

Delusions of Knowledge concerning God's Existence: A Skeptical Look at Religious Experience

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1. My Suspicion

In a preliminary way, I seek in this paper to express, explain, and to some extent defend my suspicion that hardly anyone, if anyone at all, knows whether God exists. My focus here will be limited to exploring what seems to me the most promising proposal as to how it might be that at least some people might know whether God exists—which turns out to be a way by which some theists might know that God does indeed exist: by means of religious experience. I will explain why it looks to me as if, at least in almost all cases, even if these people are right about God's existence, the way in question fails to be a way by which they know that God exists.

Some initial explanation of and background to my suspicion:

Scope: For current purposes, “hardly anyone, if anyone at all,” as a description of who might know, does a good job of setting the scope of my suspicion in general terms—which scope then amounts to something like “almost everyone, if not everyone.” In section 3, I will have something to say about what kind of people I think might have knowledge on this matter. But let me here add a bit about some whom I mean to be explicitly including among my suspected non-knowers: I suspect that nobody I know knows whether or not God exists. And I should right here explicitly add that I am in the scope of my own suspicion: I take myself to not know whether God exists.

“Agnostic”: And I think that on one common meaning of “agnostic,” it means at least roughly: one who takes themselves not to know whether God exists.¹ So in one good, common sense of the term, I’m an “agnostic” about God's existence. In section 9, I’ll explain what seems to be another good meaning of the term on which I and many

¹ As the editors point out to me, this means that an agnostic in this sense can in fact know whether God exists, since one can know what one does not take oneself to know. I am comfortable with that implication of this definition: The definition does seem to me to reflect what the term means when used in the sense in question—though I suppose that is a delicate call. Those bothered by the implication—those who, for instance, think that in no common sense of the term can an “agnostic” know—could instead take this to be a sense on which an “agnostic” is one who ~~neither knows nor takes themselves to know.~~

others who take ourselves not to know whether God exists do *not* count as “agnostics,” and explain the connection between the two uses of the term.

“Knows”: *I’m not particularly skeptical*: I imagine some readers might be thinking I’m just generally stingy about counting people as knowing things. That’s not so.² And those who are aware of my contextualism might be wondering about what standards for knowledge I mean to be employing here. In short: ordinary, moderate standards, that we very often meet concerning other matters. (Unless otherwise specified, my uses of “knows” and its cognates in this essay should be understood as governed by such standards.) We know a lot.³ But not this.

Delusions of knowledge and a concern about arrogance: Since many of my suspects take themselves to know whether God exists, my suspicion of them amounts to a suspicion that they suffer here from a delusion of knowledge. That’s not a particularly nice suspicion to harbor, I know – especially about friends and loved ones. And I realize that expressing, or perhaps even just harboring, such a suspicion, while thinking that I (and other “agnostics,” in one common use of the term) escape that delusion can make me appear arrogant. But responding to that worry goes beyond the scope of the present paper!

I Know Some (Relatively) Excellent Candidates: One piece of background you should understand about my suspicion is that I know lots of people—and some of them I know very well—who would be excellent candidates for folks who would know whether God exists, if anybody does. For reasons that will soon emerge, I think the best candidates for knowledge about this matter are all on the pro-God’s-existence side of this issue. And, as I said, I know lots of relatively excellent candidates. Not just churchy people,

² Indeed, one of the main themes of the book in epistemology that I recently finished writing, *The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 2* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press), is that, at least by ordinary, moderate standards for knowledge, we know various things that we can appear to ourselves not to know at all—in particular, that various skeptical hypotheses are false, and even that we’ve lost the lottery (in the philosophically standard lottery situation). Of course, the actual winner of the lottery doesn’t know (by any standards) that she’s lost, since she cannot know what isn’t so. But even she can rationally (if incorrectly) take herself to know that she’s lost. See Chapter 5, “Lotteries, Insensitivity, and Closure,” of the just mentioned book for further explanation.

³ Here I echo the opening of “Elusive Knowledge,” by my fellow contextualist, David Lewis: “We know a lot. I know what food penguins eat. I know that phones used to ring, but nowadays squeal, when someone calls up. I know that Essendon won the 1993 Grand Final. I know that here is a hand, and here is another. . . . Besides knowing a lot that is everyday and trite, I myself think that we know a lot that is interesting and esoteric and controversial. We know a lot about things unseen: tiny particles and pervasive fields, not to mention one another’s underwear. Sometimes we even know what an author means by his writings” (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549–567; p. 549)

who seem extremely confident about the matter, but also missionary-types (well, including outright missionaries) who live their apparent confidence to an impressive degree.

I'm Not Particularly Hostile Toward Those Who Think They Know: And I like and admire many of these excellent candidates. My suspicion seems not to be born of hostility of animus. Being just a suspicion, I do take there to be a substantial chance that it is wrong. And I'm pretty sure I would prefer it if some of these folks I know turn out to really know that God exists. This is a case where I think—but you can never be too sure about these things!—I can be correctly described as sincerely hoping that I'm wrong.

Why My Suspicion Might Be of Interest: So, if you're one of those people who takes themselves to know that God exists, I guess this all suggests that if I were to get to know you, then even if I came to like and admire you, I would likely also suspect you to be under a delusion of knowledge about this matter.

Of course, what ~~I think or~~ would think of you may well be of little interest to you in itself. But I think it quite likely that others around you harbor similar suspicions about you. My hope is that expressing that suspicion and my grounds for it may perhaps advance the cause of mutual understanding here. You know: I'll say why I think (and why others may well think) that you don't know. Perhaps then you can explain (or be positioned to better explain) why you think you do know. Maybe some others will listen in on the whole exchange. Maybe peace, love, and mutual understanding will break out. Or, well, maybe just a bit of that last item. Who knows? At any rate, there might be some interest here, for at least some people, in knowing that and why someone who knows and likes many excellent candidates and who is not particularly skeptical in general—and who is an epistemologist to boot!—might harbor such a suspicion about those who take themselves to know whether God exists.

2. Philosophical Arguments and Knowledge

Another bit of background: My suspicion that there is much ignorance and a tendency toward delusions of knowledge on the question of God's existence is part of a more general suspicion, that I share with some other philosophers: that we tend not to know the positions we take on controversial philosophical matters, even in cases where we feel very confident in our beliefs and have, at least by philosophical standards, very

good reasons for holding them.⁴ I think there is something to the view of philosophers as specialists in addressing questions to which nobody has yet figured out a knowledge-producing way to get answers to. One of our most important special skills is the ability to generate answers to such questions, and good (even if not knowledge-producing) support for those answers. I develop this more general suspicion elsewhere,⁵ and it is in line with similar suspicions other philosophers have been expressing lately.⁶ Here, I'm interested in issues that are more particular to the special case at hand, and particularly, in what may appear to be a potential way by which those who think that God exists might know this to be so—an apparent way to knowledge that is not typically available on other philosophical questions.

In line with this, one of the ways that my defense of my suspicion is going to be limited here is that I am not going to discuss particular arguments for or against the existence of God, but will rely on my conviction that, like other arguments for controversial philosophical positions, none of these arguments are strong enough to produce knowledge of the truth of their conclusions.

I am also here neglecting the possibility that atheists might know that God does not exist in a way other than by means of an argument for God's existence. This neglect is not due to my thinking this possibility is far-fetched. Indeed, I in particular have reasons to take it seriously.⁷ Rather, the neglect is just a matter of my focusing here on

⁴ As Gary Gutting (one of the philosophers with whom I aligned on this) points out (Gutting 2009), while we may well suspect that philosophical theorizing does not typically result in knowledge of the controversial positions we take on the issues we're focused on, it does produce, as a regular byproduct, philosophical knowledge of such things as that there are certain important distinctions to be drawn: See his *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). I'm not focused here on getting the line between these known byproducts of philosophical theorizing and the philosophical positions, which I'm claiming we don't know, exactly right; I take it that the matter of whether God exists is going to end up in the camp of the controversial positions we take, and so within the scope of the suspicion, on any reasonable way of drawing that line.

"Controversial": I don't mean for things we ordinarily take ourselves to know in everyday life to be put inside the scope of my skepticism about philosophy just because some philosophers deny or question the matter, making it in some sense philosophically controversial. I am rather thinking of philosophical matters that we don't commonsensically take ourselves to know, and about which there is no philosophical consensus.

⁵ "Do I Even Know, Any of This to Be True?: Some Thoughts about Belief, Knowledge, and Assertion in Philosophical Settings and Other Knowledge Deserts," an appendix in my upcoming book, *The Appearance of Ignorance*, *op. cit.*

⁶ See, perhaps most notably, Peter van Inwagen, esp. in Lecture 3, "Philosophical Failure," in his *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford UP, 2006).

⁷ In Chapter 7 of the book mentioned above in note 2, I give an account of how we know—at least by moderate standards for knowledge—that we're not brains in vats on which the way the hypothesis that we are brains in vats strikes as ridiculous plays the key role in our coming to have such knowledge, with no argument needed. (I would

what I take to be the most serious possibility of knowledge on the question, which I think is a way by which, if God exists, some might know this to be so.

I suspect that most who think that they know that God exists would not cite any philosophical argument as the means by which they know that, anyway. I am reminded of the opening lines of the gospel song “My God Is Real,” which, at least as performed by Mahalia Jackson (my favorite rendition), go like this:

There are some things I may not know
There are some places, oh Lord, I cannot go
But I am sure of this one thing
That God is real
For I can feel Him in my soul⁸ — the

Because it is more true to self-understanding of many of who take themselves to know that God exists (as well as for other reasons!), this song is much more effective than it would be if the last line above instead went:

For I have found a version of the cosmological argument that is clearly enough
sound

3. Religious Experience as a Potential Source of Knowledge that God Exists, the Challenge from Religious Diversity, and the Nature of Some Religious Experience

So, as I’ve already indicated, the more serious possibility for knowledge here seems to me what “My God Is Real” actually seems to base its assurance on: religious experience.

give similar accounts of how we know other radical, global skeptical hypotheses to be false.) This of course opens me up to questions about why atheists cannot know that God doesn’t exist in a similar way (by the hypothesis that God exists striking them as absurd or ridiculous)—questions very close to those that atheists actually have been prominently pressing in recent years (often by means of examples featuring such things as flying spaghetti monsters). As I explain, at least a bit, in an interview I did with Gary Gutting (“Why Take a Stance on God?”, originally in *The Stone*, the *New York Times* philosophy blog, 18 September 2014; reprinted with slight revisions in Gary Gutting, *Talking God: Philosophers on Belief* (New York: W.W. Norton, forthcoming, 2016), I think the answer to this challenge, in short, is that those of us around these atheists ruin our atheist friends’ chances to know that God doesn’t exist in that way (even if in fact God does not exist): If what you have going for you is just that things strike you a particular way, the presence of others (who meet certain conditions) to whom things seem very different can be a knowledge-killer. But this will all have to be worked out more thoroughly, hopefully in future work.

⁸ “Yes, God Is Real” (often performed under the title “My God Is Real”), composed by Kenneth Morris.

And many theistic philosophers, in addition to non-philosophical theists, would cite their experience of God as the way by which they take themselves to know that God exists.⁹

And what basis I have for believing in God's existence comes from this source. But I have since become skeptical of whether my experience provides or ever provided me with anything close to knowledge of God's existence. Why this skepticism? Well, one reason for being skeptical here is to be found in the challenge from religious diversity. Of course, the "problem of religious pluralism," as it's often called, is a much-discussed general reason for skepticism about religious beliefs. But it has also been raised specifically as a challenge to beliefs derived from religious experience—as in a very interesting paper by Sanford Goldberg.¹⁰ And the skeptical points I will go on to raise should be thought of as being added to the challenge from religious diversity.¹¹

But, though issues of religious diversity were no doubt playing a prominent role in the background, coloring my evaluation, my skepticism about my own theism was driven mainly by the nature of what religious experience I have had, which seems to me to have been far too meager to give me knowledge of God's existence. It's far too serious a possibility from my vantage point that what may be an experience of God is actually not coming from God at all. Without going into the nature of my experience too much (something I hope to take up at another time), my relevant experience consists of what I take to be small, gentle nudges toward belief that don't fit into a coherent body of experientially based information to nearly the extent needed for knowledge (even if I were to outright believe in God's existence on their basis and this belief turned out to be true). I take the nearest version of myself who does know that God exists to be one who has had the kind of religious experience that would be knowledge-producing. I take myself to have some ideas about kinds of religious experience that would produce knowledge of God's existence—though I'm sure that God, if God indeed exists, has much better ideas about how such knowledge could be produced. But, for better or worse

⁹ Some may also stress the role of testimony here: Not every member of a religious community needs to know on the basis of their own religious experience, because many can know by means of testimony, directly or indirectly from others who know by experience. Of course, insofar as we have reason to be skeptical that there is much knowledge derived from religious experience in the first place, that will lead to skepticism that those who believe in God through testimony are getting their belief through knowledgeable sources.

¹⁰ Goldberg, "Does Externalist Epistemology Rationalize Religious Commitment?," in L.F. Callahan and T. O'Connor, eds., *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue* (Oxford UP, 2014).

¹¹ One might in particular wonder whether the problem of diversity goes so far as to undermine even the belief in the existence of God (or of a god), even if it does present a daunting challenge to more particular beliefs about God—an issue Goldberg does not specifically take up. The issues here are complex, and I don't presume to be pronouncing on them here, but to be adding some complimentary reasons for skepticism.

(though since this is God we're talking about, I guess it would have to be for better), God, if God exists, doesn't seem to be in the business of jumping through the hoops needed to make me a knower. Of course, God being God, there would be good reasons for leaving me in the dark here—and I think I have ~~even have~~ some slight inkling of what some of these reasons might be.

And my best guess as to how some people do know that God exists if in fact any do know this is by means of much better (in various ways, relative to the goal of coming to know that God exists) religious experience than I've ever had.

But one big problem with supposing that people I'm familiar with know that God exists on the basis of their religious experiences is that when they describe the basis for their supposed knowledge, while their experiences often (but strangely, not always) sound more impressive than mine, they still don't sound like the kind of things that would produce *knowledge* of God's existence. It seems like it should be too serious a possibility from these believers' vantage point that what they're taking to be an experience of God is not coming from God at all. One way to take steps toward a mutual understanding on the matter of whether theists who take themselves to know that God exists really do know this—whether by coming to agree on the issue, or otherwise (and more likely) by at least seeing what the disagreement turns on—is often by means of more complete descriptions of the experiences in question designed to answer the question: What was your experience of God like, such that you take yourself to know, on its basis, that God exists?

The answers I've received have always left me standing by the guess that the experience(s) in question didn't really produce in the believer knowledge of God's existence. But one feature of various believers' experiences is very often cited, and is a feature which does seem to at least push toward a positive conclusion about potential knowledge: Often (as with the testimony expressed in the lyrics of "My God Is Real") those relating their experience of God will state and stress that their experience produced in them great assurance or knowledge of God. This may be an important feature of their experience in its own right, and it also raises the possibility that their experience has a character beyond and perhaps responsible for the assurance itself, that isn't being well captured by the descriptions given by the experiencers, and that does make the experience knowledge-producing. I mean, the people in question often seem so sure. They say (often) that they then knew that God was real, or the like. Isn't it

reasonable to think that they are responding accurately and responsibly to the nature of their experience in taking themselves to know, even though it may be hard, or perhaps impossible, for them to adequately convey in words what their experience was like? Or maybe the production of assurance is itself a positive factor contributing to the believer's epistemic status in a way that they themselves, more than any outsider, are much better able to appreciate. Either way, why not accept their self-evaluation?

Well, as I've said, I do take there to be a substantial possibility that some of these people really do know. To explain why my suspicion is that at least most of them, if not all of them, do not, it will be helpful to start by saying a bit about my own personal history.

4. My Own History

I've said that I take the nearest version of myself who does know that God exists to be one who has had different and better religious experience than I've actually had. But the nearest version of myself who *acts as if* he knows just goes with the very meager experiences that I've actually had—which, as I've said, seem to me to fall far short of being knowledge-producing—but acts as if he knows, anyway.

This version of myself came very close to being actual. In fact, a version of myself that *sometimes* did act as if he knew was actual. Though I never got to the point that I consistently acted as if I knew that God exists, when I was younger, I would do so occasionally, in certain settings. Yes, it could sometimes feel a little phoney. But it was complicated. It wasn't—or at least didn't feel like—*pure* phoniness. People around me, whom I was encouraged to think of as my teammates, were acting as if they knew, and acting-as-if-I-knew behavior was produced in ways that at least seemed fairly natural. And I could point myself to what religious experiences I did take myself to have had, and play those up to myself. Was it really all that meager? It was in fact fairly easy to find myself singing along, as it were (and sometimes literally singing along to the likes of): “But I am sure of this one thing: That God is real, for I can feel Him in my soul.” And this could feel in ways almost sincere. And when I acted as if I knew, and especially when I could make it seem sincere, there was strong positive feedback that did much to encourage further confident behavior. And, as I suspect is the case for many, the best way to seem sincere was to feel sincere. To the extent that, and in the ways that, I was a

faker, I was a “method faker.” There seemed to be a future for me that was not only possible, but would be easy to fall into (and perhaps would in ways take active resistance to avoid) in which I put myself more and more into circumstances that would elicit such acting-as-if-I-knew behavior, stop trying to resist acting as if I knew, identify more with the inclinations to act certain, and I would eventually find myself acting fairly consistently as if I knew. Or at least it seems like that would have been the likely result. But it seems to me that that version wouldn’t really know, though he would act at least fairly consistently as if he knew, and might even start to seem to himself to know. I would have developed a delusion of knowledge about God’s existence. I was already in the early stages of developing it. Or so I now think.

5. Those Who Have Given Up the Faith

Of course, so far, that’s just me, and as I’ve indicated, I never got to a point in which I was acting as if I knew that God exists on a consistent basis. (Well, I suppose that at a very young age—like maybe around age 5—I consistently talked as if I knew, and took myself to know, that God exists. At that time, that was one of the many things I had been taught by the adults around me, and I didn’t have any sense that it was something denied by many. For those brought up to believe, much seems to depend on how those who believe differently are introduced to one’s thought. But at any rate, it’s from my teenage years on that I’m saying I never acted on a sustained, consistent basis as if I knew that God exists, though through much of my teenage years, I would occasionally act and talk in such a way.)

However, over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to talk with some people who did get to the point—often for years, during adulthood—of acting and talking as if they knew that God existed, but who later “gave up the faith,” as it’s often put (often by their disappointed relatives and/or former colleagues in the faith), becoming atheists or self-described agnostics. Nothing is more effective for producing skepticism about positive epistemic self-evaluations of apparent knowers than talking with former apparent knowers. They of course didn’t take themselves to know that God existed at the post-crash time that I talked with them, but what I found most interesting was asking them what they now thought of their past selves. Did their past selves sincerely take themselves to know that God existed? This tends to get complicated quickly. Though there are important differences among people I’ve talked to, they usually thought that

there was some element of insincerity, lack of genuineness, or even phoniness, in the certainty they had earlier projected to the world. But it generally doesn't seem to have been cases of straightforward deceiving of others: they often think that they themselves had been deceived about what was going on. To the extent that, and in the ways that, they were fakers, they too seem to have been "method fakers." That their earlier selves had been under a delusion of knowledge about God's existence fits in quite well with the picture that many of these people have of their earlier, confident-sounding selves. Often, their becoming atheists or agnostics was a process of becoming aware of the possibility (though some seem to think that deep down they always had this worry, in which cases the process seems to have begun by coming to squarely face a possibility they had always been dimly aware of) that the certainty they seemed to feel was not an honest or genuine response to what experience of God they might have had, but was largely motivated by the desire for their experience of God to be genuine and/or was driven by social forces involving identifying with the believers (or at least folks they took to be believers) around them, and then that suspicion growing to the point that they felt the honest response was just to admit that they don't, and never did, have any genuine knowledge of God's existence.

6. Why I'm not Inclined to Accept Positive Self-Evaluations

So, what's mainly behind my suspicion, as I said a few sections back, is that when people who seem to be confident of God's existence on the basis of their experience of God describe the experiences that supposedly produced their confidence, these experiences don't seem from the descriptions to be the kind of experiences that would give one knowledge of God's existence. It sounds as if it is or at least should be, from these people's point of view, too serious a possibility that their experience came from some other source for them to know that it was a genuine experience of God. But I realize that there are some worries or suspicions some might have about my suspicion. I'll get to two fairly advanced worries in section 8.

But the previous two sections are needed to answer what is perhaps the most pressing worry many people will have about my suspicion, which can be expressed in this question: Since the people themselves seem so confident that their experiences are genuine experiences of God, and judge themselves to know that God exists on the basis of those experiences, shouldn't I accept these people's own evaluations, perhaps

deciding that their experiences may well have features that do make them knowledge-producing, but that the descriptions given of the experiences fail to convey?

Now I am able to better explain why I doubt the self-evaluations of these people who sound so confident. Basically, it's because I've so often seen similar confidence (or at least what looks for all the world like similar confidence) go bust—and go bust in ways that cast doubt on whether there was ever knowledge there. Some of the people I've talked with who have “lost the faith” also would have struck me or anyone as excellent candidates for those who would know that God exists if anyone does. But their later, negative evaluations of their earlier, confident selves are very convincing. It seems fairly clear in their cases that they never really knew that God exists. Of course, there could be crucial differences in the experiences of God that were had and how they were processed that might result in some people I know having genuine knowledge of God even while others, who seem very much the same from the outside, don't have knowledge at all. And perhaps there is a good explanation for why these crucial differences seem not to be well conveyed by people's descriptions of their experiences. And I suppose there's also room for the thought that some of those who now deny that they knew are wrong, and they really did know. But in short, based on the evidence I have (which I imagine is quite similar to the evidence had by other observers—or at least others who have had the opportunity to talk with many who once seemed to know that God exists but have since ceased to believe), the best explanation for what all is going on here seems to me to be that those who take themselves to know and present themselves as knowing are under a delusion of knowledge much like the delusions that were had by some who later came to see themselves as having never known. My judgment that this is the best explanation is no doubt to a significant extent based on my awareness of the subtle forces that can yield knowledge-like behavior on the basis of experiences too meager to produce knowledge. Some of those who currently take themselves to know will likely also later come to judge that they never knew. Others likely never will. But my suspicion is that everyone I know who takes themselves to know whether God exists, whether or not they ever come to reverse that judgment, is wrong to think they know—even if God does in fact exist.

What I am personally inclined to think here is of little interest. The purpose of my airing my suspicion is mainly to point to what seem to be important factors in trying to reach an understanding on the issue of whether many theists know via religious experience that God exists—again, whether this understanding takes the form of

agreement on the issue, or, more likely, just in our coming to see what our disagreement turns on. I am now urging that when we try to reach a conclusion on this issue, and we are seeking to understand what the experiences in question are like such that they might be knowledge-producing, we focus, among other things, on what to say about those who used to at least from the outside look just like those who still now present themselves as experience-based knowers, but who now take themselves never to have known.

7. Acting Certain of (Way) Too Much

Returning now to the problem of religious diversity, it is worth briefly mentioning another very important ground for my suspicion: The case of many would-be knowers of God's existence is not advanced by their habit of also seeming supremely confident about all manner of theological details that go well beyond the matter of God's existence. (This of course does not apply to all who would claim to know that God exists.) Of course, one of the problems here is that the details presented as known vary in conflicting ways from one supremely confident religious believer to the other, so they can't all be right about what they're so confident about. There is at least a lot of apparent confidence that would present itself as knowledge that is not knowledge at all (since you can't know what ain't so). This makes it much easier to suspect that delusions of knowledge run rampant through the fields of religious acceptance. In fact, that delusions of knowledge run rampant there would seem fairly clear, and so would go beyond being just a suspicion. The questions that remain and that leave room for mere suspicions have to do with just how extensive is the range of such delusions, and, when it comes to theists, whether their delusions might extend to the very existence of God.

8. Two More Worries about my Suspicion

Some might worry that, despite my claim to subjecting theistic belief to just moderate standards for knowledge that we very often meet in other areas of life, I am in fact holding it to impossibly demanding standards that even our simple perceptual beliefs do

not meet.¹² I have said that the possibility that my religious experience comes from a source other than God is just too substantial from my point of view to allow it to produce knowledge in me of God's existence, and I've expressed my suspicion about others in terms of it seeming to me, as best I can tell from those others' descriptions of their experiences, like it should be too substantial a possibility from their vantage points that their experiences are coming from some other source. This may lead some to think that my suspicion is based on the thought that for an experience to produce knowledge of its object, the experiencer must first be able to explicitly rule out all accounts of how that experience was produced that are rivals to its having been produced in a way that involves its (putative) object. And that may seem to some to be the employment of a standard that our simple perceptual beliefs cannot meet: If my current perceptual experience of my laptop can give me knowledge of the presence of my laptop only if I can first explicitly rule out accounts of that experience that appeal to deceiving demons, tinkering brain scientists, or the like, rather than my laptop itself, in explaining how my experience arose, then even such simple perceptual beliefs would be in deep epistemic trouble.

So, let me say that I don't think one has to be able to explicitly rule out all rival accounts of how one's experience arose in order for an experience to give one knowledge of its object. I do know that my laptop is present, despite my inability to first explicitly rule out various skeptical hypotheses about how my experience is being produced.¹³

But that's because my belief in the presence of my laptop has some very nice features that any belief I might have formed about God's presence would have lacked, if it were produced by the kinds of religious experiences I've had. I don't want to get too bogged down here in what those features are, but briefly, as it seems to me, the main thing is this: My beliefs about the presence of my laptop fit in remarkably well with

¹² William P. Alston in particular has argued on parity grounds that if we accept perceptual beliefs as justified, we should extend the same courtesy to many experientially based religious beliefs. For Alston's religious epistemology, see especially the culmination of his work in the area, his book, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell UP, 1991).

¹³ I here use "rule out" in what I take to be an intuitive sense. I should note that on the "Contextualist Moorean" position that I defend at length in *The Appearance of Ignorance*, as I mentioned in note 2, above, we do know by ordinary standards that skeptical hypotheses are false. The reason we can (often, to varying extents) seem not to know that they are false is that, because our beliefs that they are false are insensitive beliefs, the extraordinarily high standards at which we don't know that the hypotheses are false are precisely the standards that tend to get put into play by attempts to claim knowledge or to admit ignorance of their falsehood, tending to make the claims go false and the admissions true.

(display a remarkable degree of positive coherence with, where “positive coherence” denotes not just a lack of conflict, but a positive hand-in-glove-like fitting in well together—a “dovetailing,” to use what seems to be the mandatory term here) other spontaneous beliefs I have been led to form by my perceptual experiences. It’s largely because of this coherence that my beliefs about my laptop have with the larger picture of the physical world and my place in it that I’m so highly justified in believing in my laptop, even without my being able to first explicitly rule out skeptical accounts of how my experiences of my laptop arose—justified in a sense that is crucial to these beliefs, if true, amounting to knowledge. And any beliefs I would have formed about God’s presence on the basis of the religious experiences I have had would not have displayed anywhere near that degree of positive coherence with one another and with other parts of my picture of the world and my place in it. In large part, that’s why my acceptance of God’s existence, and, so far as I can tell from their descriptions of them, the beliefs in God held by others, aren’t in the relevant sense sufficiently justified to amount to knowledge.¹⁴

The second worry some might have is that many of the people’s experiences did produce in them complete *certainty* about God’s existence, and that might be, in itself, an important feature of their experience that could allow it to produce knowledge, even in the absence of the kind of positive coherence I write of above.

I am myself very open to the thought that if God directly “zapped” you with certainty of God’s existence (so you felt certain that God exists), such an experience might produce knowledge of God’s existence, even in the absence of the kind of positive coherence our perceptual beliefs display. This is a tricky call for me, but as I said, I am open to the idea. Perhaps the degree of direct warrant enjoyed by a belief directly produced by experience is proportional to the strength with which one’s experience inclines to believe it—or something along those lines. If so, then if an experience produces great subjective certainty in a particular belief, that belief might have enough direct warrant to be justified (in the way needed for knowledge), and so wouldn’t need any indirect warrant it might derive from its positive coherence with other things one’s

¹⁴ Though it’s aimed primarily at the question of justification rather than knowledge, I explain my relevant thoughts about the epistemology of sense perception, the epistemology of religious experience, and how the two relate, more fully in my paper, “Direct Warrant Realism,” in A. Dole and A. Chignell, ed., *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 150-172. I specifically argue that the considerations I raise here ruin Alston’s parity argument (see n. 11, above) in the final two sections of my just-mentioned paper, at pp. 163-170.

experience inclines one to believe. But that would all be in the case of God directly zapping one with a high degree of certainty. My worry here is that what subjective certainty is reported by these people is not produced by such direct divine zapping, but is generated in ways that run through such things as peoples' desires for their experiences to be genuine, or their response to peer pressure, and felt certainty generated in such ways would not seem to generate the kind of justification needed for knowledge, whether or not certainty generated by a direct divine zapping would produce knowledge. That is of course a very tricky call to make, especially when I am so dependent on, yet often in important ways untrusting of, the people's own descriptions of their experiences. And indeed, that trickiness is largely why I'm so tentative in my suspicion. But the suspicion is that the felt certainty comes about through the work of the kinds of forces (desire for the experiences to be genuine, responses to social pressure) that many later come to think of as the not-so-innocent way their past selves came to feel as certain as they did.

And I suppose that, on the other side of things, it's also possible that some people whom doubters like me judge to have come to their certainty in another, less innocent way, actually are being directly zapped with certainty of God's existence. Perhaps this is even so of some of us doubters' own past selves. If so, we doubters may be misjudging these people.

9. Two Uses of "Agnostic" and the Relation between them

As I said in section 1, I think I am in one good use of the term an "agnostic," since that term seems to have a use on which it means, at least roughly, one who takes themselves not to know whether God exists. (The term seems at home, in the first instance, on the specific question of whether God exists; but then, in an extended way, one can be described as being an "agnostic" on other matters about which one takes oneself not to know the answer.)

But there seems to be another good sense of the term on which I, and some others who take themselves not to know, do *not* count as "agnostics." On this use, an "agnostic" is roughly one who does not accept either answer to the question "Does God exist?", and is, in that way, undecided on the matter. Though I don't take myself to *know* which answer is right, I do *accept* one of those answers, and so, in this second

sense of the term, I should not be classified an “agnostic,” but (since the answer I accept is the positive one) a theist. (And one who accepts the negative answer could in the same way be classified an atheist, even if she takes herself not to know that God doesn’t exist.) I am a theist, and not an agnostic, about God’s existence in the same way that I’m a contextualist, and not an agnostic, about the meaning of “knows”—since I don’t take myself to know (by any good standards) that I’m right about that matter, either.

I think these two different uses of “agnostic” are closely related. One of the things that can give rise to delusions of knowledge is that, in philosophical settings, and also when we are engaging in inquiry in other “knowledge deserts,” we often engage in a kind of pretense of knowing things we merely accept to be the case, talking in various ways as if we know them to be so. One of the main ways we talk as if we know these things is by flat-out (without qualification) asserting them. Engaging in this pretense of knowledge allows us to dispense with all the hedges that would otherwise so litter our talk when we are operating in “knowledge deserts,” allowing us to quickly indicate that we accept a position by asserting it, and to indicate that we don’t even accept something by merely saying “I don’t know.” I explain this a bit more fully elsewhere.¹⁵ Here I wish to note how such an account pulls together our two uses of “agnostic.” For on our first use, an agnostic is one who does not take themself to know, and on the second, it’s one who, even when engaging in the pretense of knowing things they merely accept as being the case, won’t talk as if they know the item in question.

If my suspicion that few if any know whether God exists is correct, then it seems we *should* be agnostics in the first sense—since the alternative is to be subject to a delusion of knowledge. But that doesn’t mean we should be agnostics in the second sense: There may be good reasons for accepting an answer to the question of whether God exists (and also to accept answers to other questions), even if one doesn’t take oneself to know that one’s answer is right.¹⁶

¹⁵ My “Knowledge Deserts” Appendix referenced in footnote 5, above

¹⁶ Thanks to the organizers of and participants in the International Conference on New Insights and Directions for Religious Epistemology, held at Oxford University in June 2015, where I presented an earlier version of this paper, and especially to my commentator at the conference, Jane Friedman. Thanks also to the editors of this volume for comments on a draft of this paper.