponding author: Walter Scott Stepanenko,** John Carroll University, University Heights, United States of America;
E-mail: wstepanenko@jcu.edu

> degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle's organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental overtensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter…due to the perverted action of glands which physiology will yet discover.[3]

The problem with this view, according to James, is that "an existential account of facts of mental history [cannot] decide in one way or another…their spiritual significance."[4] For one thing, all "states of mind [have]…some organic process as its condition."[5] To determine the spiritual significance of a claim, James suggests that one must judge the claim "[b]y their fruits…not by their roots."[6] Given this "empiricist criterion," James suggests that etiological accounts of an episode are irrelevant, and that medical material cannot debunk the pretenses of religious experience simply by invoking these kinds of considerations.[7]

In *Religious Experience*, Wayne Proudfoot critiques James for developing this position. He observes a tension between James's claim that religious experience should be "assessed without regard to how that experience is to be explained" and the claim that religious experiences are "characterized by a noetic quality."[8] For Proudfoot, the claim that religious experiences involve "a noetic quality" suggests that these experiences have "the epistemic status of a hypothesis."[9] This being the case, "certain explanatory commitments are presupposed by the experience."[10] So, if the experience is to be regarded as veridical, these commitments must be plausible, or true. The problem is that this view of matters challenges James's suggestion that "interest in causes and assessment of value [are] two entirely different orders of inquiry."[11] "To describe [an] experience is to cite" the explanatory commitments involved in the noetic quality of the experience.[12] Thus, Proudfoot concludes that James's distinction between existential and spiritual judgments is untenable.

In what follows, I don't intend to challenge Proudfoot's claim that James is committed to the illegitimate protective strategy that Proudfoot describes,[13] but I do intend to challenge the claim that this is the only strategy James employs in *Varieties*. In my interpretation of James's critique of medical materialism, there are three distinct argumentative routes. First, there is James's attempt to eliminate etiological considerations from examinations of experiential episodes. Second, there is the claim that when veridical and non-veridical experiences share etiological conditions, these conditions do not bear on the veridicality of the experiences. Third, there is the claim that medical materialism relies on an antecedent, unarticulated, and undefended commitment to what James calls "noetic monism."[14] These argumentative routes are important to distinguish between for several reasons. First, the presence of the second and third argumentative routes suggests that James's case against medical materialism cannot be dismissed simply on the grounds that it involves an illicit protective strategy. Second, the third argumentative route suggests that reductionists about religious experience cannot simply distinguish between descriptive and explanatory reductionism, as Proudfoot does, in the construction of their skeptical treatments of religious experience. That's because, third, the claim that noetic monism needs to be defended, rather than assumed, suggests that there might not be one best description or even explanation of a religious experience. If so, the explanatory reductionist will not be able to get hold of their explanatory target in the first place – let alone hit that target. Thus, the explanatory reductionist will not have made an advancement beyond the medical materialist, and James's critique of the latter will put considerable pressure on the former as well.

3 Ibid., 20.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 25.
7 Ibid.
8 Proudfoot, *Religious*, 158.
9 Ibid., 163.
10 Ibid., 158.
11 Ibid., 165.
12 Ibid., 158.
13 See also Hollinger, "Damned", and Kitcher, "A Pragmatist's" for critical discussion.
14 James, *Pragmatism*, 81. See also Levinson, *The religious*.

To develop this case, I work through each of the argumentative routes in turn. I first examine James's use of the empiricist criterion and the distinction between existential and spiritual judgments it supports. I argue that Proudfoot is right to criticize this distinction, and that it is a distinction James himself should reject, given his later formulations of both pragmatism and radical empiricism. I then examine the second argumentative strategy James explores, the suggestion that etiological conditions cannot imply that an experience was not veridical when those conditions are present in any experience. I argue that this is a better objection against medical materialism, but that it leaves James open to the kind of critical work currently being done on evolutionary debunking arguments inspired by research in the cognitive science of religion (CSR). I leverage some Jamesian considerations in support of some theistic responses to these arguments, but I argue that while religious belief is rational in the face of these debunking arguments, James's second strategy does not do much work in this case. Thus, I turn to James's third argumentative strategy from noetic pluralism. I argue that James's pragmatic method leads to noetic pluralism, that explanatory reductionism relies on an implicit commitment to noetic monism, and that if we therefore have reason to embrace noetic pluralism, we have reason to reject explanatory reductionism.

2 Fruits or Manna?

In "Religion and Neurology," James introduces a distinction between "an existential judgment or proposition," which concerns the "constitution, origin, and history" of the proposition and "a spiritual judgment" or "proposition of value" which concerns "its importance, meaning, or significance."[15] This distinction is important to observe, James says, because "questions of historical fact" do not answer questions about the use of a proposition "as a guide to life."[16] This is a mistake James thinks the medical materialist makes when he assumes that "spiritual value is undone if lowly origin be asserted."[17] According to James, medical materialism amounts to "a general way…of discrediting states of mind for which we have an antipathy…by calling them 'nothing but' expressions of our organic dispositions."[18] For example, a medical materialist may attempt to criticize "the religious emotions by showing a connexion between them and the sexual life" or by attributing "mental over-tensions…to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover."[19]

According to James, the problem with this view is that if we assume "as a convenient hypothesis that the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions [is] thorough-going and complete," then "scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions."[20] Thus, "when we think certain states of mind [are] superior to others," it is not "because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents."[21] Instead we must appeal to "the general principles by which…empirical philosophy has always contended that we must be guided [by] in our search for truth."[22] This is the "empiricist criterion" that has always been at work in "the history of Christian mysticism:" the criterion that "[b]y their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."[23] Given this distinction, James suggests the medical materialists are making a category mistake. They appeal to the wrong sort of reason when attempting to dispute the claim that a religious experience is veridical, or an honest encounter with sacred reality.

As Proudfoot has observed, James's strategy here amounts to an attempt to separate "questions of origin and questions of evaluation…in the study of religious experience."[24] In this sense, James employs what Proudfoot calls a protective strategy, or an attempt to protect religious experience from the reach of

15 James, *Varieties*, 13.
16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 17.
18 Ibid., 19.
19 Ibid., 19-20.
20 Ibid., 20.
21 Ibid., 21.
22 Ibid., 23-4.
23 Ibid., 25.
24 Proudfoot, *Religious*, 169.

scientific explanation by suggesting that its claims can only be evaluated in terms inimical to scientific explanation.[25] For Proudfoot, the problem with this strategy is that experiences have "the epistemic status of hypotheses."[26] In any experience, there is a "noetic quality."[27] This quality involves "an embedded claim about the cause or origin of the perceptual experience."[28] But then this means that "matters of assessment and explanation cannot be kept as clearly distinct as [James] would like."[29]

Proudfoot's view is that James's treatment of religious experience in *Varieties* involves a sort of ham-fisted anti-reductionist position. In Proudfoot's view, many "warnings against reductionism in the study of religion conflate descriptive and explanatory reduction."[30] As Proudfoot defines it, descriptive reduction involves "the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it."[31] Explanatory, or theoretical reduction, on the other hand, "consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval."[32] The problem with descriptive reduction is that it can misidentify the experience.[33] For Proudfoot, an "experience must be identified under a description that can be ascribed to the subject at the time of the experience."[34] Yet this doesn't itself rule out the possibility that the best explanation of that description will not vindicate the embedded claim about the cause of the experience. Therefore, the inadmissibility of descriptive reduction in the study of religious experience doesn't reveal the inadmissibility of explanatory reduction in that study.

Insofar as James's protective strategy neglects the embedded etiological claims in religious experiences, Proudfoot can easily charge James with an improper use of descriptive reduction in his own treatment of these experiences. That this objection can be made against James shows how unstable James's distinction between existential and spiritual judgments actually is. For one thing, the distinction is quite out of step with the radical empiricist philosophy James will go on to develop. Radical empiricism, as James explains, suggests that "the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience…[as] the things themselves."[35] For James, these conjunctions can be either conjunctions of copresence or conjunctions of succession.[36] But if that's the case, then, any experiential episode should involve some awareness of where the experience has come from, and that, as Proudfoot notices, brings etiological considerations into play. Second, the distinction between fruits and roots involves a quite unhelpful idealization of the concept of fruit. A fruit is something that grows from roots, not something without them.

This is something James should have appreciated given his comments about the hypothesis of "the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions."[37] As James observed, this dependence, if true, would make all experience conditioned by organic conditions. So, one cannot make a judgment about the veridicality of an experience merely by pointing to these conditions. But then James doesn't need to distinguish between fruits and roots in this context.[38] He can simply point out that these organic conditions

25 Ibid., 199.
26 Ibid., 163.
27 Ibid., 169.
28 Ibid., 176.
29 Ibid., 169.
30 Ibid., 198.
31 Ibid., 196.
32 Ibid., 197.
33 Ibid., 234.
34 Ibid., 218.
35 James, *Meaning*, 173.
36 In a footnote in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James says that "[a]lmost no philosopher has admitted that perception can give us relations immediately" but he refers readers to Bergson, "Prof. James Ward in his *Naturalism and Agnosticism*" and his own *A Pluralistic Universe* for exceptions to this pattern (James, *Some*, 110).
37 James, *Varieties*, 20.
38 James uses the distinction between fruits and roots to draw attention to several things, including a distinction between foundationalism and pragmatism. My point here is just that James is wrong to map this distinction onto the distinction between existential and spiritual judgments.

amount to shared roots, and therefore these conditions cannot alone demonstrate that an alleged experience is not veridical. Of course, this move is not quite decisive against medical materialism. That's because the medical materialist can hold out hope that a more fine-grained analysis of organic conditions might reliably help distinguish between veridical and non-veridical experiences. Something near to this suggestion has been made in the case of evolutionary debunking arguments in the cognitive science of religion, as we will see in the next section.

3 The Roots of Religious Experience

In his discussion of medical materialism, James grants the notion that mental states are dependent on bodily conditions. He then suggests that this fact can't count in favor of either a religious or scientific belief. I suggested that this leaves open the possibility that a finer discrimination between bodily conditions could help distinguish veridical from non-veridical experiences. However, in "Religion and Neurology" James suggests otherwise. He suggests that we may someday know "the facts intimately enough" that we can see "'the liver'...alter[ing] in one way the blood that percolates it" such that the result is "the [M]ethodist [and] in another way...the atheist form of mind."[39] Yet it's hard to see how this admission helps James's case. If the percolation of blood associated with the Methodist form of mind was associated with routine mathematical error, while the alteration associated with the atheist form of mind was associated with mathematical genius, that might be reason to treat the Methodist form of mind with suspicion. His distorted understanding of fruits has clearly caused him to stumble here. And if we look to contemporary cognitive science of religion and some evolutionary debunking arguments in philosophy of religion, we can quickly come to appreciate attempts to identify unreliable physiological processes associated with religious experience.

Consider, for example, the hypothesized hyperactive agency detection device (HADD). According to Evolutionary Psychologist Justin Barrett, agency detection was important in the evolutionary past because it helped prey avoid predators.[40] Insofar as it is more costly to fail to detect a predator than to falsely detect a predator, it's reasonable to think that a strong predisposition to agency detection would be selected for and preserved throughout evolutionary history. This would mean that contemporary agents stand to inherit this predisposition, and this implies that contemporary agents are prone to falsely detect agents where there are none. This could clearly be the case with respect to various religious experiences. Thus, HADD supports the claim that "people acquire their supernatural beliefs because the mechanism by means of which they detect agents is prone to hyperactivity."[41]

Consider also Bering's Existential Theory of Mind (EToM) proposal.[42] According to this proposal, religious belief is explained by an overactive utilization of Theory of Mind (ToM). A Theory of Mind enables sufficiently complex cognitive actors to postulate the existence of other minds, specifically intentional states, where a meaningful event occurs. For example, the sight of someone pointing in one direction would lead one to believe that this person has a conscious attentive interest in something in that direction. Clearly, this is a quite useful skill in social contexts, and so it's reasonable to think that a strong predisposition to ToM would be selected for and preserved throughout evolutionary history, at least in the case of social creatures. Again, this would mean that contemporary agents stand to inherit this predisposition and that contemporary agents may be prone to falsely posit intentional states where there are none. According to EToM, religious belief is a result of people positing the intentional states of "a greater mind, or ultimate meaning-giver" where an apparently meaningful event occurs.[43]

Keeping these theories in mind,[44] we can revisit James's suggestion that an elucidation of organic conditions cannot undermine religious experience. One way to read James here is to suggest that James

39 James, *Varieties*, 20-1.
40 Barrett, *Why?*
41 Van Eyghen, "Is supernatural," 127.
42 Bering, "The existential."
43 Van Eyghen, "Is supernatural," 128.
44 For other CSR theories, see Boyer, *Religion* and Johnson, *God*.

is committed to the genetic fallacy: the view that questions of etiology are irrelevant to questions regarding the philosophical value of an experience. This is an example of what I earlier described as the first argumentative route in "Religion and Neurology." Having already dispatched this route, we are now considering the suggestion that the sharing of etiological roots does not lead to any substantive conclusions about the veridicality of an experience. I have suggested that this is a quite plausible claim, but as the preceding two theories demonstrate, this claim leaves room for a finer discrimination of the etiology of an experience to undermine the veridicality of that experience.

Take James's throwaway suggestion that one type of blood percolation in the liver is associated with the Methodist form of mind and another type of percolation is associated with the atheist form of mind. Suppose now that evolutionary cognitive scientists have correlated HADD with the Methodist form of blood percolation. Suppose further that the informant James references in "The Reality of the Unseen" who one night "felt…a presence in the room" they could not "better describe [than as] a consciousness of a spiritual presence" is a Methodist.[45] In this case, HADD may very well imply that the experience was not veridical. That's because the HADD hypothesis would lead this informant to think the experience was due to something other than the perception of an actual spiritual presence. And in recounting their experience, James's informant admits that "[t]his may provoke a smile."[46] Of course, this informant wasn't aware of the HADD hypothesis, but this claim is nonetheless an indication that they were not absolutely certain that the experience was veridical, and that they were open to the possibility that a claim to veridicality could be undermined. Thus, it's perfectly reasonable to think that the HADD hypothesis in this case casts considerable doubt on the veridicality of this informant's experience.

Of course, this conclusion may yet be too hasty. There may be some concrete detail of the experience that the informant might insist that the HADD hypothesis doesn't account for. Consider the series of encounters James's friend describes in this same chapter.[47] In this case, the informant describes three different experiences of an unseen presence: one, "a vivid tactile hallucination of being grasped by the arm," two, a sudden feeling of "something come into the room" and remain "a minute or two," and three, an awareness "of the actual presence (though not the *coming*) of the thing that was there the night before."[48] Suppose that this informant was then faced with the HADD hypothesis. This informant might not judge the hypothesis to adequately account for the tactile hallucinations of being grasped by the arm. Or perhaps they might judge the hypothesis to account for this hallucination, but not for the way the presence lingered in the room. Of course, we might combine the HADD and EToM hypotheses and suggest the existence of something like a HADD-EToM loop. This view would have HADD triggered by an occurrence occasionally associated with the actual presence of an agent and then activate an EToM process that searches for subsequent meaningful events. The perception of these events would then prime a subject to expect the presence of an agent thereby retriggering HADD, and this might re-engage EToM processes, and then the process could repeat. This would create a HADD-EToM loop. Perhaps this loop hypothesis can account for the experience. But notice that this hypothesized loop is quite extended across time. In the previous case mentioned above, the informant describes "immediately [feeling] a consciousness of a presence in the room."[49] Faced with this loop hypothesis, a person who had an experience of this sort might judge the hypothesis to significantly distort their experience. If so, this loop hypothesis might not undermine the veridicality of the experience.

Nonetheless, the preceding demonstrates that it is certainly possible to give a genealogical and/or etiological account that undermines the claim that an experience was veridical.[50] James's suggestion that the etiological roots of an experience do not lead to any substantive conclusions about the veridicality of an experience when those roots are shared with other experiences one does not suspect are non-veridical is open to the response that the sharing of these roots is only partial. This is what the evolutionary debunking

45 James, *Varieties*, 58.
46 Ibid.
47 James, *Varieties*, 55.
48 Ibid., 56.
49 Ibid., 58.
50 See also McBrayer, "The Epistemology."

arguments inspired by work in CSR attempt to do. Of course, those arguments might fail for many reasons.[51] One possible reason is that the advocates of these arguments fail to note how little the CSR theories address first-person experience.[52] Thus, there is little alternative to getting in the weeds, examining concrete instances of religious experience, and investigating whether a cognitive scientific account can adequately capture the details of the experience. No one who regards a religious experience as veridical needs to regard all alleged experiences as veridical. One can accept the claim that some CSR theories cast doubt on the veridicality of some religious experiences. However, it may seem that our arrival at this conclusion has left James and *Varieties* behind. In the next section, I argue that this is not the case and that the third argumentative strategy James develops in "Religion and Neurology" supports a case for continuing to regard many religious experiences as veridical when explanations that do not necessarily regard the experience as veridical are available and applicable to that experience.

4 The Case from Noetic Pluralism

Debunking arguments appealing to theories in CSR require these theories to muster more experimental support than they have thus far gathered. However, a debunking argument doesn't require CSR at all. Consider, for example, Proudfoot's sociohistorical approach to religious experience. As Proudfoot describes it, this approach involves a "historical understanding" and "natural explanation" of religious experience.[53] This approach may be consistent with regarding experiences as veridical.[54] Nonetheless, suppose one wanted to construct a debunking argument motivated by this approach rather than the theories of CSR. Such an advocate would not need to hold out hope that the cognitive scientists of the future will be able to discriminate between truth-producing and delusion-producing physiological or cognitive states. They could argue that sociohistorical explanation does not need to posit the veridicality of an experience, and that this suggests the experience is not veridical. The question is whether this follows. I think not. Such a view assumes that one explanatory practice is best and/or exhaustive, but this is the position James's case against medical materialism targets. In this way, "Religion and Neurology" contains a case for defusing debunking attempts motivated by a commitment to a form of explanatory reductionism. I will explain.

In developing his case against medical materialism, James says that when "we think of certain states of mind [as] superior to others…[i]t is either because we take an immediate delight in them; or…because we believe them to bring us good consequential fruits for life."[55] Yet how James cashes out these fruits is quite revealing. He says that it is "the character of inner happiness…which stamps them as good, or else their consistency with our other opinions and their serviceability for our needs."[56] Though he quickly returns to a discussion of "spiritual judgments," he says that here "*immediate luminousness*," or "*philosophical reasonableness*, and *moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria."[57] Thus, James says, "we are thrown back upon the general principles by which the empirical philosophy has always contended that we must be guided in our search for truth."[58] In emphasizing the need for principles (in the plural) and connecting these to his metaphor of fruits, it is clear that James is introducing a pluralistic approach to evaluation. He

51 As Peels et al note, "*no* theory in the Cognitive Science of Religion can be regarded as established" (206). See also Jong, Kavanaugh & Visala "Born Idolaters", Jong & Visala, "Evolutionary debunking", Marsh & Marsh, "The explanatory" and Van Leeuwen & Van Elk, "Seeking." See Plantinga, *Where* and Barrett & Church, "Should CSR" for a case that some commitments of CSR render atheism internally incoherent. See Braddock "An Evidential" for an argument to the effect that the confirmation of CSR theories would be a boon for religious believers not their critics.

52 For a discussion of the scope of CSR theories, see White, "What?"

53 Proudfoot, "Pragmatism", 45.

54 For example, one way of interpreting Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory approach to social science is as a radical empiricist counter to the debunking efforts of neo-Kantian or Durkheimian sociology Latour suggests amount to borderline conspiracy theories. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 160.

55 James, *Varieties*, 21.

56 Ibid., 21-2.

57 Ibid., 23.

58 Ibid., 23-4.

here appeals to the need for clear thoughts, to coherence, or "consistency with…other opinions," to moral serviceability, and to responsiveness to other needs. In a 1908 article published in *Philosophical Review* entitled "The Pragmatic Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders," James reinforces this pluralism and expressly says that true ideas "must point to or lead towards…reality [and]…yield…such satisfactions (in the plural) as concretely existing men actually do find in their beliefs."[59] This is why James says medical materialism is "a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering."[60] It's also why James describes medical materialists as "so many belated dogmatists" who make etiological considerations the "admirable *criterion*" of truth.[61] Of course, James describes his own view as appealing to "our empiricist criterion" as well, but his goal here is to construct a method for managing a plurality of desiderata, as the metaphor of fruits indicates.[62]

In this way James's pluralism is not only evaluative, but noetic.[63] James erred in overstating the distinction between existential and spiritual judgments, but in doing so he also implicitly acknowledged a distinction between genealogy and intervention, and between one knowledge practice and another. Thus, when James went to compose *Pragmatism* a few years later, he put the notion of leading at the core of his account of truth to account for both success within a knowledge practice and between knowledge practices.[64] For instance, James says the pragmatic notion of truth is "essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to."[65] This is a view that James says "force[s] us to be friendly" to "the hypothesis of *noetic pluralism*," "to the pluralistic view" that "the widest field of knowledge…still contains some ignorance."[66] Thus, James says that "no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality," but that "any one of them may from some point of view be useful."[67]

However, if pragmatism is to account for successful shifting from one knowledge practice to another, James realized he needed an account of how this was possible. For James, radical empiricism plays this role. This is one reason why James says, "the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail."[68] That theory has it that truth consists in the leading of one moment to other moments where a plurality of evaluative desiderata are consistently satisfied. Of course, if that is to be the case, moments of experience need to stand in relation to one another. Fortunately, this is exactly what James calls the "generalized conclusion" of radical empiricism: "that…the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience."[69] This supports a commitment to noetic pluralism because this "concatenated or continuous" structure of experience is not the same within or between different practices.[70] While James does allude to empiricism in "Religion and Neurology," he doesn't conceive radical empiricism as a mere refurbishing of Humean empiricism. As James says in *Pragmatism*, "Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything."[71] And as James notes in *The Meaning of Truth*, pragmatism leads to radical empiricism.[72] Therefore, the relationship pragmatism and radical empiricism is not that of a Wittgensteinian ladder. James does not use pragmatism to establish radical empiricism and then drop the former. Radical empiricism presupposes pragmatism, and pragmatism requires coherence of commitments,

59 James, *Meaning*, 270.
60 Ibid., 20.
61 James, *Varieties*, 24, my emphasis in italics.
62 Ibid., 25.
63 See also Levinson, *Religious Investigations*.
64 See Stepanenko, "A New Name."
65 James, *Pragmatism*, 98.
66 Ibid., 81-2.
67 James, *Varieties*, 33.
68 James, *Meaning*, 172
69 Ibid., 173.
70 Ibid.
71 James, *Pragmatism*, 44.
72 In this sense, radical empiricism is not just contrasted with Humean empiricism, but is conceived as a retread of Kant's transcendental empiricism.

the correspondence of memories with actual events, the satisfaction of needs, and practical relevance for all claims. In this way, James integrates elements of coherentist, correspondence, virtue, and consequentialist epistemologies into his view. If we focus on radical empiricism and overlook James's pragmatism, we might be tempted to interpret James as a noetic monist and miss this noetic pluralism.

This oversight can be problematic because this commitment constitutes one of James's important insights in "Religion and Neurology." James's case against medical materialism doesn't rely solely on a protective strategy. James's pragmatism is pitted against reductionism in general. Thus, James would be quite unmoved by an attempt to leverage Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reductionism into a debunking case. For James, the adoption of any form of reductionism would just be the adoption of one particular point of view on a phenomenon. The important question will still be whether or not that point of view can account for the relevant concrete facts of the phenomenon. If the point of view cannot clearly do so, the explanation will not be viable, but even if one explanatory perspective accounts for the relevant facts, that still wouldn't suffice to rule out the veridicality of the experience. To do that, one would need to suggest that other explanatory perspectives are not viable. But to do that, one would need to suggest that one explanatory practice is best and/or exhaustive and this is exactly what Jamesian pragmatism denies. That's not to say James could not endorse a form of reductionism as useful, but that he would resist the attempt to leverage this utility in a debunking effort or other effort to preclude alternative explanations.

To reinforce this conclusion, recall Proudfoot's claim that "those who identify their experiences in religious terms are seeking the best explanations for what is happening to them."[73] In Proudfoot's view, if these experiences are veridical, the religious believer should expect an explanation that takes those experiences to be actual encounters with the divine. However, James's commitment to noetic pluralism also entails a commitment to perspectival pluralism. So, for James, an alternative explanation which does not involve any theistic appeals is not necessarily a rival explanation. Two explanations are only rival explanations if they purport to account for the same aspects of the same phenomenon, and at least one denies what the other claims. Consider one of the experiences of an unseen presence I described in the last section. The HADD hypothesis is tailored to account for the experience of this presence. It is an alternative to the hypothesis that the experience is veridical. The two explanations are rival explanations because they both attempt to account for the same aspect of the same experience, and one denies what the other claims. In this circumstance, one explanation is to be preferred over its rival only if that explanation accounts for its target better than the other. Thus, an experiential episode can only be regarded as non-veridical if the veridical hypothesis fares worse in this regard.

Now, it might seem as if a religious experience can be dismissed as non-veridical in cases where the veridical and non-veridical hypothesis account for the episode equally well. The first thing to say about such cases is that they are probably rare. I suspect that the more we focus on the concrete details of an experiential episode, the less likely it will be that we find ourselves in a situation where two rival explanations fare equally well. Nonetheless, suppose there is such a case. On what grounds can the non-veridical hypothesis be preferred over its veridical rival? The typical move here is to appeal to parsimony considerations. The non-veridical explanation is supposed to be preferable insofar as it invokes fewer and syntactically simpler entities.[74] But is that true? Consider a debunking case motivated by a view like Proudfoot's. Proudfoot's sociohistorical analysis, to be descriptively adequate, is going to have to account for the experiential details of the disputed episode. To account for these details, he must, therefore, appeal to a wide variety of sociohistorical cultural phenomena. The hypothesis that the episode is veridical is going to regard the experiential details as registers of something that actually, or mostly, happened. The hypothesis will thus have less of a need to appeal to the resources of 19th century liberal Protestantism, or contingencies in the Counter Reformation, or the state of Pauline interpretation in 17th century England, etc. Of course, the veridical hypothesis might also appeal to these resources, but insofar as the episode is regarded as veridical, the veridical hypothesis might appeal to fewer of these resources. All of this suggests that an identification of the simpler, more parsimonious

73 Proudfoot, *Religious*, 227.

74 See, for example, Nola, "Demystifying".

explanation is no straightforward task. James would hardly care. He says explicitly in *Pragmatism* that "profusion, not economy, may after all be reality's key-note."[75] Of course, this is a view that James most explicitly formulates in his later philosophical writings, but his uneasiness in "Religion and Neurology" with "nothing but" explanations suggests that this commitment is at work in *Varieties*.[76]

Perhaps there are other considerations debunkers might appeal to that put pressure on veridical interpretations of religious experience. One often invoked consideration is against hypotheses with untestable assumptions.[77] Perhaps one response is that the veridical hypothesis rests on assumptions that are testable. Many philosophers have argued that religious experiences allow for a test of sanctity: if true, these experiences lead to reform in character, the accomplishment of tasks that were otherwise not accomplished, clarity of thought, and so on.[78] These sorts of tests might not satisfy debunkers, but if noetic pluralism is true, there's no reason to expect every claim to be testable in exactly the same way. Of course, the reductionist debunkers might suggest that at this point James and I are only inviting us to engage in a bit of intuition warfare, that we are merely pitting an intuitive commitment to noetic pluralism against the reductionist's intuitive commitment to noetic monism. And it's true that James does not quite secure a case for noetic pluralism in *Varieties*, but the good point he is implicitly making in "Religion and Neurology" is that the debunker is relying on an implicit commitment to noetic monism, and that they have not secured their case for noetic monism either. Thus, Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reductionism is itself of little use in a debunking case, and James's work in *Varieties* helps us see why.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that the critique of medical materialism James develops in "Religion and Neurology" cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it contains nothing more than an illicit strategy that protects religious experience from the reach of scientific explanation. While this is a dubious strategy, it is not the only or even the most important consideration to which James appeals in his case against medical materialism. Instead, I have argued that when we elucidate the most forceful considerations to which James appeals in *Varieties*, we not only have a case against medical materialism, but a case against debunking efforts reliant on explanatory reductionism in general. This is a case I have described as the case from noetic pluralism. According to this view, there are a plurality of knowledge practices, no practice can capture every aspect of a target phenomenon, and no claim made from within a particular practice can be ruled out unless it contradicts a claim made from within a separate practice that better accounts for the target aspects of the target phenomenon. Because any form of explanatory reductionism privileges a particular knowledge practice, the truth of noetic pluralism entails the rejection of explanatory reductionism. The preceding has admittedly not secured the case for noetic pluralism, but the primary contention is that the reductionist has not secured the case for noetic monism either.

This is not to say that a form of explanatory reductionism cannot be useful, but that the complexity of experience is such that successful reduction need not amount to exhaustive description. Consider Proudfoot's suggestion that "those who identify their experiences in religious terms are seeking the best explanations for what is happening to them."[79] If we are focused on the intuitive aim of "figuring out exactly what happened" we can focus on the contrast between veridical and non-veridical interpretation of the experience as Proudfoot does here, and this focus is acceptable enough. The problem is that this focus can obfuscate the possibility of a multiplicity of veridical or even non-veridical interpretations of

75 James, *Pragmatism*, 93. This doesn't mean a Jamesian cannot accept the leaner of two theories (if one can be discerned) on pragmatic grounds. A leaner theory can do more work, be more beautiful, inform practical interventions better and so be preferred on these grounds. It's just that if we reject parsimony as an intellectual, aesthetical, moral or practical ideal, we cannot prefer a leaner theory just because it is leaner.

76 James, *Varieties*, 19.

77 See, for example, Nola "Demystifying".

78 See Van Eyghen, "Is supernatural", and Alston, *Perceiving*.

79 Proudfoot, *Religious*, 227.

the experience. One could generate poetic descriptions, prosaic descriptions, pictorial descriptions, etc. of the same experience, each description could suggest that the experience was veridical, and yet each can amount to a somewhat different description of the same experience.[80] The Jamesian view is that these descriptions can be true concurrently. I have suggested that this view relies on an implicit commitment to noetic pluralism and that this commitment is plausible. If so, knowledge practices that suggest an experience was veridical can coexist with practices that do not assume or imply that the experience was veridical. In these cases, the absence of a veridical judgment of an experience in one practice need not necessarily undermine the presence of a veridical judgment in another practice. To suggest otherwise is not just to embrace explanatory reductionism, but noetic monism. If we have reason to accept noetic pluralism, we have reason to resist this suggestion or any suggestion that alternative explanations are not available and/or viable. Therefore, an acceptance of noetic pluralism entails the rejection of explanatory reductionism as a method of accounting for religious experience, whether we take that reduction to suggest an experience is veridical or not.

References

Alston, William. *Perceiving god: The epistemology of religious experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Barrett, Justin. *Why would anyone believe in god?* Walnut Creek: Almita Press, 2004.

Barrett, Justin, & Church, Ian. "Should CSR give atheists epistemic reassurance? On beer-goggles, BFFs, and skepticism regarding religious belief." *The Monist*. 96 (2013), 311-324.

Bering, Jesse. "The existential theory of mind." *Review of General Psychology*. 6 (2002), 3-24.

Boyer, Pascal. *Religion explained: The human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors*. London: Vintage, 2002.

Braddock, Matthew. "An Evidential Argument for Theism from the Cognitive Science of Religion." In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by Rik Peels, Hans van Eyghen, & Gijsbert van Den Brink, 171-198. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Hollinger, David. "'Damned for God's Glory:' William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture." In *William James and a Science of Religions*, edited by Wayne Proudfoot, 9-30. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.

James, William. *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Edited by Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1902|1985.

James, William. *Pragmatism*. Edited by Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1907|1975.

James, William. *The meaning of truth*. Edited by Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1909|1975.

James, William. *Some problems of philosophy*. Edited by Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1911|1979.

James, William. *Essays in radical empiricism*. Edited by Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1912|1976.

Johnson, Dominic. *God is watching you: How the fear of god makes us human*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Jong, Jonathan and Aku Visala. "Evolutionary debunking arguments against theism, reconsidered." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. 76 (2014), 243-258.

Jong, Jonathan, Christopher Kavanaugh, and Aku Visala. "Born Idolaters: The limits of the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion." *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematishe Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*. 57 (2015), 244-266.

Kitcher, Philip. "A Pragmatist's Progress: The Varieties of James's Strategies for Defending Religion." In *William James and a Science of Religions*, edited by Wayne Proudfoot, 98-138. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Levinson, Henry. *The religious investigations of William James*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.

Marsh, Jason and Marsh, Jon. "The explanatory challenge of religious diversity." In *Advances in religion, cognitive science, and experiment philosophy*, edited by Helen De Cruz & Ryan Nichols, 61-83. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

McBrayer, Justin. "The Epistemology of Genealogies." In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by Rik Peels, Hans van Eyghen, & Gijsbert van Den Brink, 157-170. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Nola, Robert. "Demystifying Religious Belief." In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by Rik Peels, Hans van Eyghen, & Gijsbert van Den Brink, 71-92. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

80 This is in addition to the possibility that there may be a multiplicity of accurate descriptions internal to each knowledge practice as well.

Peels, Rik, van Eyghen, Hans, & van den Brink, Gijsbert. "Cognitive Science of Religion and the Cognitive Consequences of Sin." In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by Rik Peels, Hans van Eyghen, & Gijsbert van Den Brink, 199-214. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Where the conflict really lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Proudfoot, Wayne. *Religious experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

Proudfoot, Wayne. "Pragmatism and an Unseen Order." In *William James and a Science of Religions*, edited by Wayne Proudfoot, 31-47. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Stepanenko, Walter Scott. "A new name for some old ways of thinking: pragmatism, radical empiricism, and epistemology in W.E.B. Du Bois's 'Of the Sorrow Songs.'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, forthcoming.

Van Eyghen, Hans. "Is supernatural belief unreliably formed?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. 85 (2019), 125-148.

Van Leeuwen, Neil, & Van Elk, Michael. "Seeking the supernatural: The interactive religious experience model." *Religion, Brain & Behavior*. (2018), 221-251. doi: 10.1080/2153599X.2018.1453529

White, Claire. "What does the Cognitive Science of Religion Explain?" In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by Rik Peels, Hans van Eyghen, & Gijsbert van den Brink, 35-50. Springer International Publishing, 2018.